

***Virtual Voices and Contrapuntal Melodies: Exploring the liminal experiences of part-time, adult learners as they embark on undergraduate, online study.***

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*For those who 'imagine themselves otherwise'.*

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## **Abstract**

Using liminal spaces as a heuristic tool, this study explores the experiences of fifteen adult learners as they complete the first academic module of their part-time, online degree.

Online undergraduate programmes enable adult learners to make decisions of how their aspirations are best met. The convenience and flexibility of hybrid spaces, enables them to take control of their learning. However, these benefits are reliant upon negotiating new ideas, technologies, constructs of learning and emergent identities which may sit at the counterpoint of existing roles, responsibilities and experiences. For some, this period of transition can consequently be characterised by disorientation and liminality.

The findings provide new insights into the context of the decision to study online, highlighting the extent of the emotion and entanglement between an individual's choice to participate in learning and their personal lifeworld. It shows how online learning provides a degree of agency for some students where participation in other settings could be difficult.

This research conceptualises the decision to return to study, in order to identify the interplay of the personal, institutional and circumstantial domains which shape these early encounters. It uses a narrative approach to explore participant experiences in forging their emergent identities, the opportunities and challenges presented by hybrid online spaces, the importance of networks and a sense of belonging and what tools and strategies are deployed in negotiating boundary encounters.

Although the data for this study was collected and analysed before the Covid-19 pandemic, the study examines what we, as educator-researchers, can learn from their narratives and how this might inform our professional practice in the Covid-19 context. It makes a methodological contribution to the literature in the growing field of online research methods through its innovative use of online reflective journals and Skype interviews alongside examining the implications of the findings for both policy and practice.

## Contents

Abstract.....	3
1. Introduction.....	8
1.1 Locating the Study and the Research Problem.....	8
1.2 Personal Perspectives and Emergent Concepts.....	11
1.3 Limitations of the Literature in the Field.....	12
1.4 The Study and Research Questions.....	14
1.5 Theoretical Perspectives - New Experiences of Liminality.....	15
1.5.1 Characteristics of the Rite of Passage.....	15
1.5.2 Being 'Betwixt and Between'.....	16
1.5.3 Trials of Separation.....	16
1.5.4. New Transitions and Non-Linear Journeys.....	18
1.6 A Reflexive Approach as an Educator-Researcher.....	19
2. Literature Review.....	21
2.1 Exploring Adult Participation in Education.....	23
2.1.1 Traits, Typologies and Motivation.....	24
2.1.2 Socio-Economic Drivers and Cultural Needs.....	25
2.2 Models of Adult Participation.....	25
2.2.1 Cross's Chain of Response Model.....	25
2.2.2 The Significance of the Disorienting Dilemma.....	27
2.2.3 Overcoming Barriers.....	29
2.3 The Decision to Study Online.....	30
2.4 Adult Learners and Constructs of Engagement.....	31
2.4.1 Understanding Engagement.....	31
2.4.2 A Behaviourist Approach to Engagement.....	32
2.4.3 Engagement as a Process.....	32
2.4.4 Towards a Multidimensional Approach.....	32
2.5 Conceptualising the Landscape of the Adult, Online Learner.....	33
2.5.1 The Personal, Institutional and Circumstantial Domains.....	34
2.5.2 The Role of Emotion.....	34
2.6 Factors which Shape Early Experiences of Becoming an Online Adult Learner.....	36
2.6.1 Self-Attributes and Motivational Constructs for Learning Online.....	36
2.6.2 Challenges of Online Learning – Hybrid Spaces.....	39
2.6.2.1 Learning Places in Hybrid Spaces.....	42
2.6.2.2 The Logistics of Study.....	43
2.6.3. Identity and Belonging as an Online Learner.....	46

2.7 Developing the Conceptual Framework .....	48
3. Methodology .....	52
3.1 Introduction .....	52
3.2 Siting the Research – Philosophy and Approach.....	53
3.3 A Narrative Approach.....	55
3.4 Learning from the Pilot Project .....	57
3.5 Hearing Voices – The Methods for Data Collection .....	58
3.5.1 Online Reflective Journals .....	59
3.5.1.1 Private or Public Online Spaces? .....	61
3.5.1.2 Co-Constructing the Online Research Space.....	62
3.5.1.3 Structuring for Reflective Journaling .....	68
3.5.2 Online Semi-Structured Interviews .....	69
3.6 Research Planning, Design and Implementation.....	71
3.6.1 Participant Selection and Context.....	71
3.6.2 Ethical Considerations.....	73
3.6.2.1 Participant Information and Informed Consent.....	73
3.6.2.2 Access.....	74
3.6.2.3 Mitigating Power Dynamics and Fair Treatment.....	74
3.6.2.4 Designing for Rigour .....	76
3.7 Data Analysis .....	76
4. Findings and Discussion .....	80
4.1 Introduction .....	80
4.2 Degrees of Disorientation – the Decision to Return to Study.....	81
4.2.1 The Decision to Act.....	82
4.2.2 External and Internal Dilemmas .....	83
4.2.3 The Missing Piece .....	86
4.3 Pragmatism and Preference – the Choice to Study Online .....	88
4.3.1 Pragmatism – the Flexibility and Accessibility of Online Study .....	88
4.3.2 Personal Preference – the Desire to Study Online.....	89
4.4 Journeying to Studenthood – Challenge and Opportunity in Emergent Identities.....	92
4.4.1 Emblems of Studenthood.....	94
4.4.2 Expectations of Studenthood – Real and Imagined Barriers .....	96
4.4.2.1 Structure and Certainty .....	97
4.4.2.2 Learning Places.....	97
4.4.2.3 Marker of Success .....	97
4.4.3 Seeking ‘Fixedness’ - Lost and Found (and Lost Again) in Liminal Spaces.....	99

4.4.3.1. Safe Places - the Importance of Friends and Family.....	99
4.4.3.2 A Sense of Belonging - the Significance of Peer and Academic Relationships...	100
4.4.4 Complementary and Contrapuntal Aspects of Studenthood .....	106
4.4.4.1 Congruent Identities.....	106
4.4.4.2 Discongruent Identities and Managing Boundary Encounters.....	107
4.4.5 'Holding on Tight' – Emotion in Transition.....	110
5. Conclusions and Implications.....	114
5.1 Exploring and conceptualising the context of becoming an adult, online learner (RQ1)..	115
5.2 The enablers and challenges that learners perceive as shaping their emergent studenthood and their experience of negotiating liminal spaces (RQ2) .....	117
5.3 The 'New Normal' – the Impact of Covid-19 on Part-time, Adult Online Learners .....	121
5.4 What the Study has Achieved.....	123
5.4.1 Methodological Implications of the Study.....	125
5.4.2 Practical Implications of the Study for Teaching and Learning .....	126
5.4.3 Wider Policy Considerations Raised by the Study .....	128
5.5 Limitations of the Research.....	129
5.6 Conclusion.....	130
References.....	132
Appendix 1 The Research Process .....	146
Appendix 2 – Mapping of Reflective Journal Prompts to the Research Questions .....	147
Appendix 3 – Mapping of Interview Questions to Research Questions.....	150
Appendix 4 The Participant Information Sheet.....	154
Appendix 5 Interview Protocol.....	156
Appendix 6 Ethics Approval Process.....	157
Appendix 7 – Participant Pen Portraits .....	158
Appendix 8 – Copyright Permission for Figure 1 .....	166
Appendix 9 – Declaration of Third Party Proofreading.....	167

Figure 1 Cross (1981) Chain of Response Model.....	26
Figure 2 The Conceptual Framework.....	50
Figure 3 The Online Reflective Journal Homepage and Welcome .....	65
Figure 4 About the Researcher .....	66
Figure 5 Embedding Video to Engage Participants.....	66
Figure 6 About the Research .....	67
Figure 7 Embedded Participant Information and Consent Form .....	67
Figure 8 Co-Constructed FAQs Section.....	68

## 1. Introduction

This thesis examines the liminal experiences of fifteen part-time adult learners as they complete the first 12-week academic module of their online, undergraduate degree programme. All of the learners are studying online, for the first time, and therefore field a range of competing demands such as work, family and social commitments. The focus of this research is to give context to their return to study and the decision to do so online. Through a process of narrative inquiry, it aims to give voice to these learners and their first-hand accounts of their emergent 'studenthood' – the different ways in which enrolling on a programme is implicated in who they are (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2010, p.1). The study examines the factors which they perceive as shaping this experience as they embark on their online learning. This period of transition and transformation may, for some, also be characterised by disorientation and liminality. This study explores what we, as educator-researchers, can learn from their experiences and the tools which they draw upon to negotiate the dilemmas posed by these liminal spaces, and how this can inform our professional practice. Data collection for this study began in October 2017, however, at the time of formulating the concluding chapter to this study in March/April 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic struck the UK – a sustained crisis of uncertain duration. The UK imposed strict social distancing measures which impacted on students in traditional face-to-face universities and urgent measures took place across the sector to shift to the online delivery of teaching (Crawford *et al.*, 2020). Although this population can be distinguished from the participants in this study by such factors as study mode, stage and motivations, the experience of disorientation may offer up some appropriate insights and a useful methodological approach.

### 1.1 Locating the Study and the Research Problem

Within the UK, online learning provision is offered by an increasing number of traditional Higher Education Institutions as either an alternative to their face-to-face provision (University of Derby Online, University of Leicester and Liverpool Online) or, more widely, as a complementary part of a blended learning programme to both on and off-campus students (Staffordshire University, University of Manchester and Anglia Ruskin University. The Open University has for a number of years also offered a model of distance and, more recently, online education for part-time study and remains the UK's largest online learning provider accounting for 65% of all provision



(Universities UK, 2019). Uptake of exclusively online learning opportunities by UK part-time students at undergraduate and postgraduate level has seen slight growth (up 3% in 2018) for HEIs but is likely to see further significant increases in the current Covid-19 landscape. The potential market within this sector remains crucial in the delivery of flexible learning opportunities which are not compromised by temporal and geographical limitations, therefore enabling students to study at a distance whilst balancing work, social and personal commitments. McGill, Beetham and Gray (2016) define online learners as any learners who happen to access learning opportunities and resources via digital networks. More specifically, for the purpose of this study, the learning opportunity afforded is a part-time, undergraduate degree programme taught exclusively online by the academic teams at the University through the Moodle-based Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

The potential opportunities afforded by online learning at undergraduate level hand over to adult learners the ability to make decisions about how their needs and aspirations are best met, particularly when and where they study (Kardan *et al.*, 2013; Henry, Pooley and Omari, 2014; Hyllegard, 2008). The benefits of greater convenience, flexibility and taking control of learning and progress through the course are clearly convincing and accepted (Henry, Pooley and Omari, 2014). However, these key benefits may be compromised by the fact that many adult learners do not cope well with the first steps into online learning as they negotiate new, emergent learning identities which may sit at the counterpoint of existing and multiple roles and responsibilities (Lee, Choi and Cho, 2019; Fraser *et al.*, 2018; Kardan *et al.*, 2013; Simpson, 2013; Hyllegard, 2008). Simpson (2013) suggests that the problem of retention and attrition of this group eclipses and undermines the achievements of online learning and is potentially a problem so vast that it rarely attracts focus and attention in the academic literature. Simpson (2013) alludes to the graduation rates for distance learning institutions (OU, London International Programmes, Athabasca, OU Netherlands, TU Quebec, DAU India, University of SA) standing at between 0.5% and 22% - the 'distance education deficit' (Simpson, 2013, p.107; Inkelaar and Simpson, 2015, p.3). In examining the literature and internal data from my own institution, attrition resulting in withdrawal tends to occur early in the programme, with significant dropout before the first assignment and nearly half of new students dropping out before their fourth assignment (Inkelaar and Simpson, 2015; Kahu, 2014; Simpson, 2013). This trend is mirrored at the University with 61%

of all students withdrawn in 2019-20 achieving zero credits due to academic failure or non-submission of their first module assessment (Awards Board Report, March 2020).

There is also limited research into the significance and impact of online learners' external relationships and how they impact on the early stages of the learning journey (Koole and Stack, 2016), however, local data shows that of the online learners voluntarily withdrawing in 2018-19, 77.5% did so for personal or social reasons (University Continuation Report July 2019), split between financial reasons (45%), family reasons (13%), work commitments (12%) and health reasons (7.5%).

Given the challenges and limitations presented by the current literature, this study is firmly positioned at the early stages of the student's experience in embarking upon part-time, online study. Morgan's Student Experience Transitions Model (SET, 2011) may be useful in conceptualising the stages of the student lifecycle as first contact, pre-arrival, arrival and orientation, introduction to study, re-orientation and induction, outduction. Although the SET model is premised upon the experiences of traditional learners in face-to-face settings, it may elicit insight into the first four stages, in particular the point of first contact through to the introduction to study.

Morgan (2011) describes the point of first contact as a critical part of a student's learning journey as decisions made during this transition stage can impact on their university success and career. At the time the SET model evolved, first contact with an institution was often when they applied for study. Now, this is more likely to be through less formal means through the website and any related admissions support functions such as admissions chatbots, synchronous live chat with admissions advisors or current students. First contact is also a time when aspirations and expectations are established.

During the pre-arrival stage, the university starts to develop a relationship and it is a phase where engagement patterns and expectations can start to be set which may exert a strong influence on the student's ability to persevere and succeed.

Morgan's description of the arrival and orientation stage is described keenly in terms which are more associated with students embarking on a programme of study in a face-to-face setting rather than those studying exclusively online. Bayne, Gallagher and Lamb (2014) explore how online learners conceptualise their own 'arrival stories'

(p.574) and how they conceptualise the spatiality of online learning and the institutional 'presence' (p.574) of the university.

The introduction to study is a vital stage in the lifecycle of the student which enables the student to become quickly embedded in their university studies so they do not disengage and possibly withdraw. Introduction to study at university takes place over a longer period than just a few weeks. It is during this period that students learn to cope with the demands of academia and pressures of life.

Although it is noted that Morgan's SET Model approaches the student lifecycle from a perspective which is clearly institutionally framed (see 1.3) it may provide useful timestamps which are mutually understood in exploring the findings of the study later on.

Therefore, in exploring the early experiences of adult learners enrolling on an online programme, this inquiry considers the context of their decision to participate in online study. It also considers what influences their emergent learning identity or studenthood and their sense of belonging as an online learner.

## **1.2 Personal Perspectives and Emergent Concepts**

At the time, I worked as a Head of School for a university which specialises in online learning and which was awarded Taught Degree Awarding Powers (TDAP) in 2015 and university title in 2016. The University has seen online student numbers grow year on year and had 5,367 students learning in this study mode as of April 2020.

My interest in the experience of adults in education stems back to my first teaching role on an Access Diploma. The adults' lives were inevitably reflected in their engagement with their studies as both complex and chaotic with periods of engagement, disengagement and reengagement (O'Brian and Toms, 2008). This activity took place within the rigid structures, linear processes and practices of a large FE college. The capacity for education to transform is undeniable but the outcomes for these learners were as unpredictable as their individual pathways, being often fraught and fractured, leaving a gaping chasm of uncertainty between their right of self-assertion and access to education and their ability to influence the setting which renders such self-assertion feasible (Bauman, 2000).

The opportunities afforded by online, flexible learning are therefore part of that modernity and their elective biography, allowing individuals to take control of their lives and access education (Glastra, Hake and Schedler, 2004). The inherent nature of online learning does not tether individuals to time and place and as such, many of the practices and policies should, in theory, bridge any gaps and provide a degree of certainty. An alternative view could be that such flexibility and opportunity replaces one structure and set of challenges with another as the context in which the learner is situated remains as challenging and volatile as ever.

This is a narrative which has persisted into my current work, 20 years further down the line, where the opportunities afforded by online provision are tempered by disjuncture thereby creating challenging spaces which must be navigated. As my own School within the University approaches the award of its first full undergraduate degrees, Simpson's notion of 'deficit' (2013, p.107) provides a point of reflection, exploration and development for an educator-researcher. I am motivated in my research by a caring interest in the students' stories and in exploring the emotional highs and lows of their early experiences.

### **1.3 Limitations of the Literature in the Field**

In scoping out the study, I worked across the key strands of adult learning, online and distance learning and theories of liminality, identity, belonging and transition. This early scoping exercise back in 2016 revealed frustratingly limited research into the convergence of these strands. For example, Hartnett, St. George and Dron (2011) explored motivation of adult online learners on a full-time programme, Kuo (2013) examined student satisfaction amongst traditional online learners, Martin (2005) focused on the self-efficacy of lifelong learners but in a face-to-face setting. Consequently there was a paucity of insight into the holistic experiences of the adult learners that we encounter at the University and even less on the crucial and problematic early window of transition into online undergraduate study raised by Simpson (2013).

The opportunities for discovering students' experiences and perspectives on online learning are often limited. Educational interactions take place within prescribed and structured fora with a clear delineated purpose whether that be social or academic, task-based or informative. Further insights are provided by end of module

questionnaires or Internal and National Student Survey (ISS/NSS). There is little opportunity, through the communication channels and processes of my institution, for informal engagements, insights, snapshots or flashpoints without it being captured in a text-based discussion forum or recorded in the Learner Management System (LMS). Jones refers to this as 'digital preservation' (2012, p.248) which also contributes to a blurring of the boundaries between public and private space.

A striking feature of some of the literature is the tendency to explore the correlation of such variables of motivation, satisfaction and persistence amongst online adult learners but not to scratch beneath the surface to consider the lived experiences and narratives of the participants (Fraser *et al.*, 2018; Kuo, 2013; Hartnett, St. George and Dron, 2011). As such, research in this field tends to be one-dimensional, institutionally-framed and undertaken at arm's length, exploring a single aspect of online learning such as motivation or readiness but failing to capture a holistic picture of the experiences of the adult online learner. Problems are clearly identified as situational, multi-faceted and complex (Hartnett, St. George and Dron, 2011) but the methods employed do little to conceptualise and reach out to that hidden world experienced by the learner with data being largely collected by online survey at 'arm's length'. McGill, Beetham and Gray (2016) articulate the importance of engaging online learners in meaningful dialogue rather than relying on data analytics to track engagement. In this way, universities can not only capture the diversity of the learner voices but also listen to their needs to provide an authentically flexible, effective and inclusive experience.

The scoping exercise also revealed research into the experiences of online learners when compared with their face-to-face (campus-based) counterparts but failed to distinguish between the needs of full-time (as part of a blended offer) and part-time (exclusively online) learners (Simpson, 2013; Hartnett, St. George and Dron, 2011). Waschull's study (2001) suggests that where students are given a free choice of whether to study online or in a face-to-face setting, those who choose online learning have lower attrition rates and the level of achievement is the same. This suggests that the traditional models of attrition for face-to-face settings might not be applicable to online learning and the reasons for online study are down to a unique set of circumstances and challenges.

Lee, Choi and Cho (2019) also warn against the risk of viewing online, adult learners as a single homogenous group with characteristics which are intrinsic to their adulthood and predict or pre-determine success or failure. It was therefore of crucial importance to me, in framing this study, that it reach out to explore not only the holistic experience of these learners but also their first-hand experience of this transitional phase.

#### **1.4 The Study and Research Questions**

The objectives of this study are to uncover more about the context of the decision to return to study and to do so online, in order to find out what characterises the early experiences of becoming an online learner, what enables and challenges them in forging their learning identity and what happens at the boundaries when their lifeworld intersects with the world of the institution.

This study makes a contribution to knowledge in addressing some of the gaps identified in the literature above and explores the factors which shape the experiences of adult learners as they embark on online undergraduate study. Using the concept of liminal spaces as a heuristic tool and extending the literature on liminality into online learning, the work focuses on the participants' narratives during the first 12 weeks of study.

The study conceptualises the context of being a part-time, online learner by drawing on the literature to identify the domains which shape their experience and by exploring their interplay. The study then takes a narrative approach to gain a holistic insight into the lived experiences of these learners by employing an interpretivist framework and thematic analysis to examine the factors that the participants perceive to shape their decision to return to study and their emergent learning identity. Particular focus is given to the factors which both enable and challenge them in their journey but also how they experience and negotiate this turbulent and emotional liminal space at the boundaries of where their lifeworld and the institution intersect.

There are two key research questions:

1. How can the dynamic context of becoming a part-time, adult, online learner be explored and conceptualised?

2. What enablers and challenges do learners perceive as shaping their emergent studenthood and how do they experience and negotiate boundary encounters and liminal spaces?

The study then goes on to consider the implications of these findings for professional practice.

The research also makes a contribution to the growing field of creativity in online research methods and particularly those which might be used in professional practice by exploring the use of online reflective journals and Skype interviews as data collection tools for research by educator-researchers.

### **1.5 Theoretical Perspectives - New Experiences of Liminality**

The challenge of exploring the interplay of the various factors or domains which give the context of being a part-time, adult, online learner is how to capture the temporal, transformative but often chaotic and non-linear nature of this experience from the outset. The concept of crossing thresholds has been well explored in both anthropology and later, the boundaries stretched to examine educational, organisational, management and consultancy settings (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016; Wright and Gilmore, 2012; Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011; Ybema, Beech and Ellis, 2011; Meyer and Land, 2005; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). It serves as a useful heuristic technique for capturing states of being and becoming throughout a journey but is often approached and documented as an ordered and linear process.

#### **1.5.1 Characteristics of the Rite of Passage**

Van Gennep's (1960) seminal work from 1909 'Les rites de passage' first set out the journey of rite of passage in social anthropology as a means of exploring the transition from childhood into adulthood. Van Gennep (1960) set out three stages of the rite of passage; separation which is characterised as a detachment from previous ways of being (preliminal); transition which is characterised by being in a state of limbo which has few or none of the attributes of the previous and coming stages (liminal); and incorporation or re-assimilation which is characterised by entry into a new group and life (postliminal).

### 1.5.2 Being 'Betwixt and Between'

Van Gennep's concepts were later developed by Turner (1967) to represent the transition between two relatively fixed or stable conditions where the person is in a temporary state of ambiguity. Turner used the idea of being 'betwixt and between' (1967, p.96) to describe this liminal stage of having left the old life but not yet being assimilated into the new life. He termed the state of limbo as an 'interstructural situation' where they are going through ... a process, a becoming and ... even a transformation' (Turner, 1967, p.93). This liminal state is a point at the threshold, an indeterminate state between culturally-defined stages of a person's life (Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011). The notion and emotion of such uncertainty, disorientation and dilemma is well rehearsed in the literature in the field of adult learning (Mezirow, 1981; Taylor, 2000; Cranton, 2006; Raikou, 2018). Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1981), which is explored further in Chapter 2, highlights the degree of emotional turmoil that the liminal phase may bring. Ecclestone (2009) provides a lens through which to view such a paradox with particular regard to educational transitions. Much of the structure and process of higher education is reflected in discernible events and milestones which are experienced in a linear and sequential way by learners. This is then reflected in the funding mechanisms and achievement frameworks which are designed to raise and account for improvements in participation, progression and achievement which mirror the normative expectations and rituals associated with the rite of passage.

### 1.5.3 Trials of Separation

The issue of separation, as an important part of transition and transformation, provides new challenges when exploring the context of being a part-time adult, online learner. Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) characterise the experience of separation as a sharp and symbolic inversion of social attributes and Cook-Sather and Alter (2011) explore the significance of the state of separation as a key construct of the powerful and transformative potential of transition. In the same way, Turner describes the benefit of the liminal state of separation in liberating the individual from structural obligations as they enter into a 'realm of pure possibility' (1995, p.97) in which they find themselves temporarily undefined.

Traditional frameworks of higher education see this concept of separation borne out (Simpson *et al.*, 2010; Wright and Gilmore, 2012). This is even the case, to a limited



degree, for part-time adult learners who will experience separation from their family and friends to periodically attend lectures and classes on campus. They are separated from the structural obligations of work, family and existing social networks if only for a short while. Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016) identify that such learners are never completely separated from their previous ways of being, but move back and forth between the familiar and unfamiliar over a prolonged period of time – they experience fluctuating conditions of separation.

For online, adult learners, the notion of separation needs to be understood very differently, as there is no obvious physical separation, but other forms of separation that are less tangible may exist. They inhabit multiple roles and their identity is not fixed but relational (Beijarrd, Meijer and Verloop, 2004) and consequently in constant flux. The lack of geographical and temporal delimitations are advanced as benefits of online learning. Even the symbolic separation that is attributed to the status of being a student (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016) is hyphenated with that of carer, parent, friend, worker. The liminal space is shared, interrupted, waxes and wanes with the interplay of the social and personal lifeworld. This also creates the potential for disjuncture as reality can be more readily and frequently checked against expectations 'in situ' as the individual journeys back and forth between the pre-liminal and the liminal. This potential for disjuncture exists for all adult, part-time learners whether in a face-to-face or online setting but can be more problematic for those studying online where learning is situated at the heart of home, family and work life. Here, there is less opportunity to suspend these past roles and identities (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016) as they are uncoupled from this non-linear journey to, instead, encapsulate it. They become the stage set for these actors rather than the backdrop.

Part-time, adult, online learners are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, concurrently wrestling the contrapuntal melodies of the old and the new with the incessant pull and push of structural obligations and social norms over an extended period of time. They experience the inherent porosity at the boundaries of their liminal space as work, family and home seep into this sacred transition phase and threaten to displace the powerful possibilities of this 'limbo of statuslessness' (Turner, 1995, p.97). This is not Turner's highly institutionalised ritual, guided by elders and supported by the community but a self-guided process and self-made

communitas (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). Savin-Baden (2019) recognises these learners as 'threshold people' (p.21), characterised by their loss of life structure due to the different ambiguities which arise as a result of the need to create new space and different structure.

#### **1.5.4. New Transitions and Non-Linear Journeys**

Field (2015) explores the nature of these new transitions with the period of late modernity being characterised by increasing rates and variety of change across all areas of adult life. He argues that this leads to a continuing experience of transition across the lifecourse with participation in education providing further impetus for change. This marks a shift from the collective experiences of transition in the industrial era – the move into education and then into the workplace – to more varied and individualised routes with increasing levels of individual choice, particularly later on (Field, 2010) – a standard biography being replaced by a more elective biography (Glastra, Hake and Schedler, 2004). This has led to the idea of transition being 'embedded and routine' (Field, 2010, p. xviii) as we have learned to accept change and transition at an ever-increasing rate. The flexibility, accessibility and convenience of online learning would appear to play to this aspiration as the vehicle through which such biographies may be constructed. This is echoed by the OECD (2020) who reflect the potential of part-time, adult online learning as a means to address barriers to learning, training and work transitions by allowing learners to choose a time, rhythm and place compatible with work and family responsibilities. However, the stance adopted throughout this study is that such a position does not effectively distinguish between the agency afforded by the myriad individual opportunities to participate in online educational transitions and the underpinning structures and obligations which may make such biographical shifts as challenging as ever. This may be reflected in the continued decrease of adult learners in the UK, by nearly 4 million in the past decade (Learning and Work Institute, 2019).

Paradoxically, Field argues that the traditional support networks which underpin such transitions have become ever more fragmented with challenges faced by individual actors who have fewer and fewer collective resources on which to draw (Glastra, Hake and Schedler, 2004). As the collective experience of change gives way to the individualised path, it does so within a fragile network of family, friends and colleagues, all of whom are endeavouring to negotiate transitional changes of their

own. Quinn (2010) even challenges the narrative of transitions for some learners, for whom the entry into Higher Education is characterised by a lack of separation. Here, the potential for the push and pull of the pre-liminal and liminal may even give rise to a state of stasis.

Despite the potential for anxiety and risk, there is also the potential for agency and transformation and this is of crucial importance to this study. Quinn (2010) considers how imagined spaces and communities can enable transitions especially where the journey is no longer comprehensible in the traditional, unilinear way. Field (2010) sets the tone for this study in highlighting that this experience of transition has the capacity to and for change and can therefore be used to address the aspirations of these individuals who 'imagine themselves otherwise' (p. xxiii).

### **1.6 A Reflexive Approach as an Educator-Researcher**

As this is a study of my professional practice - as the researcher - I am the research instrument (Ball, 1993). It is therefore important to explore my own background, experience and beliefs as they impact on the design and focus of my research. In acknowledging my own position, I recognise that the aims, design and my participation within the enquiry will shape the interpretation of findings. To achieve this end I have adopted a reflexive position throughout the research process, from the planning and setting of objectives, through the construction of the design and my own positionality with respect to theoretical stances within the literature. With regard to my identity within my research setting, I have found myself, as educator-researcher, rooted equally within both my workplace and research field as a Head of School and also academia. It has therefore been important for me to reflexively and continuously assess my insiderness. Hellowell (2006) loosely defines the notion of an insider being an individual who possesses intimate knowledge of the community and its members. Drake and Heath (2011) highlight that the construction of knowledge is a combined product of the understanding of professional practice, higher education practice and the researcher's own reflexivity. It is therefore a 'confluence unique to every researcher' (Drake and Heath, 2011, p.2). However, this is not fixed. The position of the educator-researcher may be found to be in state of constant repositioning at any point in time determined by the setting, state of personal knowledge, external perceptions of the researcher and any reflexive

accountability made by the researcher. It may well be the case that, in this capacity, I am never truly an insider.

I have also foregrounded my identity as an experienced and capable practitioner who is taking on the mantle of novice researcher in this field. My research tradition in legal method provides a layered product around a common axis which also gives a unique viewpoint. Gouldner (1973) warns against attempts to remove such contaminations through a notion of objectivity but instead recommends being aware of and prepared for these questions of affect. My identity as a new researcher within the social sciences is explored reflexively and constantly adjusted throughout this study as I have acquired new knowledge, as foundations are unsettled and the boundaries and limits of my research are acknowledged.

## 2. Literature Review

There were a number of key challenges in constructing a literature review which was appropriately scoped for the purpose of this study. These were threefold. Firstly the extent of the body of literature on adult participation in education, its currency generally and its relevance to online learning – a construct which would not have been tenable at the time that the seminal works were emergent. Secondly, a means by which the challenges of the rapidly expanding body of literature in the field of online learning could be managed and utilised appropriately and pragmatically. Thirdly the alignment of taxonomies relating to the field and in particular the definitions of key terms such as participation, engagement, motivation, readiness and persistence, which have been used interchangeably in research studies presenting challenges to both the scope and purpose in reviewing the work.

The search strategy interrogated several databases through the Summon interface to obtain current literature on the topics included in the literature review. These databases and resources included Education Research Complete (ERC), ERIC, PsychLit, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, Google Scholar and Proquest. The reviews made were directly linked to:

- adult participation in education
- adult participation in online education
- engagement in online education
- emotion in online education
- retention/attrition in online learning
- motivation and satisfaction in online learning
- identity and belonging in online learning
- flexibility of online learning

The inclusion criteria entailed all articles:

- Published only in the English language
- Peer reviewed
- Available in full text
- Published between:
  - 1960-2016 (adult participation in education)
  - 2000-2016 (other themes) then further extended to 2020 for updating

The exclusion criteria consequently comprised studies that were not published in English and articles that were not available in full text.

This review of the literature aimed to present a clear overview of the range of current theory related to the study. Firstly, the review explored some of the drivers for adult participation in learning more broadly, drawing across the key works from Houle in the 1960s examining the traits and typologies of adult learners, through the work of Boshier, Johnson and Rivera and Cross to Crossan *et al.* examining socio-economic drivers and cultural needs. This was then honed down to specifically examine the reasons why adults who make the decision to return to study choose to do so online, drawing on the more recent work of Kardan *et al.* (2013), Henry, Pooley and Omari (2014) as well as Lee, Choi and Cho (2019). This, in turn, led to an examination of the key constructs of engagement and influences on retention in online learning, particularly through the work of Berge and Huang (2004) on a domain-based model, and brought together these insights to effectively explore and conceptualise the context of being a part-time, adult online learner. These stages of the review aligned to the first research question to provide a grounding and potential framework for the study.

Secondly, a thematic review of the factors which impact upon the experiences of adult learners studying online was analysed and synthesised into three cross-cutting themes; self-attributes and motivational constructs, the challenges presented by the flexibility of online learning, and the theme of identity and belonging as an online learner. Under the umbrella of motivational constructs, there was a small body of literature exploring the impact of grade point average (GPA) on motivation. This literature was excluded at this stage as the study focus was the first 12 weeks of the programme of study and was therefore pre-submission. These three key themes aligned to the second research question focusing on how part-time, adult online learners perceive and approach challenges and enablers to their emergent identity of studenthood (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2010).

These factors also provided further insights into the context of adult participation in part-time online study but also instigated methodological ideas of how these experiences could be explored, identified and conceptualised through narratives of the participants.

The principal output of the literature review was, therefore, the development of a conceptual framework (set out in 2.7). This combined the key factors and dimensions related to the context of participation in part-time, online study around which to structure the subsequent primary data collection and analysis. Areas of particular interest in undertaking this analysis were the visibility and interplay of the various domains around the three cross-cutting themes of self-attributes and motivation, the inherent flexibility of online learning and hybrid spaces, and identity and belonging. The study aimed to explore the challenges and opportunities that part-time, online study presents to learners and how they invoke agency and deploy strategies to negotiate such boundary encounters and liminal spaces.

The domain-based approach taken in this study is explored in 2.5 and provides a holistic framework in which to understand the multiple dimensions of the participants' experience – the personal, circumstantial and institutional domains (Berge and Huang, 2004). These domains provide the outline context and their interplay highlights the dynamic variables which shape the detail of that experience and create the potential for liminality and disorientation at the boundaries.

## **2.1 Exploring Adult Participation in Education**

The journey of transition into online undergraduate study begins with the decision to participate.

The conditions contributing to the decision to participate are significant to this study given the quarterly enrolment intakes and that admissions decisions are made within two working days by the academic team at which point students are enrolled and can join an online induction. Therefore the context of the decision to participate is still operant and influential during their initial experience of online study.

The literature examining the reasons for adult participation in education are both broad and extensive and will not all feature in this paper. Key to this work is an understanding of how this literature has evolved to provide a useful tool in acquiring a better insight into the multiple factors which influence participation in online undergraduate study and to cross-reference this body of work with the emergent literature focusing on online learners' experiences.

### 2.1.1 Traits, Typologies and Motivation

Much of the early writing in the field of participation focused on the traits and typologies of those adults who choose to return to education. The early seminal work of Houle (1961) sought to identify typologies and to classify the reasons for participation. Houle's work categorised learners based on their reasons for participation as either goal orientated, activity orientated or learning orientated. Houle's methodology took quite a narrow approach to understanding in depth the motivations to participate, stating that the work aimed 'not so much to cover even that small sector as to uncover its significance so that it may become the subject of later and fuller development' (Houle 1961, p.4). Houle's initial study drew a small sample of participants which has also been criticised both for a lack of diversity and narrative.

A wider study was undertaken by Johnstone and Rivera (1965) and was the first study which presented consistent profiles of adult learners and their motivational orientations, also correlating aspects of participation, age and socio-economic position of the learner. This research therefore provided the requisite breadth of foundation to give significance and insight into the background of adult learners and their motivations for participation.

Boshier (1971) revisited the shortcomings of Houle's earlier work and proposed that adult learners are either growth motivated or deficiency motivated. Boshier's work emphasised that participation is a very individual and unique experience which is a product of the internal psychology of the learner as well as the circumstances that they find themselves in. This work represents an early acknowledgement of the context of decision-making with regard to participation and the uniqueness not only of the decision-maker but also of the circumstances in which that decision is instigated, nurtured and made.

Courteney (1992) was critical of the focus on the personality traits of the individual learners. He argued that whilst these typologies may provide a direction on the source of the learning need, this focus fails to acknowledge factors encompassing personal and psychological circumstances which also lead to the decision to participate. Lee, Choi and Cho (2019) also warned against the risk of viewing online, adult learners as a single homogenous group with characteristics which are intrinsic to their adulthood and predict or pre-determine success or failure.



### **2.1.2 Socio-Economic Drivers and Cultural Needs**

Work exploring the individual traits and typologies which provide a disposition to participation continued into the 1980s and 1990s, with the emergence of factors which influence the decision to participate becoming more apparent. Cropley (1980) acknowledged the emergence of socio-economic drivers and cultural needs which influence the decision to participate operating alongside an inherent readiness to acquire new knowledge, skills and experience. Wlodkowski (1985) extended this to include a notion of 'added value' associated with participation alongside three other factors, successful learning, volition and pleasure. However, White (2012) emphasised the failure of such works to capture the narrative and context of the decision to participate.

Crossan *et al.* (2003) similarly argued that whilst such survey data of social, economic and demographic variables can provide broad contours of the patterns and trends in participation, they rarely shed light on the shared attributes and social milieu of participants. It is the incidence of these factors which provides useful insights into the context and setting of online learning and also participation in it.

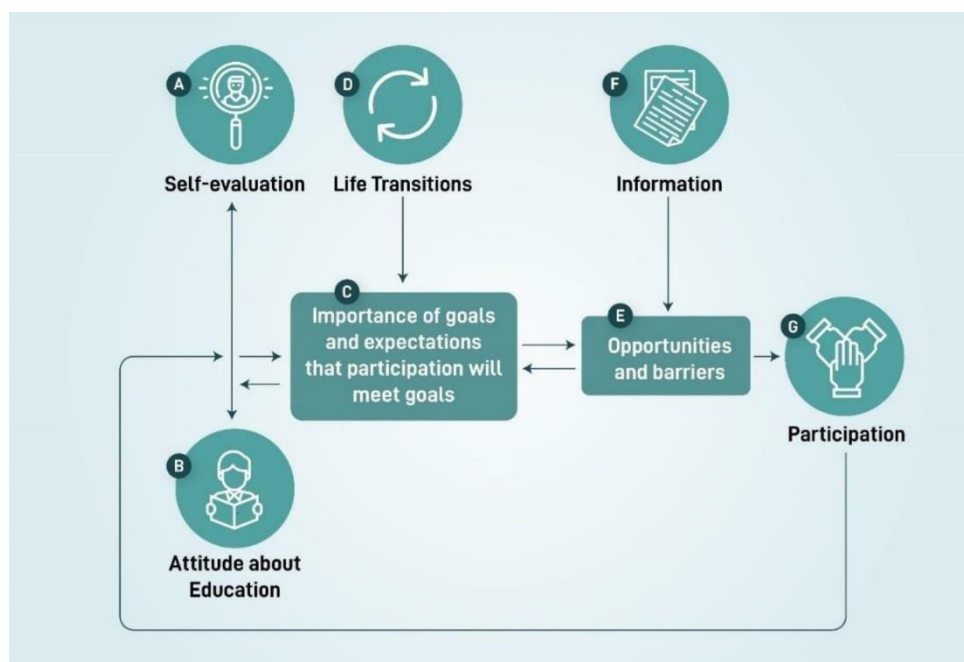
## **2.2 Models of Adult Participation**

The models of decision-making attempt to theorise the factors and forces which influence the decision to participate in adult learning. The theories align to the research findings and thinking of the time but do provide an evolving and comprehensive view of our understanding of the context of the experiences of adult learners returning to study either in a face-to-face setting or online. Key to this study is the work of Cross (1981) in the development of the Chain of Response Model which shows how individuals respond to internal and external variables associated with participation in learning activities.

### **2.2.1 Cross's Chain of Response Model**

Writing around the same time as Knowles and Mezirow, Cross published her conceptual framework, the Chain of Response Model, in her publication 'Adults as Learners' (1981). This book brought together and synthesised much of the work to date regarding adult learning and she describes the framework as 'the rough beginning of a conceptual framework designed to identify the relevant variables and hypothesize their interrelationships' (1981, p.124).

Cross's model built on the earlier work of Rubenson (1977) but her premise is distinctive and pertinent to this study for two key reasons; how a domain-based approach may provide a conceptual basis in which to better explore the range of non-linear interactions and experiences of these learners (or chains of responses) and the role of emotions driven by life transitions in the decision to participate.



*Figure 1 - Cross (1981) Chain of Response Model*

Cross's model (produced here with permission from Wiley – see Appendix 8) also recognises that adults can be self-directed learners and it explores how participation in a learning activity is 'not a single act but the result of a chain of responses, each based on an evaluation of the position of the individual in his or her environment' (1981, p. 125). This echoes the work of Knowles (1980) who distinguished between the way in which children learn (pedagogy) and the way in which adults learn (andragogy). Knowles first positioned the two concepts as dichotomous but later revised this position, viewing andragogy and pedagogy as being on a continuum, with individual circumstances giving rise to specific needs within adult learners (Knowles, 1984). Nowadays, it is common to see the term 'pedagogy' used generically to describe any teaching and learning encounter regardless of the age of the learner – a position which is not without criticism (Peterson and Ray, 2013, Forrest and Peterson). Although Knowles' work was not rooted in empirical evidence and therefore ought not make a theoretical contribution, his assumptions underpinning andragogy are considered to be good practice. Knowles (1980) put

forward that adults are self-directed learners, they bring a wealth of experience to the educational setting, they enter educational settings ready to learn, they are problem-centred in their learning and they are motivated to do so by internal factors. Therefore any curriculum, whether designed for a face-to-face or hybridised setting, should be structured to allow adult learners to build on past knowledge and experiences – an approach which clearly aligns to constructivism.

In Cross's Chain of Response model, arrows show one- or two-way relationships between the elements of the model, including (A) self-evaluation, which is interrelated with (B) attitudes about education, (C) importance of making and meeting goals, which is affected by (D) life transitions, with (C) also clearly linked to (E) opportunities and barriers, which, in turn is affected by (F) information about the environment (Morgan's 'first contact', 2011), with (E) also having an impact on (G) participation.

As part of the process of self-evaluation there are stable personal traits which play an important role in the motivation to participate and achieve. Cross highlighted how characteristics such as confidence and self-esteem can be attributed to those who voluntarily put themselves to the test and can be motivated to participate in learning. This, again, echoes Knowles' (1980) premise of adults as self-directed learners.

Cross proposed that attitudes towards education arise from previous experiences of learning and the attitudes of friends and family. Cross linked these two influences to the traits previously explored by Houle (1961) and it could be argued that the social, economic and demographic variables explored by Johnstone and Rivera (1965) have a role to play in terms of the reference and membership groups. Cross suggested that the interplay between self-evaluation and attitudes about education contributes to the learning-orientated personality.

### **2.2.2 The Significance of the Disorienting Dilemma**

Cross (1981) then went further to explore the framework of participation with regard to life transitions alongside opportunities and barriers to participation. This opened up an area of insight which remains under-explored recognising that the decision to participate may, in part, be an emotional one, born out of a period of change or even chaos calling for a new phase of the lifecycle. Cross recognised that some of these changes are gradual and predictable whilst others are sudden and dramatic

but that either can constitute a powerful and motivating force for learning. The identification of such life events with an interest in adult participation and a view of the transition as a positive force was referred to by Havinghurst as 'the teachable moment' (1972, p.7). Crossan *et al.* (2003) supported this view arguing that a disposition and decision to participate in adult learning is neither a linear nor one-directional journey, that it can be fraught, is often unpredictable and is bound up with other life events and experiences.

The notion of such uncertainty and dilemmas is well rehearsed and this study draws on the work on Mezirow in the field of transformative learning theory (1981). Mezirow proposed a series of phases as a methodological approach to the transformative potential of education for non-traditional learners. His work centred on the systematic observation of a college programme which sought to reintegrate female adult returners into education but he extends the concept of the disorienting dilemma from the decision to participate, following it through into the early experience of learning itself.

This study will draw on the first stage of Mezirow's process, that of the disorienting dilemma – an essential phase which is the catalyst for change through self-reflection and analysis to challenge assumptions. Mezirow linked the use of the term 'dilemma' to a dramatic change or a life crisis such as 'the death of a mate, a divorce or a family breadwinner becoming incapacitated ...' (1978, p.7). Mezirow's early conceptions of the disorienting dilemma focused on the family and externally imposed dilemmas. He later extended this to internal anomalies or trigger events for which the existing modes of meaning making will no longer suffice and which activate critical reflection and the initiation of the transformative process (Raikou, 2018). The initial confrontation of the dilemma may be 'self-induced ... induced by life circumstances or induced by other people ...' (Mezirow, 1991, p.173). Taylor (2000) did not attribute the dilemma to a single act or experience but made reference to the impetus for transformation being accumulative. Taylor perceived this as a subtle accumulation of opportunities which facilitate exploration and clarification of past experiences and accepted meanings rather than trigger crisis. Taylor's insight extended the notion of disorientation from the decision to participate into the act of learning describing it as a 'spiralling effect ... that is continually repeated' (p.291). Cranton (2006) perceived that life crises by their very nature do not always lead to critical self-reflection and the conditions for

transformation, and that moreover it is the building of events which leads to the questioning of perspectives.

### 2.2.3 Overcoming Barriers

Cross (1981) explored how barriers can block the road to an actual participation. She divided barriers into three main streams; situational, institutional and dispositional. Situational barriers arise from the personal situation of an adult at a given moment e.g. lack of money or lack of time due to job and family responsibilities. Institutional barriers arise when educational institutions generate the rules and practices that are discouraging for a lot of adults, for example inconvenient timetables or a lack of support and advice. Dispositional barriers are related to the self-esteem and attitude of the adult learner and their confidence to succeed in the course.

Cross highlighted that participation will come about or not, and after a successful enrolment within a course, the cycle will start all over again. Kondrup (2015) reinforced aspects of the Chain of Response Model in reaffirming how decisions, reflections and actual practices are always embedded in a complex web of life history and a certain cultural framework rooted in self-perception and self-evaluation as well as both conscious and unconscious life strategies. The model is not without criticism however. Rubenson and Salling Olesen (2007) highlighted how the model inadequately aligns the main constructs of attitudes, motives and barriers to the broader structural and cultural context; the significance of the decision to participate in terms of the individual life history. It is argued that the model is simplistic and mechanistic equating non-participation to resistance (Kondrup, 2015).

Burnell (2013) presented the notion of barriers as obstacles which can be overcome with the correct support mechanisms thereby avoiding the focus on non-participation and the incumbent limited view. She conceptualised barriers as challenges faced by some more than others. They therefore affect the extent of participation and engagement rather than preclude the act itself. This is a direct challenge to Cross's view that participation will occur or it will not.

Cross (1981) clearly showed the interplay between valence and expectance and what has gone before to form attitudes to learning and the ability to self-evaluate. In doing this Cross gave context to the complexity of the decision-making process and its non-linear nature and how it is bound up in previous experiences, as highlighted

by Knowles (1980). Cross's Chain of Response Model is a clear recognition of the importance of understanding the context of the decision to participate and the interplay of multiple contributory factors in reaching that decision. Mezirow extends this into the early experiences of learning. The exploration of life transitions adds a further layer of complexity to the decision-making process setting the tone for the early experiences of participation which have the potential to be fraught, unpredictable and emotional. Cross's model is also relevant here as she started to explore the context or domains in which the experience of adult learners plays out. There is clearly a personal (or dispositional) dimension – those individual traits and typologies and demographic characteristics, an institutional domain – providing opportunities and barriers to access whether financial, structural or process-dependant and finally a circumstantial (situational) domain – the snapshot context at any given moment, life work and family circumstances.

### **2.3 The Decision to Study Online**

Henry, Pooley and Omari (2014) suggested that whilst there is market research and instructor experiences of the attractive features of online learning, there is little empirical evidence to explore the reasons why students choose to participate in online learning rather than campus-based provision. This understanding is important as without it, universities (and other online providers) cannot be sure that programmes are effectively meeting student expectation or that students are sufficiently informed and are ready to learn in an online environment. Krause (2005) went further to suggest that students' early experiences of met or unmet expectations play such a significant role in shaping the rest of their experience.

Henry, Pooley and Omari's study found that the predominant reasons for online participation relate clearly to the personal circumstances overlooked by the early literature (Houle, 1961; Sheffield, 1964) and the convenience that online learning offers in terms of time, place and pace. Participants are also drawn to particular courses because of the relevance of the subject matter, institutional reputation and entry pathway whilst personal features such as satisfaction, inspiring others and pursuing career and employment goals are also significant.

One area of discussion worthy of note is the premise that online learning is often promoted as a secondary position for those too busy to study on campus due to

work and family commitments. This is often the case where the provision has a campus-based offering. The promotion of the benefits of online learning is comparative and contributes to prospective students' expectations relating to what online learning may offer them if they enrol (Henry, Pooley and Omari, 2014). However, exclusively online learning has no face-to-face alternative and is not promoted as a less desirable option but as a new realm of possibility (Lee, Cho and Choi, 2019). The decision to study online does not always weigh up the merits of one mode against another. This may present a slightly different perspective on the reasons for enrolment which is worth further consideration.

Flexibility is a theme treated by Selwyn (2011) and others (Willging and Johnson, 2009; Dumais *et al.*, 2013; Kara *et al.*, 2019) where participants reflected that their decision to study online was based around expectations of personalisation; an unshackled experience where learners could find an appropriate fit with their individual situation. Timing, pace and location were key determinants in the offer of online learning especially where students lead nomadic lives through work. Here it was felt that online learning had the capacity to bring a 'regular element to otherwise irregular circumstances' (Selwyn, 2011, p.373). For others it was felt to fit with individual life circumstances whether that was to work alongside family commitments or in the absence of family commitments serving to fill free time.

## **2.4 Adult Learners and Constructs of Engagement**

This study into the lived experiences of adult learners in online undergraduate study requires a specific field of enquiry within which such experiences can be explored. Bryson and Hand (2008) highlighted that the problem with focusing narrowly on single aspects of the student experience such as motivation and persistence is that they are insufficient to holistically describe the full individual experience of learning.

### **2.4.1 Understanding Engagement**

The notion of student engagement is well used in undergraduate online study and fewer terms are 'invoked more frequently and in more varied ways' (Axelson and Flick, 2011, p.38). However, the term is more difficult to pinpoint in reality as it has varying definitions which are dependent on a range of contextual factors. What is key to this research, in scoping out the construct of student engagement in online, adult, undergraduate study, is that it reflects the complex and multifaceted experience of the learners.

### **2.4.2 A Behaviourist Approach to Engagement**

Kuh (2009) defined engagement as, 'the time and effort that students devote to activities which are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities' (2009, p.683). This understanding of student engagement is multifaceted but is institutionally and behaviourally focused on the demands of study, the learning environment and academic and auxiliary support. However, the challenges which are faced by adult, part-time learners in the online environment will be more complex and varied. Such a definition fails to capture the wide-reaching and often emotive challenges faced by adult learners, practical barriers in the personal and circumstantial domains such as time management, work and family commitments and financial uncertainty. A behavioural approach also fails to capture the emotional dimension of returning to study and the inherent social and cultural challenges of online study such as feelings of alienation, self-perception, isolation, fear of failure and understanding teaching practices and language which is 'alien' (Krause, 2005, p.11). This is reflected in the literature whereby engagement is institutionally viewed and measured in terms of behaviour and yet learners construct engagement as an affective process (Solomonides and Martin, 2008).

### **2.4.3 Engagement as a Process**

O'Brian and Toms (2008) undertook a review of the literature in the area of student engagement and focused on the process. They determined that it consisted of a point of engagement, period of engagement and disengagement. This work provides an insightful perspective which is particularly pertinent to adult learners; the notion that the process of engagement is not constant; that the intensity of engagement will vary during the period of engagement; and that there will be periods of disengagement and reengagement when the participants stop of their own volition or when their environment requires them to stop being involved.

### **2.4.4 Towards a Multidimensional Approach**

Pittaway's (2012) model of student engagement also took a multidimensional approach comprising five elements; academic, professional, personal, intellectual and social. The academic element captures the learner's role in their learning, the professional extends beyond the classroom to sharing experiences and networking with others. The personal element is the learner's level of confidence, motivation and persistence and the intellectual is the level of cognition. Finally the social element is



the recognition of the diversity of views and perspectives when working with others. Pittaway's model extends beyond the behavioural and cognitive, and beyond the classroom setting. The methodology also gives meaning and focus to the study as it is through the narratives of the participants that the nature of the relationship with the learning, their peers and their own, emerging, identity is uncovered. The five elements of Pittaway's model are distinctive yet intersecting but the study does not go on to clarify and give context to the interplay between the elements.

It is a significant and driving feature of this study that a holistic approach was taken in order to uncover the learner in context. Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) stated that, 'we should not settle for notions of engagement which fail to reflect the complicated lives of adult students' (p.173) and consequently it is imperative that this study captures such a view.

Kahu's framework of student engagement (2013) encapsulates the behavioural and cognitive elements but also recognises that engagement has an emotional or affective dimension. This highlights the challenges faced by online learners by virtue of inherent distance and also acknowledges that the transition to undergraduate study is a time of considerable emotional volatility (Christie *et al.*, 2008). Kahu conceptualises student engagement as the emotional, behavioural and cognitive connection with their study influenced by a wide range of psychosocial and structural factors such as enjoyment, interest and belonging. This approach recognises that intensity of student engagement is variable and is situated within and influenced by the wider social context. Kahu recognises that engagement is not a construct which is isolated to the act of learning but is, in reality, influenced by a wide range of structural and psychosocial variables; some stemming from the university which are sited in the institutional domain such as institutional policies and practices; some sitting firmly within the personal domain such as student self-perception, skills and self-efficacy.

## **2.5 Conceptualising the Landscape of the Adult, Online Learner**

Recurrent through this review of the literature are three variables or domains; the personal (Cross 1981; Houle, 1961; Courtenay, 1992; Boshier, 1971), the institutional (Cross, 1981; Henry, Pooley and Omari, 2014; Hyllegard, 2008; Kardan *et al.*, 2013) and circumstantial (Cross, 1981; Crossan *et al.*, 2003; Havinghurst, 1972; Kahu, 2013;

Crossan *et al.*, 2013; Mezirow, 1991; Turner, 2000; Cranton, 2006) which give context to the start of the journey and the decision to participate. These three domains also make an interesting appearance at the other end of the learning journey, in studies of retention and attrition in adult and online learning.

### **2.5.1 The Personal, Institutional and Circumstantial Domains**

Berge and Huang (2004) reviewed the multi-dimensional phenomena of retention of students in higher education from a number of different perspectives. They explored models of retention and attrition in both traditional and distance education by, amongst others, Boshier (1973) and Kember (1999). From a thorough review of prior theory and research, they proposed a new, holistic model be presented within the context of online learning that shows the relationship among these elements, factors and circumstances across three domains – personal, circumstantial and institutional. The model has been tested in studies by Muilenberg and Berge (2005), Young and Bruce (2011) and most recently by Fraser *et al.* (2018) and has proved to be a useful tool in the context of online learning as well as being a model which is flexible and context-specific. To encounter the same variables at the start of the learning journey and also at the end suggests a suitable framework in which to explore the context of being an online, adult learner. The interplay of the personal, institutional and circumstantial domains will frame this study, providing the space, context and boundaries within which narrators can share their experience.

### **2.5.2 The Role of Emotion**

What is absent from both Cross (1981) and Berge and Huang's (2004) conceptualisation of the domains (and alluded to by Kondrup, 2015) is emotion. This begins to appear more regularly in recent research dialogue with Christie *et al.* (2008) recognising the phase of transition into learning as one of emotional volatility and Kahu (2013) recognising the far-reaching but variable consequences of emotional engagement in online learning.

Mälkki and Green (2014) considered the challenges of liminal spaces and the emotional aspects generated by this space and period of uncertainty. They described such feelings as 'edge emotions' – instances when we are forced out of our comfort zone or to the edges of it. This is a very risky place and whilst integral to the process of perspective transformation through questioning and re-negotiating identity, should be tempered and supported with trust, nurture and care both

academically and at a personal and social level. Conrad (2002) and Zembylas (2008) both highlighted the ambivalent nature of such emotions as anxiety and fear as well as curiosity and excitement. Mälkki and Green (2016) considered the requisite conditions of a safe and accepting learning environment which facilitates the process of reflection and transformation. It is crucial that such an environment does not exist in isolation, in the institutional context, but extends to the learners' personal and social relationships and is interwoven across the domains.

A review of the empirical research on emotions and virtual learning by Henritius, Löfström and Hannula (2019) found that few studies had captured the fluctuation of emotions within the context of a flow of events or experiences, focusing instead on methodologies which captured post-hoc states of emotion. In reality, there is an inevitable emotional dimension to any personal transformation which can, at times, be painful, threatening and disorienting particularly where perspective transformation can lead to emergent identities which appear incompatible with existing ones. A lack of emotional and psychological space affords little room for reflection, recognition and renewed negotiation. Nussbaum (2001) argued for the presence and recognition of such emotions, describing them as shaping the landscapes of our social and mental lives and being an 'intelligent response to the perception of value' (p.253). Irving, Wright and Hibbert (2019) warned of the potential for emotions to both halt as well as facilitate transitions in the learning journey as the anxiety and doubt of the liminal space morph into helplessness, anger and panic. This can result in a learner getting stuck (Meyer and Land, 2005). However, it is important to emphasise that the liminal space does not exclusively trigger negative emotions such as doubt, stress, worry, panic and surprise but that it also has the capacity to act as a mechanism which triggers access and transition. The cognitive maturity and previous experience of undergraduate study of these participants, as Master's level learners, should be acknowledged as a potential contributing factor in their ability to frame emotions as such a catalyst.

Kahu (2014) considered the emotional engagement of adults in online learning as being predominantly influenced by their interest (connection to their course) and a sense of belonging (connection to the institution, its staff and other students). Kahu found that positive emotions triggered further behavioural and cognitive

engagement which, in turn, led to a spiral of enjoyment whereas negative emotions such as frustration, isolation and anxiety could inhibit engagement and interest. These are explored further in Chapter 2.6.3 but are acknowledged here as factors which have the potential to contribute both positively and negatively to the liminal state as a means to mitigate the potential isolation and lack of connection associated with learning online.

A key question for the design of this study is how these dynamic and fluctuating states of emotion feature in the conceptual framework. Do they provide a fourth, independent but intersecting domain or are they a product of the interplay of the personal, institutional and circumstantial domains? This will be considered further in Chapter 2.7.

## **2.6 Factors which Shape Early Experiences of Becoming an Online Adult Learner**

The literature exploring the factors which shape the experiences of adult learner engagement are not only vast but differ broadly in purpose and function. The field incorporates a diverse range of overriding objectives, methodological approaches, participant groups. Any attempt to synthesise the literature through comparison would be reduced to an examination of semantics and a fragmented picture, losing clear sight of important cross-cutting themes.

In an attempt to give a coherent underpinning to this research, the field is examined within the context of three cross-cutting themes which are self-attributes and motivational constructs, the challenges posed by the inherent flexibility of online learning, and identity and belonging.

### **2.6.1 Self-Attributes and Motivational Constructs for Learning Online**

The motivation literature explores a number of often overlapping self-attributes which make a positive contribution to success in online learning.

Motivation to learn is defined by Ruohotie as 'an individual's desire to work towards a learning goal. The motives which are the basis for the learning desire activate, direct and maintain the learning activity', (2000, p.8).

The frameworks of motivation derive a number of key motivational constructs which are often classified as intrinsic and extrinsic to the student.

Key to these intrinsic constructs is the work of Bandura on self-efficacy (1986). Self-efficacy is expressed as a students' own perceptions of their ability to complete a task. The work of Bandura explored the perceptions of students in a face-to-face classroom setting but suggested that self-efficacy may be a predictor of academic performance and success. His later work in 1997 went on to show that students with high academic self-efficacy are more adaptable and agile in their strategic learning.

Liaw (2008) examined self-efficacy in the context of online learning alongside interaction and the format and provision of learning materials. In determining effective e-learning, all three components were significant but the perception of self-efficacy was found to be the key indicator in predicting satisfaction with e-learning.

The importance of internet self-efficacy, autonomy and self-regulation was also explored by Kuo *et al.* (2013). The research explored the experiences of students enrolled on a summer school course, using Moore's interaction framework (1989) and Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1977). The aim of the research was to investigate the extent to which the potential variables, interaction, internet self-efficacy and self-regulation predict student satisfaction in online learning and to consider the effect of student background variables on these three features. The research found that internet self-efficacy is a key determinant of student satisfaction and that time spent online was less for those students who had internet self-efficacy. Although the sample here was narrow (undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled on a summer school programme) the relationship between the background of the student and the variables which indicated satisfaction with online learning are useful given the inherent distance of online learning and understanding of those learners. Warner *et al.* (1998) also highlighted the importance of learners' confidence and competence in information and communication technologies for learning, and the ability to engage in autonomous learning. Tanner, Noser and Totaro (2009) found that some students did not have sufficient grasp of the required technology.

The idea of self-efficacy also has an emotional dimension as a learner's belief in their own ability to cope with the challenges of online study will be reflected in their self-esteem, academic self-construct, personal development and cognitive engagement and achievements.

It is therefore not surprising that self-efficacy features as a key factor in a number of frameworks of motivation (Radovan's Variables of Motivation, 2003; Deci and Ryan's

Self Determination Theory, 1985; Pintrich's Motivational Expectancy Model, 1988; Ruohotie, 2000).

Another construct of motivation stems from further work of Bandura (1991) and relates to the students' ability to self-regulate. Ruohotie (2000) emphasised the importance of self-regulation in student motivation and in particular the 'conscious self-assertion, which allows for the analysis of one's own experience and thought processes' (Ruohotie, 2000, p.2). Self-regulation has three key features; self-monitoring the effects of behaviour, the evaluation of behaviour, and affective self-reaction. Self-regulation feeds into self-efficacy through intrinsic reflection on behaviour and action, and for this work sits well with the notion of a journey of transition.

Hartnett, St. George and Dron (2011) used Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory as a theoretical framework for research into the motivation of online learners. Motivation has been presented as an individual characteristic which is stable across situations, failing to recognise that individuals are active and integrate new learning and experiences into their own sense of self (Deci and Ryan, 2015). Deci and Ryan's framework (2000), as a motivational theory, addressed what energises the behaviour of individuals and how that behaviour is regulated in the various domains of their lives.

The study by Hartnett, St George and Dron (2011) aimed to show that viewing motivation as an intrinsic or extrinsic quality does not recognise how motivation may be influenced and in what ways. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002) stated that one of the most important assumptions of social-cognitive models is that motivation is a dynamic, multifaceted phenomenon. However, much of the motivation research and literature polarises the two facets of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. It either presented motivation as a stable characteristic of the learner, seeking traits and trends of successful online learners, or is investigated as an effect of the learning environment. The important interplay of the two domains and the recognition that individuals can be motivated to a greater or lesser degree at any given time and in any context was discussed by Turner and Patrick (2008) in Hartnett, St. George and Dron (2011). The study found support for the view that online learners are intrinsically motivated but this is only part of the picture. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations co-existed and were highly influenced by the situation. Perceived

importance, relevance, utility and value of the activity (identified regulation) were just as important as interest or enjoyment of the task (intrinsic motivation). The premise of the research, that student motivation is a changing dynamic affected by the interplay of domains, is of significance for this work and the journey of transition but this only focused on the personal domain (traits and typologies) and the institutional domain (the learning environment). However, this work does bear out earlier findings (Bird and Morgan, 2003) from a study of adult learners on part time online programmes which concluded that motivation was not static, and varied across the programme of study. Bird and Morgan (2003) also highlighted that motivation cannot easily be categorised but is a combination of variables, interests, needs and opportunities, opening up the circumstantial domain as a further, significant dynamic.

McGill, Beetham and Gray (2016) highlighted this further stating that it remains contentious whether these factors are persistent properties of the individual, or resources that can be differently deployed in different contexts and built on with experience. As a result it is also unclear how the various contributory factors may be distinguished to arrive at a picture of how some individuals are generally more successful online learners than others.

These works (McGill, Beetham and Gray, 2016; Hartnett, St. George and Dron, 2011; Bird and Morgan, 2003) add support to the dynamic and complex nature of motivation which proves a key challenge across this work. Conceptualising motivation as dynamic and complex provides insights into the drivers for participation whilst, at the same time, adding light and shade to the complex and mutable interplay of the domains as participants construct their lived experiences of being an adult, online learner. It is a patchwork of ever-changing factors which pervades all three domains.

### **2.6.2 Challenges of Online Learning – Hybrid Spaces**

The flexibility afforded through online, hybrid pedagogies has been a common theme throughout this review and demonstrates the commitment of the institution to support learners with a more flexible offering which fits with their individual lives and circumstances (Selwyn, 2011; Bourdeux and Schoenack, 2016; Universities UK, 2019). It is one of the driving factors behind why adults choose to study online for their degrees and such hybrid learning spaces are seen as a reorganisation of

learning along more personalised, democratic and effective lines (Smith, 2010; Selwyn, 2011).

Cohen, Nørgård and Mor (2020) highlighted how we now find many aspects of our lives hybridised and this is clearly seen in the Covid-19 pandemic as both face-to-face as well as online learners have experienced the boundaries between home, work, social and educational spaces blurred to take on the mutuality of shared function and purpose, bridging location and even time. The abrupt and unforeseen intrusion of Covid-19 and the associated restrictions have left learners coming to terms with alien and unfamiliar learning environments for the first time as well as hybrid pedagogies that fundamentally shift and cause them to further rethink their concept of learning places.

Currie and Eveline (2010) made reference to the emergent terms which are used to describe the work and family interface such as 'juggling work and family', the 'work/life balance' and the prospect that work and family are two separate entities. This may be a formal convenience but in reality we are immersed in these two domains simultaneously and technology blurs the formal realms of space, place and time, placing them on a continuum with boundaries becoming permeable to the point of saturation and leakage (Edley, 2001).

Cohen, Nørgård and Mor (2020) defined 'hybridised' as more than a meshing together of two constituents; it is the two constituents distinctively at once and this duality is what creates something new. Hybrid learning spaces, therefore, are ones in which technology permeates physical space with the potential to augment and enhance learning experiences. Hybridisation extends across both mobile and internet technologies to create interfaces between virtual spaces and real-world phenomena whilst simultaneously creating a 'data shadow' (p.1039) for our actions in the physical world.

Cohen, Nørgård and Mor (2020) used the example of an academic tutor and a student who are engaged in a synchronous session using a video-conferencing platform. Both tutor and student are simultaneously 'at home' and 'in class'. However, the tutor also has to acknowledge the student's learning space as their 'home' space and simultaneously a 'class' space – a challenge for both tutor and student.



Hybrid pedagogies blur the boundaries between traditional and formally constructed spaces of learning and activity and have the potential to throw up new and unexpected experiences, challenges and opportunities. As the worlds of work, life, learning and play begin to meld, traditional constructs of places and spaces for learning become deconstructed and untethered.

Selwyn (2011) highlighted that such expectations of flexibility are reciprocal and learners who engage with online study are often anticipated to be able to show qualities of creativity and adaptability to respond to changing knowledge demands and social uncertainties. He described their ability to shift from being a passive negotiator of the prescribed rules to being an 'active founder and re-configurer of the rules' (p.368). Hybrid learning spaces present both demands and opportunities as the locus for learning becomes untethered and hybridisation challenges our conception of what constitutes a learning place. Hybridity is multidimensional: it concerns the interleaving of formal and informal social structures of learning, the combination of physical and digital tools mediating an individual's interaction with the world and society, and more (Cook *et al.*, 2015).

Bennett, Knight and Rowley (2020) highlighted the significance and personal nature of such hybrid learning spaces. Within any learning space - be it institutional or online/virtual - students connect with the engagement strategies they consider to be typically successful for them, a position echoed by Kahu (2014). Therefore the key qualities of online learning places are aligned with successful learning activities and there is consensus that enjoyable learning experiences equate to good learning outcomes. These connections between space and place can be subtle but a powerful catalyst for learning and to understand them we must grasp the 'shifting assemblages involving human beings and things: material, digital and hybrid' (Ellis and Goodyear, 2016, p.149 in Bennett, Knight and Rowley, 2020).

Xiao *et al.* (2020) concluded that the essence of hybrid learning is flexibility in terms of time, space and pace of learning that empowers learners to find the right mix for themselves out of all options available. This could be any combination of offline or online, synchronous or asynchronous. For Selwyn (2010) this would represent a dynamic and significant shift for part-time, adult learners who often desire stability and predictability in their pursuit of independent study.

### 2.6.2.1 Learning Places in Hybrid Spaces

Carvalho *et al.* (2018) examined the complex and fluid nature of being an online student when it comes to the question of learning places and hybrid spaces. The mix of opportunities blurs the accepted boundaries between the formal and informal as well as between the concrete and the digital to create 'learning in-between' (p.41). This can be a space of curiosity and creativity but also one of risk which is reliant on learners exploiting the inherent flexibility and value of online learning and negotiating the challenges afforded by it, particularly those of place, space and pace.

Carvalho *et al.* (2018) differentiated between place and space. Place is presented as something which is 'concrete, realised and experienced' (p.43) whereas space is more abstract and generalised, a more figurative and temporal notion. There is an implied relationship between a learner and their learning place which brings with it connection and identity. The two concepts are both intrinsic to what online learners do.

Selwyn's (2011) interviewees described a place which is conducive to study being one which guarantees a sense of isolation and concentration. This may be a reorganisation of the household space so that it can facilitate learning or some dedicated office space. Defining such physical space may be seen as taking a professional outlook (Carvalho *et al.*, 2018). The narratives of female adult learners present notions of less defined places of study often fitting around domestic arrangements (Selwyn, 2011; Dumais *et al.*, 2013; Kara *et al.*, 2019). They also described a less equitable allocation of space where quite often partners took up prime 'office space' for their non-learning activities. This presents challenges in both maintaining boundaries whilst living in the learning environment but also does not facilitate the perceived requisite of a place of solitude away from other family members (Selwyn, 2011). This may lead to learners temporarily relocating to other study places such as the university, study centres, library or coffee shop – a constant redefinition of the learning place (Kember, 1999; Selwyn, 2011; Brooks, 2012). These options for those learning exclusively online are clearly more limited when there is no physical, institutional place on which to lean.

Material things also give a sense of place for learning by contributing to a sense of ownership and identity. Materiality can transcend the physical to bring a sense of

order and connectedness for those who do not have a defined and constant study place (Carvalho *et al.*, 2018).

Kahu *et al.* (2014) found that ideas about what studying online would be like became very different in reality as the complexity of students' lives meant that finding space, place and time to study was a major challenge.

The representations of place are very traditional, bounded in accepted norms and expectations of the formal, physical spaces of exclusivity, solitude and quiet non-interruption. They do not always reflect the fluidity and hybridity afforded by online learning let alone the move towards a flexible pragmatism – a reconfiguration of the rules. Selwyn (2011) advised caution for educators in their anticipation of online learners' ability to deal with uncertainty – learners may be conductors rather than controllers of their engagement and actions. Furthermore, adult, online learners do not appear to treat other places such as shared online fora and spaces as the study place, instead, viewing it as a place of other activity (Carvalho *et al.*, 2018).

### **2.6.2.2 The Logistics of Study**

Finding time to study is a circumstantial challenge which emerges strongly from the literature (Kember 1999; Christie *et al.*, 2008; Currie and Eveline, 2010; Rao and Giuli, 2010). Selwyn (2011) referred to this as the logistics of study. Frequently the goal of online learning is compromised by the routine demands and commitments of an individual's day, their paid and unpaid commitments including work, caring responsibilities and social activities. The demands of family commitments come through clearly in many of these narratives and it is clear to see that quite often the impetus behind the decision to study emerges as a constraining feature (Cross, 1981). This supports the earlier argument that Cross's Chain of Response Model does not end at the point at which there is engagement with learning or not but that these conditions are operant into the initial learning experience and often beyond – the cycle does not start all over again.

Quite often the time and space for study is made or 'carved out' (Selwyn, 2001, p.376) around the temporal patterns of others (particularly family members) or has to be guarded or bought through paid arrangements such as for additional childcare. Such space is negotiated within the micro-economy of the household. Besides caring arrangements, the inflexible demands of other roles and

responsibilities such as household work also feature whereas for younger participants the conflict lies with personal care and leisure time.

Dead time is also a consideration – unproductive breaks, pauses, rest and travel periods throughout the working week. There is some evidence that such periods can be leveraged for online study space without the demands of caring responsibilities or family life seeping in but these opportunities can often be circumstantial, fraught and unpredictable (Rao and Giuli, 2010; Selwyn, 2011).

Similar challenges are also faced by those who do not have pre-determined schedules of work, have varying work responsibilities week on week or those who are juggling multiple employments due to financial hardships (Willging and Johnson, 2009; Rao and Giuli, 2010).

Selwyn (2011) found that the space for online study is sometimes bounded and compromised by self-imposed limitations. Despite universities offering a range of learning opportunities through discussion fora, online content and additional learning materials, full use of these is not always made, with learners perceiving them as extraneous to the grade and being content to forego activities which are not seen as integral to the core reading and subsequent assessment. Selwyn argued that this often reflects a desire for stable and predictable learning by those who are happy to pursue it independently and appears to be a far cry from Field's notion that transition and the capacity to adapt, flex and change would be 'embedded and routine' (Field, 2010, p. xviii). However, Kahu *et al.* (2014) presented a more nuanced view of how students soon started to distinguish between tasks which required ideal conditions and those that can be done when conditions are less than ideal, mediating the demands and challenges of both the institutional and circumstantial domains.

Dumais *et al.* (2013) also presented perceptions of space for study amongst first-generation, adult online learners as often being a relegated priority sitting below work and personal commitments. Many of the participants felt that their workplace required commitment over and above their family and personal life and that a defined commitment to engagement in study was incompatible. This study reflected such tensions in concerns of participants in their ability to successfully coordinate virtual group-based assignments, which may shed light on Selwyn's (2011) observation of reluctance of such learners to participate beyond core activities.

The flexibility and adaptability of online learning for students to study at their own pace are often cited as the key benefits of online learning for those wishing to study on a part-time basis (Selwyn, 2011; Bourdeux and Schoenack, 2016; Universities UK, 2019). This is a notion which has been extensively challenged in the literature, being described as mere window-dressing or a synonym for more business-like ways of working, which in effect rationalise provision rather than working for the benefit of the learners and widening access to education (Harrison *et al.*, 2003). Selwyn (2011) argued that such a premise should be viewed from the perspective of the learner and how such principles of flexibility and adaptability are encountered and play out in the day to day lives of adult learners. The flexibility of online learning certainly provides a good fit for adult learners who are working alongside their studies, an unshackled approach to study which is driven by the learner. It is also anticipated that such learning encounters have the capacity to adapt to individual needs in terms of pace, timing and place of study as discussed above (Selwyn, 2011). However, this flexibility of the learning encounter is often found to be in direct contrast and occasionally conflicts with a number of institutional and self-imposed inflexibilities. Institutional frameworks for teaching, progression through the learning and assessment in online learning are often rooted in the traditional face-to-face experience with common regulatory frameworks and assessment approaches rather than ones which are aligned to the mode of study (Selwyn, 2011; Dumais *et al.*, 2013) – a tick box on the module descriptor regarding the mode of delivery being a poor substitute for a truly differentiated experience.

There are also self-imposed inflexibilities regarding study approaches and practices amongst online adult learners which have been explored previously and are often overtly linear, instrumentalist and assessment-driven with a focus on the final grade (Selwyn, 2011; Kara *et al.*, 2019). Selwyn argued that despite the citations of flexibility and adaptability of online learning for working adults the challenges of achieving such 'fit' is neither convenient nor straightforward with many such students lacking the fluidity to engage and disengage with learning to meet the needs of their changing circumstances. Instead, adult, online learners prefer structured engagements which fit into structured routines, an approach which inevitably favours those with longstanding and successful patterns of educational engagement where learning is experienced and managed in rigid, routinised and inflexible ways (Kember, 1999; Selwyn, 2011). Flexibility is perceived as the integration of study

around the status quo and the maintenance of the existing circumstances rather than the opportunity for the learner to reinvent and re-orientate themselves.

### **2.6.3. Identity and Belonging as an Online Learner**

A sense of belonging is a subjective feeling of relatedness or connectedness (Thomas, 2012). As learning is such a social and collaborative process in which knowledge is developed and constructed within a community, a sense of belonging will impact on the learning journey whether it be to reduce isolation, to create camaraderie, or simply to provide scaffolding and support to reduce anxiety and manage workloads. Such networks of connection and support have become ever more vital during the Covid-19 pandemic and whilst a sense of belonging is not evidenced as a key to success and completion (feelings of disconnection and isolation have not been shown to result in learners dropping an online course (Rovai, 2002a)), it can impact and influence the learning experience and the ability to flourish in online spaces (Phirangee and Malec, 2017; Peacock and Cowan, 2019).

The notion of belonging is multifaceted and extends across all relationships within and without the online learning environment; fellow online learners, academic tutors and support interactions across their engagement with the university. Peacock and Cowan (2019) defined a sense of belonging for online learners as having two key attributes – a sense of being accepted and valued alongside feelings of fitting in and being connected to a group, class, subject or institution. Phirangee and Malec (2017) distinguished between isolation and solitude. Solitude may comprise moments of isolation within a network of connections whereas isolation is a physical separation with limited interaction which can provide feelings of misunderstanding and conflict.

Such a sense of belonging also appears crucial to negotiating the liminal spaces which emerge as learners negotiate new learning identities and could be extended to deal with uncertainty and disjuncture created by times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The traditional writing in this field (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1967) showed how such rites of passage were characterised by a complete separation from the old community before the process of re-assimilation commenced with the scaffolding and support of elders. The limits of this traditional view when extrapolated to online learning were explored in section 1.5 but the sense of belonging remains crucial even if this is a dynamic double-positioning – belonging within both the traditional structures of everyday family and work life and that of the

university simultaneously. The alternative would be a sense of non-belonging or estrangement (Rantatalo and Lindberg, 2018) which would pose challenges in the formation (or continuation) of the new learning identity.

Christie *et al.* (2008) explored the challenges of developing a sense of belonging when learning identities are fragile and uncertain when engaging with new learning environments and learning communities. They described this as 'the culture shock' (p.569) on entering higher education where the anticipation of not knowing what is expected becomes entangled with the learning process itself. This is exacerbated where the learner has no previous familial experience of higher education and there is no reservoir of insight or support to draw upon.

Peacock and Cowan (2019) showed how feelings of belonging can have a positive impact on learners and enable them to flourish in the online environment. This applies whether the online domain is their starting point or whether their face-to-face studies have moved online on account of the Covid-19 restrictions. Connection and trust in the development of significant relationships can support the development of confidence and self-esteem as learners work towards their personal and professional goals. Peacock and Cowan (2019) emphasised the significance of the relationship with a caring tutor who knows them, is enthusiastic, encouraging, friendly and can be trusted – a modern day elder in the online environment to facilitate opportunities to build self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem in navigating the transition.

Online learners report that greater collaboration with their peers in the online environment fosters a degree of camaraderie which can ameliorate the isolation of learning at a distance. This is not simply about networks and making personal and professional connections but being part of an experience that only fellow online learners can understand (Delahunty, Verenikina and Jones, 2014) which, in turn, serves to reduce anxiety around their issues and concerns. There is a sense of belonging, with the online community acting as a source of empathy and support as well as a sounding board to share views and ideas in the construction of their learning and knowledge (Kahu, 2014; Thomas, Herbert and Teras, 2014), a tacit source of knowledge and strategies or 'know hows' (Lee, Choi and Cho, 2019, p. 30).

The narratives around the value of belonging twist and turn with other studies showing that such interactions within the online community are more likely to be academic than social with non-traditional learners having less time and desire for social activities (Christie *et al.*, 2005; Kahu, 2014). Participation in online learning manifests itself from the individualistic or even insular to the inclusive where the value is attached to sharing and collaboration for the benefit of the group (Rovai, 2002a). Some learners showed an awareness of the potential isolation and lack of connection which is inherent in online learning and did not foresee it to be a problem as they were content to have such autonomy and independence. Others felt that the value of online discussion fora, the tone set and contributions made, did not always reflect an authentic reality (Kahu, 2014) or that the development of interpersonal skills, whilst desirable, was simply not a priority (Delahunty, Verenikina and Jones, 2014). Fitting in can be problematic and othering can occur where work obligations, academic expectations or ethnic identities are misaligned with the peer view leading to further disorientation, incongruence and isolation (Phirangee and Malec, 2017).

Kahu (2014) highlighted that whilst connections and interrelatedness with tutors and fellow students features in such narratives, a connection to the institution, discipline or programme of study is rarely spoken about. The sense of belonging for online learners appears to be very much centred around those very human relationships and establishing social presence which is accepting of all identities, experiences, beliefs and knowledge sets and provides a sound basis on which to experience congruence and create shared meaning and understanding (Phirangee and Malec, 2017).

## **2.7 Developing the Conceptual Framework**

This review of the literature has considered in detail the influential factors operant in the decisions of adults to return to education including the decision to study online. In this section, I discuss the development of the conceptual framework for the study through which the landscape and boundaries for the research are established alongside the tools and methods which contribute richer insights to explore the experiences of the participants.



The work of Cross (1981) and the Chain of Response Model serve as a starting point for the conceptual framework, through which to approach the context and factors which influence adult participation in education. The work of Mezirow explored the extent to which emotion may play a factor in the decision and early participation. The work of Berge and Huang on the Model of Online Student Retention (2004) contributed towards a fuller understanding of the landscape of being an online learner.

Linking back to the initial premise of how the context of being a part-time adult, online learner can be explored, this key subset of the literature provides a contextual basis for this framework through the three established domains, the personal, circumstantial and institutional (Berge and Huang, 2004). Here, this framework is extended to incorporate the significance of emotion. The role of emotion was not evident in the original work from Berge and Huang in 2004 but has since been brought to prominence in the writing in the field by Zembylas (2008), Kahu (2013), Kondrup (2015) and Henritius, Löfström and Hannula (2019). Emotion is not presented here as a fourth domain but a product of the interplay of the other three - existing at the thresholds due to its potentiality to both bind and expose the fragility of these dynamic interrelationships with the pull and push of the demands in each domain.

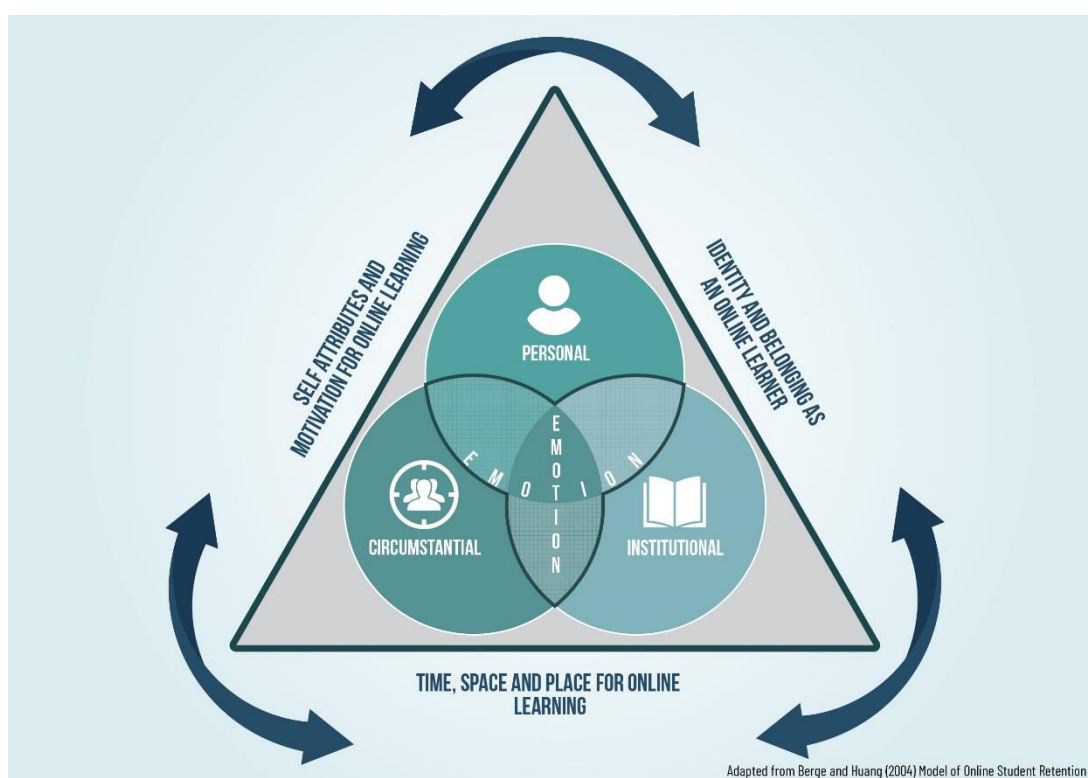


Figure 2 – The Conceptual Framework

It is from this work that the first of the research questions is derived:

1. How can the dynamic context of becoming a part-time, adult, online learner be explored and conceptualised?

This framework conceptualises the domain intersections as potential liminal spaces. It examines the interplay of these domains through the lens of liminality to uncover how the participant experience at the boundaries as well as 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1967, p.96) can be identified, as the participants take their first steps on this online journey and begin to forge their emergent identity of studenthood.

This review has presented a further key subset of the literature which aligns to the initial premise of what influences the experience of these learners and synthesises the perceived factors which shape this emergent experience – the enablers and the challenges. Through a thematic review, these have been drawn not only from the participation and motivation literature, but also from the writing in the fields of identity and belonging in online learning as well as the challenges and opportunities provided by the untethered flexibility of online learning and hybrid spaces.

It is from this work that the second research question is derived:

2. What enablers and challenges do learners perceive as shaping their emergent studenthood and how do they experience and negotiate boundary encounters and liminal spaces?

Some of the studies presented in this literature review were clearly limited by the participant profiles sampled and the methodological approaches used as set out in the first chapter (1.3). These included methodological limitations of online survey, the institutional framing as well as comparative studies of online students and their face-to-face counterparts. This study, through the framework, addresses these limitations by examining the two research questions through the first-hand narratives and lived experiences of the participants during the 12 weeks of their first online module, gathered through online reflective journaling and Skype interviews which are examined further in Chapter 3.5. This also provides an opportunity to shape professional practice through methodological innovation and data collection in the digital space; an alternative, effective and timely method for gathering rich

narrative which is congruous with that setting and which sheds light on how such complex and dynamic experiences can be explored.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Introduction

In situating the approach to this research study, it is important to set out the philosophical paradigm that has guided and influenced this research journey, including the methods adopted, analysis techniques used and the manner in which conclusions are drawn from the literature and data gathered.

This chapter explores my own positionality as a researcher before considering the research paradigm which was utilised in this study. The pilot project provided an environment to tentatively test the effectiveness of one of the research tools for data collection, the online reflective journal. This section then moves on to examine in detail the two data collection methods – online reflective journals and online interviews – and decisions made around the use of public and private spaces, opportunities for the participants to co-construct that space and triangulation of the journal data through online semi-structured interviews. The chapter sets out the design and implementation considerations as well as the ethical framework for the study including participant selection and how the issue of power dynamics has been approached, before moving on to set the scene on how the data was analysed.

As an educator-researcher, the development of my methodology is governed by my own positionality which is a convergence and reflection of my own beliefs, values and worldview which have evolved through my professional practice. The researcher does not start with a clean slate and in exploring my own professional practice, I am very much part of the world that I am studying.

My research tradition is in legal method and scholarship both as a researcher and as an educator. This is rooted in doctrinal analysis and the formulation of legal 'doctrines' through the analysis of legal rules, deductive and inductive logic. The use of analogical reasoning and policy analysis all feature strongly within this process.

In exploring my own research position, what had constituted forms of knowledge and ways of knowing previously would need to change in my development as a researcher in education. This would involve a challenging shift in my own mindset as to the legitimacy of knowledge but would bring with it the reward of new ways of knowing and a broadening of data types and collection methods. Even the act of engaging in practitioner research can lead to almost immediate professional change,

since our perceptions, and often our actions, change the minute we start looking and reflecting. The notion of reflexivity is recognition of one's self both within and without the research; it is an explicit self-consciousness about the researcher's position and values (Greenbank, 2003).

Such a line between the old academe and the new cannot be drawn as my traditional discipline shapes my emergent identity as researcher and although such philosophical considerations often remain hidden in research (Slife and Williams, 1995), they are still operative and influential on the process and practice of research and therefore need to be explicitly identified. Consideration of the research approach is therefore essential in order to establish my basic beliefs as the researcher and my worldview (ontology) as well as the guidelines which have set out the parameters by which this research has been conducted (epistemology and methodology). In doing so, the most appropriate methods and techniques can be adopted to achieve the aims and objectives of the inquiry – a clear interrelationship between the theoretical stance, the epistemology and the methodology and methods.

### **3.2 Siting the Research – Philosophy and Approach**

Creswell (2014) defined worldview as, 'a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study' (p.6). He cited other related terminology including 'epistemologies and ontologies', 'paradigms' and research methodologies. Although each term broadly relates to the position of the research, the terms epistemology and ontology refer to discrete concepts. Epistemology is the philosophy of how we come to know, and ontology is the philosophy of what can be known, or the nature of reality (Guba and Lincoln, 2005).

My own ontological and epistemological beliefs stem from my position as an interpretivist. Such a worldview places emphasis and importance on understanding rather than explaining human behaviour (Bryman, 2012) in the belief that knowledge about the social world is subjective and is rooted in first experience and interpretation. Understanding is therefore achieved through eliciting the lived experiences of the participants; their own first-hand accounts and interpretations of their realities – a truth which is subjective and contextually situated. In this way, insight and understanding of the highly subjective world of the human experience

can be gained in an effort to 'get inside the person and to understand from within' (Cohen *et al*, 2000, p.22).

This worldview is in stark contrast to the positivist perspective which seeks to explain the social world through the development of relevant and true statements which can serve to give an explanation of a situation or concern (Phillips and Burbules, 2000). The positivist approach may also seek to make causal links between events, decisions and actions. The aims of this research are to gain an insight into the individual factors which shape the lived experiences of the participants. This is predicated on their uniqueness as an online learner and the interplay of highly personal and individual factors which shape their circumstances and experience. Such insight is complex, dynamic, highly subjective and individual. Whilst shared or common experiences may emerge, such perspectives will not translate into generalisable truths which can explain the behaviour of all adult online learners. It is therefore not descriptions of the way that things really are or really work but rather a process of making meaning out of the situation that we find ourselves in (Pring, 2004).

Within qualitative research, it can therefore be assumed that reality is not something that is separate from the human experience. This sense and meaning is created through an interactive process which includes the researcher (Guba and Lincoln, 2003) meaning that the investigation cannot be undertaken in a way which is value free (Bryman, 2012). Clandinin (2006) went so far as to outline the importance of the belief of the researcher that they can relate to the research and researched in such a way as to present valid interpretations of the data. Objectivity therefore falls strictly within the remit of the researcher as a stance that she adopts as part of the project, committing time and energy to maintain critical distance through a variety of strategies.

The rich data required to reveal new insights into unique and complex experiences cannot be reduced to the statistical, numerical form generated through quantitative research. Whilst numerical data may be generated within a qualitative approach, it will usually only be a complementary element of the full data picture and will be supported in the main part by rich, narrative accounts.

Denscombe (2014) set out that whilst a quantitative approach seeks to generate data, the data in qualitative research is already in existence but is only revealed

through the research process when it is analysed and interpreted by the researcher, becoming research data at that point. Clandinin (2006) described this as a turn from numbers to words as data, in recognition that the translation of experience into numeric codes loses the subtlety and nuance of both the experience and relationships within the setting under investigation. A quantitative approach may also have a limiting focus on cause and effect thereby losing or submerging rich data which simply does not 'fit'. Even an attempt to construct and define language and concepts through rigid and restrictive definition which is free from metaphor in order to account for findings and laws means that the opportunity for insight, to make meaning and enrich understanding, is flattened (Clandinin, 2006). Qualitative inquiry is therefore key to the integrity of this project, to reveal the lived, first experiences of online adult learners through new means with a view to generating new understanding.

### **3.3 A Narrative Approach**

The design of the research project aimed to bring together two key issues which were identified in the early stages of the work; the shortcomings of research in the field ('arm's length' methods by survey which failed to provide rich narrative) and the potential of this work to give voice to the participants and their individual capacity for agency and action. Busher, James, and Piela (2015) explored the limits of survey research which are premised on an assumption that all students speak with the same voice whereas, in reality, student perspectives are multifaceted and shaped by the intersectionality of students' life experiences. Authentic learner voices might also be perceived as potentially threatening to existing institutional hierarchies.

This was coupled with a desire to shape my own professional practice through the opportunity for methodological innovation and data collection in the digital space; an alternative, effective and timely method for gathering rich narrative which is congruous with that setting. Neumann (2005) argued that the only link between academia and practice for the educator-researcher lies with the researcher's interest in the project. However, for practitioners who are also senior decision-makers within their organisation, there is likely to be a more significant impact on practice (Drake and Heath, 2011) and in particular through the way in which these practitioners think about their work. Drake and Heath (2011) described this as 'critical purchase on

aspects of professional life' (p.92) which subtly changes the way in which practitioners go about their work and how practice is better understood.

To this end, a pragmatic stance was taken; one which was both 'mutable and liquid' (Savin-Baden and Tombs, 2017, p.33) but aimed to achieve congruence between the tools utilised and the way in which the data is managed and analysis undertaken. Savin-Baden and Tombs (2017) referred to the need for liquidity when researching in digital spaces and a recognition that digital research spaces are often hybridised and mixed. Such a pragmatic approach is rooted in a methodology which has a sound philosophical base but recognises that some element of the new or uncertain in the construction of this methodology may bring with it new insights and understandings.

This inquiry illuminates the first hand, lived experiences of part time, adult learners through a narrative approach. It collects participants' stories, and retells the participants' views by combining the researcher's experience with those of the participants to produce a collaborative narrative (Creswell, 2014). Such an approach is particularly suited to this inquiry as Field, Merrill and West (2012) highlighted,

'If we wish to see learning as a fundamental and pervasive human activity, then we need to see it as integral to people's lives and the stories that they tell about their lives in their attempts to understand and shape situations.' (p.80)

Clandinin and Connelly (2004) described inquiry into narrative as both the phenomenon and the method in as much as narrative describes the structured quality of the experience to be studied as well as the patterns of inquiry for its study, '... people, by nature lead storied lives and tell stories by those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience' (p.2). A narrative approach also serves to capture the temporal nature of the participants' experience recognising that such perceptions are framed within a continuity of accounts and episodes, and the inter-connectedness in between.

Fontana and Frey (2008) explained how narratives are vehicles that can bring the words and stories of the participants alive, and this work enables participants to tell the stories of the context of their experience as a part-time, adult, online learner, to describe and explore the interplay of the personal, circumstantial and institutional



domains, the heightened emotional nature of the intersections and their ability to invoke individual agency and impact in this liminal space. Enabling the participant as narrator challenges the positivist position of a single and absolute reality bringing to the fore those participant narratives as a truth represented by their individual experience. As Clandinin (2006) highlighted, the narrative researcher enters into the midst of lives, lives which began long before and will continue long after a research project ends.

It is through these narratives that the participants express the 'how' and 'why' of their lived experience, producing challenging questions instead of offering concrete answers (Polkinghorn, 1995). Bateson (1994) ruled out the goal of certainty in narrative enquiry emphasising that ambiguity is the warp of life and not something which we should be aiming to eliminate.

### **3.4 Learning from the Pilot Project**

A pilot project was undertaken as part of the 8ED003 taught modules on the EDD programme. The pilot did not aim to undertake a mini study of the main project but instead was used as an investigation of the design process and to explore online data collection tools – in particular to establish whether an online reflective journal could be embedded within the VLE and whether they would generate sufficient participant engagement and depth of narrative to sustain the project.

The pilot aimed to utilise the student blog function embedded in the compulsory induction module for students joining the University on an undergraduate online award. This reflective space was a private area which was shared only by myself, as researcher, and the student. Ethical approval was sought from the University to undertake the pilot study with a sample drawn from students commencing undergraduate study to School-based programmes (Law, Psychology and Social Science) in the April 2016 intake. Data was elicited asynchronously from the participants in response to the prompt,

- *In your personal blog, reflect on your educational journey so far and your reasons for deciding to study online for your degree.*

Participants in the pilot project gave informed consent to participate in the research by including a cut and pasted statement at the end of their blog. Further ethical considerations were also actioned around participant information, power

relationships and fair treatment, which are further explored in relation to the data collection for the main project below.

From an intake of 91 students, 27 participated in the reflective blog activity and of those, 10 gave informed consent for their data to be used in the pilot project. This engagement rate with the blog activity was reassuring but did also raise questions around why so few participants gave consent to the data being used. This insight shaped the approach taken not only to the information given to prospective participants regarding informed consent but also regarding how technology could be used in order to eliminate unintended barriers around the act of giving informed consent.

A deductive approach to analysing the data was taken as part of the pilot study, utilising pre-established theories of online participation (Henry, Pooley, and Omari, 2014; Kardan *et al.*, 2013; Hyllegard, Deng and Hunter, 2008) to drive coding. Braun and Clarke (2008) highlighted the limits of such a theoretical approach to analysis as, being researcher driven, less descriptive of the data overall and focusing on one aspect of the findings. This was evident from the data collected in the pilot and the approach perpetuated one of the key challenges in the existing body of literature in the field, namely that much of the work is institutionally focused and framed. New codes also emerged which were not accommodated by the literature used to frame the pilot and the key one of these was the emotion which was present in the narratives. This finding informed the conceptual framework and in particular the interplay of the contextual domains for points of tension and heightened emotion – the boundary encounters providing flashpoints and frontiers. The pilot project established that online reflective journaling could provide a feasible method of data collection for the main study which was congruous with the aims and research questions. The use of online reflective journals would be coupled with online, semi-structured interviews to complete the data collection strategy. The rationale for both methods is explored in the following section.

### **3.5 Hearing Voices – The Methods for Data Collection**

The range of research tools selected can provide both temporality and situatedness to the approach to capture states of flux and how change and adaptation are brought about through the agency of the participants. In order to achieve this within

the study, there were two strands to data collection; a co-constructed reflective, digital space for an online journal throughout the first module and a number of semi-structured interviews with participants to act as a point of deeper exploration and triangulation of the data.

A key aim of the data collection was that I, as researcher, would not take sole control of the research process. The relationship with my participants would be mutual and bilateral as we took opportunities to work together to design, manage and enhance the co-constructed digital space. Schwandt (2007) described this process as 'research with people rather than on people' (p.45). This process allowed me some additional opportunities to become more familiar with the participants during the inquiry process, to build trust, to seek to diffuse any perceived power dynamics, to gain deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives and also to engage them in the co-construction of a reflective space which worked for them.

### **3.5.1 Online Reflective Journals**

The preceding decade has seen an increase in the integration of technology into academic and practitioner research as sites of interest which are both interlinked and mutually inspired (Biberman-Shalev, 2018). The use of online reflective journals supports the underpinning philosophy of the study in so far as this research instrument could be used to capture, in depth, the flux and flow of the participants' experiences, thoughts and emotions (Harricharan and Bhopal, 2014). In this study, it would serve as both the research medium and the setting (Salmons, 2016), providing a point at the interface of their online and offline worlds in which to explore the interplay of the contextual domains. The use of online reflective journals for online learners is therefore conducive to the experience being explored, providing congruence with the environment being studied (Burton and Goldsmith, 2002).

Pragmatically, Wilson, Kenny and Dickson-Swift (2015) showed how online reflective journals and blogs can enable participant voices to be captured and disseminated close to their vernacular intent with the added advantage of anonymity for those wishing it. In this study, the asynchronous nature of the online reflective journal negated issues around the equality of participation, distance and time whilst providing a platform on which to recruit specific groups as part of the sampling process. The use of reflective journals and blogs has been considered to be naturalistic data in textual form, enabling the creation of substantial amounts of

instant text, plus images and links without the resource intensiveness of tape recording and transcription (Hookway, 2008) - a key benefit to the educator-researcher as data analysis can commence straight away.

From the perspective of my participants, the online reflective journal facilitated maximum respondent control over when, and in what form, they provided data and how much data they wished to provide. My participants also had the power to review and edit their entries which allowed each to immediately validate his/her own data. The asynchronous nature of the journal also provided displacement of space and time to allow for thought and reflection and a platform for heightened interpretation, offering the participants a chance to explore their own behaviour and decisions. To facilitate this, a loosely imposed semi-chronological structure (without archiving) which did not restrict participants to a linear progression was used to provide 'a record of an ever-changing present' (Elliott, 1997, p.24) and keep momentum flowing (Harricharan and Bhopal, 2014). Biberman-Shalev (2018) highlighted how the recording of such reflections creates an attention to detail of which participants may not ordinarily be aware, personal traits, progress and development and a change in perspective. A key is that such structure should not be at the expense of spontaneity and candid writing about participant experiences. The online reflective journal certainly offers the potential to educator-researchers to gain rich narrative insights into the lived experiences of the participants.

So what is the compromise?

There were obvious practical differences of using reflective journals which centred around a lack of non-verbal cues in an asynchronous environment, whether paralinguistic, chronemic, kinesic or proxemic (Salmons, 2016). Dowling and Brown (2010) argued that the range of cues available online are often different rather than narrower. Chronemics may not be entirely absent as the spacing and timing of contributions or a non-response may share some insights but this would be with caution as network latency or simply how participants organise the time and space of their engagement with the study may be different to synchronous or face-to-face contexts and may be misleading in terms of temporal cues and judgements. Asynchronous online research also provides fewer opportunities for the researcher to read distress or discomfort or to recover a difficult interaction (James and Busher, 2009) but that was tempered by the fact that engagement and participation in the

space was completely within the participants' control and volition. Other concerns around the asynchronous nature of the online reflective journal relate to the openness and ease of participants in writing such personal accounts, as well as the post-event rationalisation of the account, which may potentially dilute challenges faced as the participants select what they consider to be important. Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016) ameliorated such concerns suggesting evidence from their study of DBA students, that these were exactly the sort of experiences that their participants recorded and quoted from and in doing so conveyed 'the depth of rawness' (p.12) of the experience at that moment.

The literature on narrative inquiry focuses on the interview as method and, consequently, is heavy with the notion of presence, emotional attentiveness and engagement (Riessmann, 2008). Beuthin (2014) emphasised the obligation of the narrative researcher to work with transparency, connection, authenticity and compassion as the researcher and participant interact and co-construct what evolves. Can the use of the reflective journal be a true narrative inquiry without such interaction? Riessmann (2008) did go on to highlight how such relationships in the setting of the interview may be tempered with an air of performance and a desire of participants and researchers to perform well rather than to engage in a genuine and authentic way. The co-constructed online space utilised here diluted such considerations by providing a space neutral of ego and self-consciousness. Duggan (2013) also argued for the nature of narrative inquiry as a reflective encounter and that the distance created between the participant and the researcher limits the perception of the participant as research subject. He argued that the question for the use of reflective blogs should be 'how can [they] maximise the extent to which the role of the researcher is minimised in solicited narrative research' (p.31).

#### ***3.5.1.1 Private or Public Online Spaces?***

The key data collection instrument for the study was an online reflective journal kept by the participants over the course of their first module. The use of a personal journal as a tool for data collection is characterised by reflective, descriptive, interpretive and exploratory content which aligns with common qualitative methodologies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

A key area of contention for this study was the distinction between an online reflective journal and a blog, and a review of the literature sees the two terms used

interchangeably. Ackland (2013) presented the blog as a type of media within the Web 2.0 platform with the emphasis on interactivity and the centrality of users. The blog author posts for a reader who can also comment allowing for the development of a theme through the conversation (Hookway, 2008). Siles (2011) emphasised the public nature of blogs as a fluid format for participation outside the private sphere, whereas Richardson (2006) and Newson, Houghton and Patten (2009) highlighted other distinguishing features such as personalisation and the ability for the author to update instantly with text, imagery, audio, video and hyperlinks as key. Hookway (2008) showed how blogs are often created and authored through blogging platforms such as Wordpress and Blogger but these do have privacy settings enabling the blog to be locked down from public view or restricted to a specified group (Salmons, 2016). Blackboard 9.1 retains the same features in both the blog and reflective journal functionality, the difference being privacy, with the blog being instantly published to a cohort and the reflective journal being private.

Consideration was given to the objectives and aims of this study and whether those would be best served through private or public reflections. Analysis of the data would predominantly be thematic rather than interaction and discourse which would require a public space. The anonymity granted by such privacy also provided the potential to spur richer and deeper thought than face-to-face conversations (Mann and Stuart, 2000), revealing personal voice and reflections whilst eliminating any pressure to be competitive (Biberman-Shalev, 2018). Any anxieties or feelings of being judged were reduced, thereby increasing self-disclosure and motivating deeper introspection and reflection (Harricharan and Bhopal, 2014).

In light of these considerations, the term online reflective journal was used to describe the data collection tool in this study, with the methods literature across both journals and blogs being exercised to frame and support the discussion. Participants' online reflections remained private between the participant and the researcher. The participant's ownership and curation of the space was central with additional opportunities for co-construction and improvement.

### ***3.5.1.2 Co-Constructing the Online Research Space***

The challenge in designing this study was therefore to determine an online, digital space which could deliver the features required of the data collection instrument, the reflective journal, whilst also honouring the underpinning philosophy of

capturing participant voices and being conducive to the experience being studied rather than external or adjunct to it. As Salmons (2016) highlighted, the researcher interacts directly with the participants across a number of exchanges and every stage of the process provides an opportunity to build trust and to learn about the research participant. Additionally, although not entirely separately, this work therefore also appreciates the value of a participatory approach and although not cooperative inquiry in its purist sense, seeks out opportunities for participant collaboration in recognition that there is both significance and usefulness in the involvement of participants in the knowledge-production process (Bergold, 2007). A narrative approach is, ultimately, underpinned by engagement and collaboration with the participants.

Many of the popular blogging platforms such as Wordpress, Wix and Blogger could deliver the technical features and be locked down for privacy but they have inherent barriers to participation, requiring participants to set up, register and verify an external account. They also require greater researcher input where there was no facility to work with a cohort as each participant would need to be prompted individually.

The pilot project had been sited in the University's own Moodle based VLE but this had been attached only to the induction module and the study now needed to capture participant experience across the whole of the first module.

The University had recently configured the Office 365 suite for the use of staff and students and it therefore seemed logical to explore the applications available. The use of an O365 application would site the reflective journal within the wider learning experience but provide an element of critical distance between the participant and their studies. This gave a further, quasi-liminal space providing opportunity beyond specific existing constraints whether temporal, spatial or circumstantial. This would further serve to dilute and de-stratify traditional power relations by providing a firewall between participants' learning, progress and achievement whilst not taking their participation without their experience of the personal, circumstantial and institutional domains. Crucially there would be no physical barrier to accessing the reflective journal either through separate account set up or log in.

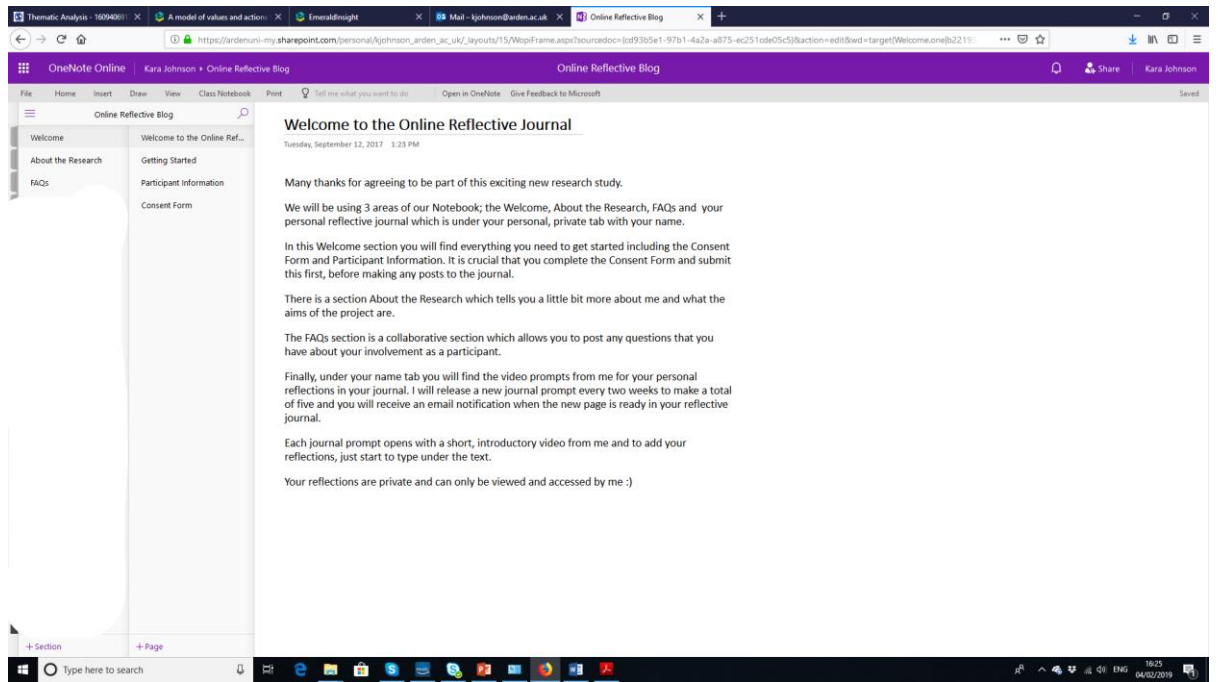
Although not widely used in this setting, I examined the features and functionality of the One Note Class Notebook application in Office 365. This is usually used by

teachers in primary and secondary education but had a number of key features which would facilitate the reflective journals in the correct way. This included:

- **Private Notebooks** — this feature provided a space for the online reflective journal which is shared only between the researcher and participants.
- **Content Library** — a notebook to share course materials with participants. The researcher can add and edit its materials, but for participants, the notebook is read-only. This area was key to providing information about the study, instructions to participants and also facilitated the embedding of the O365 Forms application to collect informed consent from participants in the study.
- **Collaboration Space** — a notebook for all participants and the researcher to share, organise, and collaborate. This enabled participants to share the development of the tool and to build their own FAQs area based on their practical participation, experience and feedback (See Figure 8).

The home page of the One Note app provided the opportunity to welcome participants but also to familiarise themselves with the One Note platform and how to get started. The functionality and taxonomy of the site was bespoke and aligned to the demands of the research study and therefore the standard Microsoft features and terms were replaced with the nomenclature of the project. The aim was to ensure that the participants were confident in the space and that the setting of the One Note site did not distract from or interfere with their engagement (Salmons, 2016).





*Figure 3 - The Online Reflective Journal Homepage and Welcome*

The online research space also served to present an opportunity to diffuse some of the concerns around the power relationships outlined above, anchoring that commitment in the practice of the research study whilst setting the tone, scope and nature for future participation and interaction within this space. I therefore shared personal information about myself, my background and my research journey in the open understanding that 'honesty, and respect are pre-conditions of the search for truth/truths' (Zuber-Skerritt, 2005, p.54). This aimed to minimise the distance and separatedness of the research relationship (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009) whilst encouraging participants to engage in a genuine and authentic way (Riessmann, 2008).

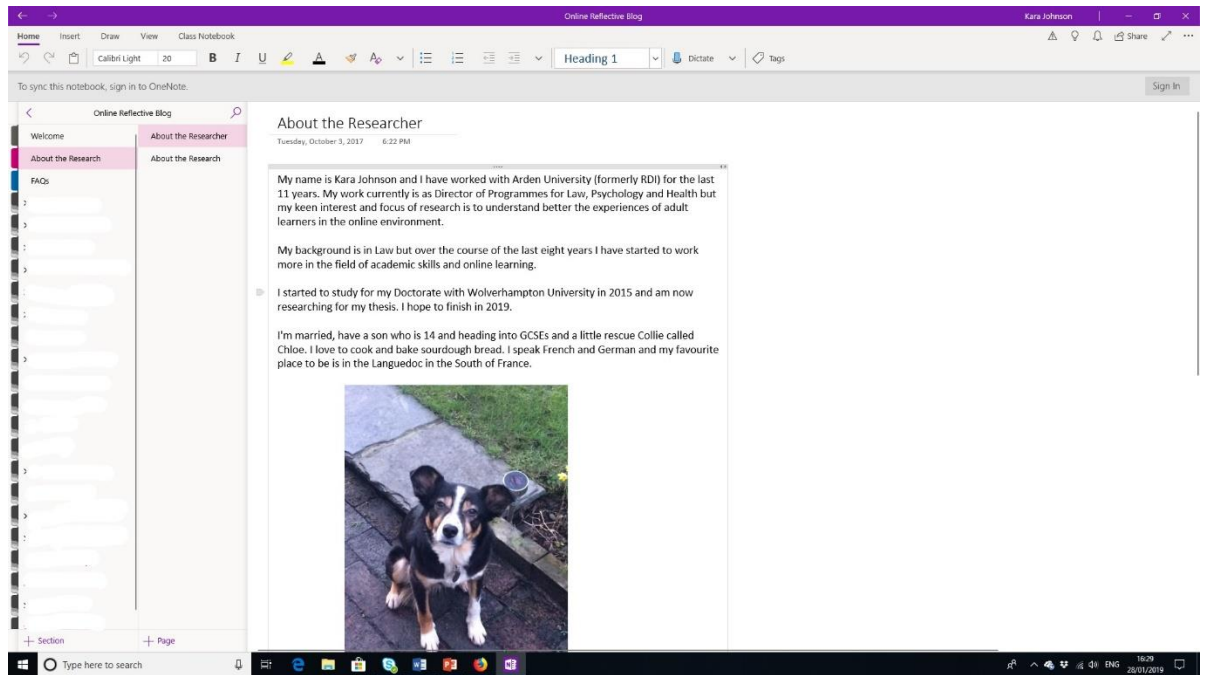


Figure 4 - About the Researcher

This was further reinforced throughout the study through sharing personal and friendly videos to discuss prompts and themes for the journal reflections and why they are important to the inquiry.

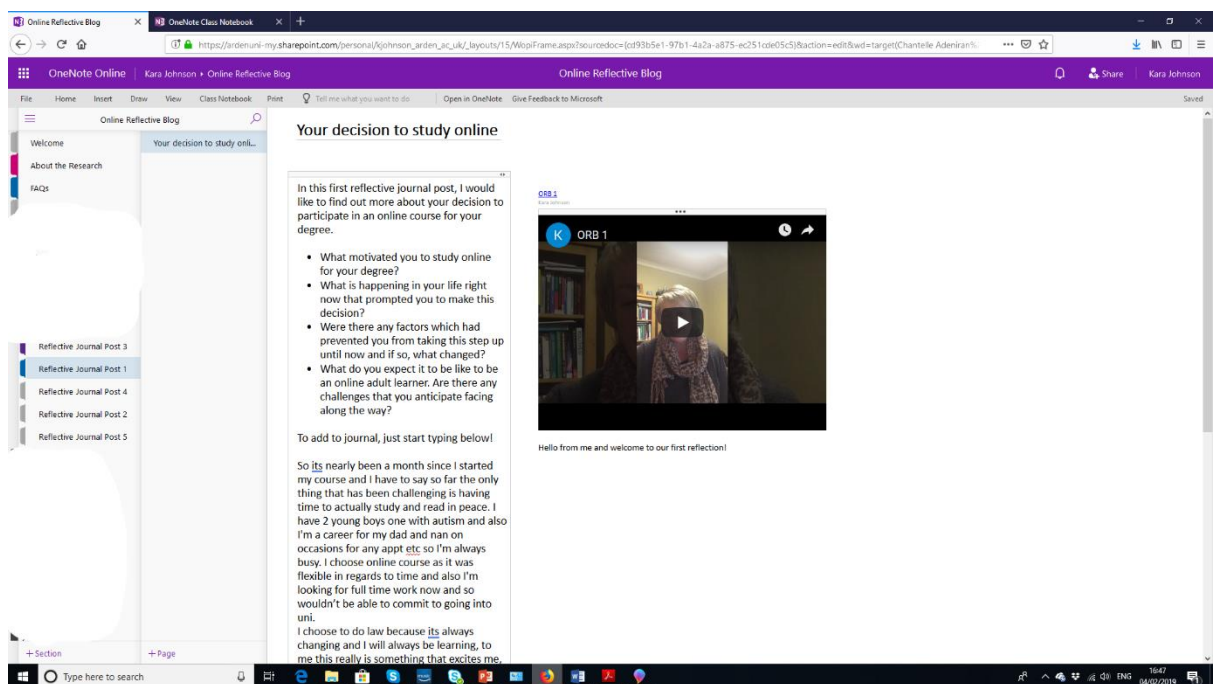


Figure 5 - Embedding Video to Engage Participants

Information about the research was presented in such a way as to take into account the perspective of the reader and was framed in the everyday language of the participant addressing the relevance of the study to their experiences through use of the second person (Salmons, 2016). It would therefore serve to provide the

participants with guidance on tone, approach and content to their own reflections in their journal.

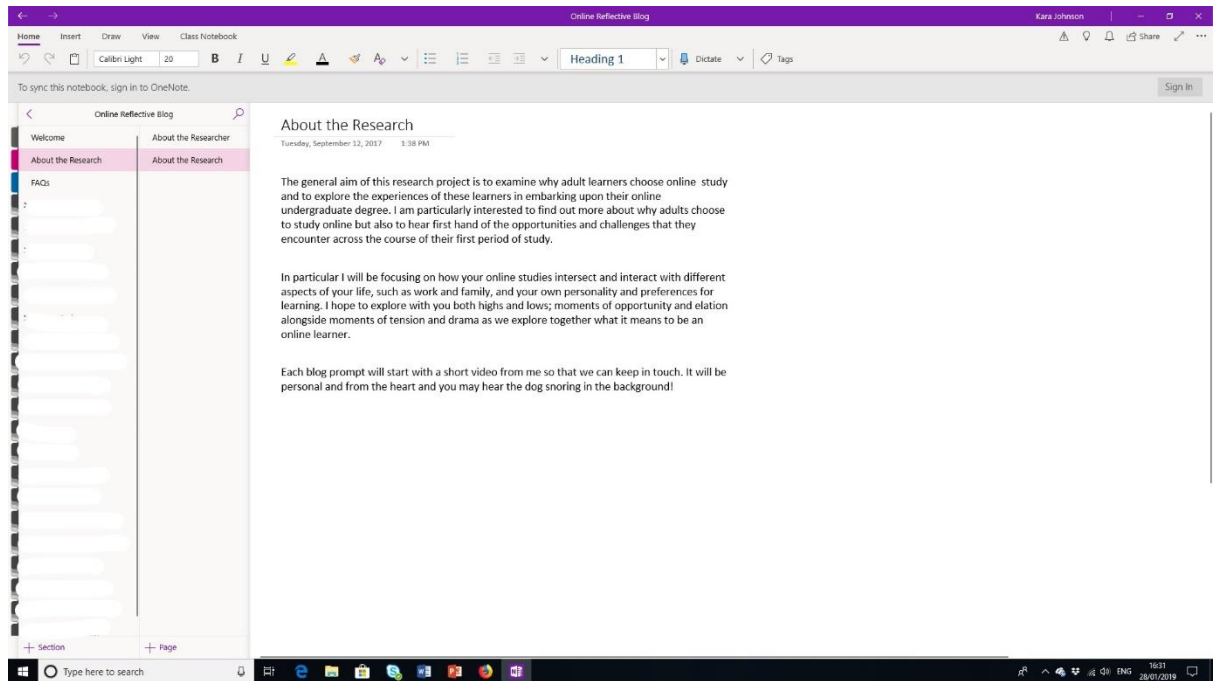


Figure 6 - About the Research

Participants were directed to key information about the study from the homepage and it was clearly stated that this Participant Information must be read and consent given before any posts to the reflective journals be made. The research consent form was built using O365 Forms and embedded into the One Note site. This enabled the consent to be attributed to the individual log in credentials to the O365 account.

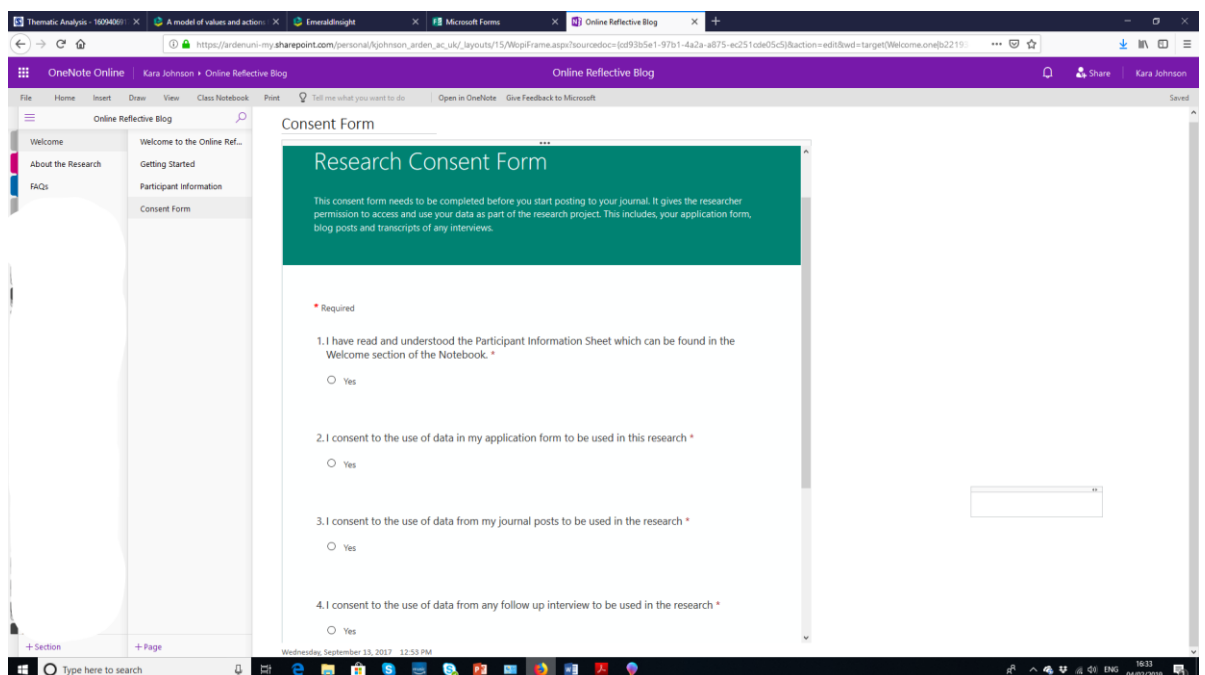


Figure 7 - Embedded Participant Information and Consent Form

The consent form gave permission for data to be used across the collection methods - reflective journal and any future, follow up interviews. Salmons (2016) highlighted some of the drawbacks of obtaining written consent over verbal consent to include the fact that written agreements can be long and intimidating. This consent form was immersed within the research site and all participant information was synthesised into the act of giving consent rather than it being adjunct to it. The process for participants was quick, concise and verifiable.

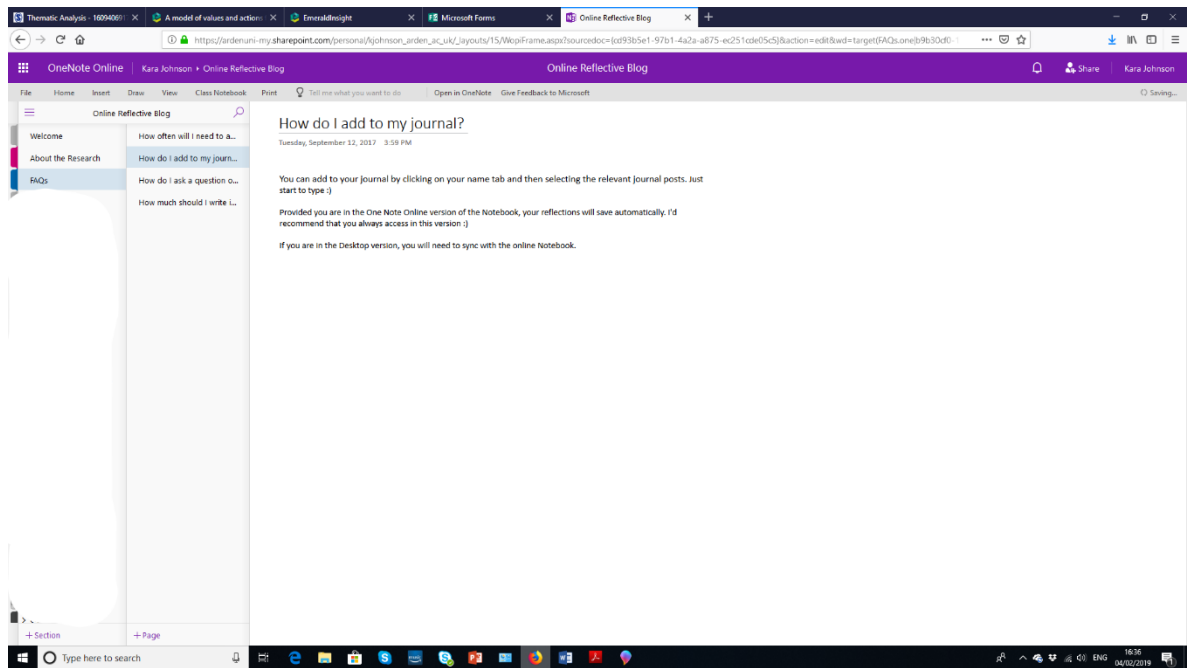


Figure 8 - Co-Constructed FAQs Section

### 3.5.1.3 Structuring for Reflective Journaling

In order for the reflective journals and subsequent interviews to provide the intended window into the social world of the participants, thought had to be given to the nature of the prompts or questions which would provoke reflection and to give the learners the opportunity to narrate their lived experiences. There is a paucity of literature on this in the field of using blogs and journals for data collection and so guidance was sought from experiences of using face-to-face and online interviews. Fontana and Frey (2008) highlighted the potential for qualitative methods to provide greater breadth than their quantitative counterparts and therefore the need to provide structure is paramount.

There were five journal prompts to be released at fortnightly intervals by both email and in the private journal. The prompts took the form of open questions and were

mapped against the literature and the research questions to ensure good alignment and fit (Appendix 2).

The participants already had details of the themes and topics that were the subject of the study in the information sheet as well as the other sources about the research and researcher. The aim was to balance structure for the reflections whilst not unduly leading the participants, in order to carefully elicit their experiences and allow them to reflect and express these in their own words. Each journal prompt contained a key phrase or question which aligned to the literature to focus the reflection on the themes of participation in online learning, the personal, institutional and circumstantial domains and the role of emotion, particularly at the domain intersections.

### **3.5.2 Online Semi-Structured Interviews**

The use of semi-structured, one to one interviews with participants served to give credibility to the findings through triangulation of the journal data and also to complement and delve further into the stories of the participants. Interviewing as a primary tool for data collection can be resource-intensive and time-consuming, particularly for practitioners, but in this study it was used to validate a sample of the reflective online journals. Finally, the use of interviews rounded the proposed methodology in the acknowledgement that not all data can or should be reduced to the written word.

As a secondary data collection method, interviews in this study were not used to collect factual data *per se* but were used to enhance the opportunities for meaning-making from the reflective journals in particular as a means to discover things which could not be directly found and observed. A semi-structured format was again used and mapped to the literature and the research questions (Appendix 3) but which also allowed for further exploration of the themes which had arisen in the journals and any emergent themes. The combination across the data collection methods therefore gave both life and a temporal dimension to the insights provided.

The possibility of some participants being invited to take part in an interview was set out in the participant information and consent process for recruitment to the study. Purposeful sampling was again used with all participants who had completed all five journal reflections; three agreed to take part in the interviews.

Skype was offered as the interview medium given that it was conducive to the online setting which participants had experienced in completing their online reflective journals and provided a convenient and synchronous mode of communication which was accessible to all participants as part of their O365 accounts.

Weller (2015) notes that the use of Skype with a webcam also has the advantage of enabling the observation of body language and tone. She referred to this as the 'talking heads' perspective (p.33) - making it possible to assess accessibility and involvement i.e. are participants pleased and excited to be involved, what areas of the interview provoke interest and animation? It also provided mutuality as this enabled me to demonstrate my engagement and encouragement through this remote and synchronous co-presence.

The three interviewees were invited to suggest a time and date convenient to them for the interview to take place and a Skype link was sent over by email along with a further copy of the participant information. They were also given the Interview Protocol (Appendix 5) in advance.

The interview process raised some personal challenges and questions across a number of key themes which were important to me as a new researcher.

I was already privileged to know personal information about my interviewees from their online journals and yet they knew so little of me other than the personal information which I had shared in the One Note site. I had aimed to create a welcoming and non-threatening environment in which they were willing to share details of their personal experiences and beliefs, and to establish our relationship in an 'atmosphere of power equality' (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009, p.280). Yet this relationship felt far removed from the equality and democracy which I had aimed for. I had a heightened awareness of the privileged nature of my position and knowledge and how the insights that I had been given so far were personal and private. Kvale (1996) argued that relationship building through warmth and caring in a variety of qualitative settings might conceal power differences, with the power lying with the researcher who poses the project, sets the agenda and rules the conversation. The use of Skype offered some remediation to this imbalance. Being remotely present with the participants through Skype diffuses power dynamics and hands over a degree of control to the participants who are free to drop out of the interview at any point, without excuse or explanation.

I also became aware of 'me' – the first time so far that I had been temporally and spatially present in the research process with my participants. I was paradoxically aware of my insiderness to the study and my outsidersness as a researcher/interviewer given my lack of experience and skills set. Gubrium and Holstein (2003, in Mercer, 2007) commented that interviewers are expected to keep their 'selves' out of the interview process with neutrality being the overriding consideration, and yet such neutrality is difficult to obtain when participants are discussing issues, both personal and emotional, to which I am already privy.

Beuthin (2014) elaborated on the tensions that can arise in interviewing participants, particularly for new researchers. She talked of the hesitancy and uncertainty for the novice researcher as well as the tensions between emotional attentiveness, presence and performance. The aim should be to conduct the interview with as much transparency, authenticity and compassion as possible, as the interview is and of itself 'an intervention and participants are often vulnerable' (p.13).

My experience of being a novice interviewer in the course of this study highlighted the importance of developing these skills through immersion rather than by proxy. It is a 'human art form' (Beuthin, 2014, p.13) and not a mere set of natural and spontaneous techniques to be applied and provides an opportunity for personal and professional improvement and accountability for the privilege of various ways of knowing.

### **3.6 Research Planning, Design and Implementation**

The research design describes the methods and procedures to guide this inquiry. The research design provides a framework for participant selection, data collection, data management and analysis, data representation, ethical considerations, trustworthiness and rigour. See Appendix 1.

#### **3.6.1 Participant Selection and Context**

The site and context for the study were determined by the focus of the professional doctorate and I was keen to delineate the research site from the online place of study as a space for personal reflection but was still keen to keep the activity within the context of the experience being explored.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify potential participants as the findings of the pilot had not highlighted any reason why this might not be effective nor had suggested that the data gathered was specific to certain conditions such as subjects studied. Purposeful sampling is the practice of selecting participants from a known sample that is rich with useful data for a particular study, in this way ensuring that the full scope of issues can be explored (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Creswell (2014) explained that in qualitative research, the researcher should aim to select participants and research sites on the basis that they can 'purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study' (p.125). Thorne (2008) showed how purposeful sampling can be used to gain insights from particular participants 'by virtue of some angle of the experience that they might help us better understand' (p.90). This sampling technique aligned well to the aims of the study as it would provide participants who could share their experiences of being a part-time, adult learner on an online undergraduate programme.

The practical criteria used to select the sample were :

- New student to the University (Oct 17 or Jan 18 intakes)
- Enrolled on an undergraduate, online programme within the School
- Adult Learner (Over 19 on entry – change in definition on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016 <https://www.gov.uk/advanced-learner-loan/eligibility>)
- No previous experience of online study at undergraduate level

Participants were invited to the study by an email to their University email account which set out the scope of the project and how the data would be used. A total of 195 students were invited to participate in the study and 39 agreed. Twenty took part in the online reflective journals of which 15 narratives are included here from participants who made more than one entry. These 15 participants were invited to take part in the Skype online interviews and three agreed. Two of these interviews (Charlotte and David are drawn upon in the findings and discussion, the third (Shelley) did not yield insights beyond those presented in the reflective journal.

The participants were drawn from a range of programmes within the School and their pen portraits are included in Appendix 7.



It is recognised that the purposeful nature of the sampling and the information provided in the invitation and participant information sheet may prove more attractive to participants who have a confident level of internet self-efficacy. This will be considered further in the evaluative stages of the study.

The data was collected between October 2017 and April 2018.

### **3.6.2 Ethical Considerations**

The nature of this project and my position as researcher raised a number of ethical issues as well as concerns relating to the nature of power relations in respect of this project. The work by Diener and Crandall (1978) set out the four key areas of ethical consideration to be embedded into the approach and design of the study. These include the risk of harm to participants, a lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and whether any deception may occur deliberately or inadvertently.

#### ***3.6.2.1 Participant Information and Informed Consent***

To address these concerns effectively, a number of proactive measures were taken in line with my own University's ethical approval process, the ethical approval process and code of ethics of the awarding University. To ensure these concerns were effectively abated, a number of proactive measures were taken in accordance with both the University's Code of Ethics and the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018). See Appendix 6.

Access to and understanding of the Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 4) was a pre-requisite of the Consent Form (see Figure 7). The principles of participant information and the consent form as set out by Sarantakos (2005, in Creswell, 2014) include key elements of information such as:

- Identity of the researcher and any sponsoring institution
- Purpose of the research and benefits of participation
- How the participants were selected
- Identification of the level and type of participant involvement
- Guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality
- Assurance of the right to withdraw
- Names and contact details for questions and further information

All participants gave their consent through reading the Participant Information and then completion and submission of the online Consent Form. Participants had (and still have) access to their reflective journals.

The participants who were invited for interview were again provided with the Participant Information as an email attachment and also the Interview Protocol (see Appendix 2). They were also provided with a transcript of the interview by email.

### **3.6.2.2 Access**

I obtained permission to access the research site through application to the Senior Management Team of the University, setting out the research proposal, its ethical considerations and mitigating actions.

### **3.6.2.3 Mitigating Power Dynamics and Fair Treatment**

Even though a qualitative approach to research can provide a platform for the co-production of knowledge in which the distinction between the researcher and the researched becomes less distinguishable, it can also provide new dilemmas particularly with regard to the power dynamics evolving within this relationship. Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach (2009) highlighted the complex and conflicting roles; participants as clients or, in this case, students who are the main providers of the data and insights, and the researcher who is the data collector, analyser, philosopher and publisher.

Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach (2009) also highlighted how the developmental nature of the research process leads to changes in power relations across the course of the study which pose specific ethical issues to the researcher.

Such issues were apparent in this study as my role as an insider researcher is bound up with my identity as the Head of School in which the participants are learners. Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach (2012) referred to this as an incongruity between the 'micro-ethics of equality' in the research relationship and the 'macro-setting of dominance and authority' (p.280). During the recruitment stage of the study I was aware that control over the research process lay in my hands as did the decisions which I took over how to introduce the research to the potential participants and how to describe the research goals (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2012). It was therefore crucial at the recruitment stage and through into data collection to diffuse

any informant bias (Mercer, 2007) to ensure that participants did not feel that they should or shouldn't participate on account of my position.

I sought to address my position in a number of ways in order to mitigate the power dynamics created by the research relationship as effectively as possible. My role was clearly set out in the invitations to participate as well as the participant information sheet. I provided an introductory video to the journal activity, to myself and to the research making my role and research interests explicit – a commitment to present the study and its aims in a clear and open way (Bravo-Moreno, 2003).

The data collection stage of the study afforded an opportunity for me to hand over a degree of control to the participants with regard to the online research space in addition to me being entirely dependent on their willingness to take part and to share their stories. As each journal entry was not archived, the journals remained under their control for the duration of the study. The participants were therefore free to amend, add or delete at their will.

Participants were also encouraged to co-construct the online space for reflective journaling (see 3.5.1.2) in an effort and desire to present a less hierarchical and more reciprocal, transparent framework in which to undertake this study (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2012).

Similarly, during the Skype interviews, I sought to acknowledge the developing power relations during the interview but also the ways in which this method might defuse power dynamics by giving some freedom to the participants who could drop out of the interview at any point, without excuse or explanation. Communication was open and honest and any criticisms of the research and of the method were welcomed (Bravo-Moreno, 2003).

Fair treatment was a further consideration bound up with the clear information given to participants as it was highlighted that they would in no way be disadvantaged in their studies by not participating or withdrawing from the project nor would their participation be advantageous at a personal level beyond the shared benefits of the study and the implications for practice, for themselves and future learners.

### **3.6.2.4 Designing for Rigour**

At the outset, in constructing the approach, methodology and data collection tools for this project, it was crucial to establish rigour which, in a qualitative inquiry, can be judged by its trustworthiness and authenticity (Guba and Lincoln, 2005).

In determining whether research is trustworthy it is important to evaluate the credibility of the research. It is accepted that there will be several accounts of the aspect of social reality which is being explored and subsequently, it is the feasibility of that account or its credibility which makes the findings acceptable. To meet this expectation, participants were briefed as part of their invitation on the aims and objectives of the research and the nature of the data that would be collected. They were invited to co-create elements of the online journal site and were also given the opportunity to review their transcripts from the interviews to confirm accuracy.

The credibility of the research may also be established through the process of triangulation where there is more than one data source used. Bryman (2012) shows that triangulation can work both within and across strategies either in an integrative approach or to cross-check findings. Triangulation was used between the reflective journal posts and interview transcriptions with the participants. The interview was used to establish internal consistency in order to corroborate the accuracy and authenticity of the diary data but it was also noted that the follow up interview served to smooth out some variations in the depth of reporting.

A further aspect of trustworthiness is confirmability (Guba and Lincoln, 2005) which establishes that the researcher has acted in good faith in undertaking the research and, whilst complete objectivity is impossible in social research, a reflexive stance has been taken throughout in which personal axiology or theoretical preferences have not swayed the conduct and outcome of the research.

## **3.7 Data Analysis**

I transcribed the interview data myself due to the sensitive nature of the information which was shared by that sample of participants. The accounts of fifteen participants are included here (10 female students and 5 male students) all of whom completed more than one entry to the reflective journal and therefore provided insights into their early experiences as an online learner. The process of preparing the transcripts also gave me an early opportunity to engage with initial data analysis – a personally

challenging endeavour for me as a novice researcher and also for this study. I felt alerted to the responsibility to treat my participants fairly and to do justice to their stories for the trust vested in me in their open and honest accounts.

My tentativeness was compounded by a fear that there would not be order and logic (to which I was accustomed) in the accounts provided (despite the fact that my premise for the study was to explore the uniqueness of the online learner) and that I would be easily distracted. All of these things came to pass and an initial vertical reading of the first five individual accounts left me overwhelmed. I closed the file and locked it in my office drawer.

A reflection from Joanne in her fourth post to her online journal stuck with me;

*You keep reminding yourself that you have come a long way to be where you are and as the saying says, 'a smooth sea never made a skilful sailor'.*

Those early accounts of my participants' experiences mirrored my own personal liminal journey as a doctoral candidate.

I unlocked the drawer and re-opened the file and started to seek out themes within and across the accounts, similarities and differences. I wrestled with the question of whether thematic analysis of the data was the most appropriate approach. Thematic analysis can be described as identifying, analysing, organising and describing themes found within a data set (Braun and Clark, 2006); it has the advantage of being a flexible and accessible approach to give a rich and detailed account of complex data and can generate unanticipated insights as well as key features. A thematic approach to the analysis would also provide me with a platform from which to innovate both at an organisational level but also within professional practice. However, I also felt that in generating themes I was losing something of the authentic voice of the participants, stories started to fragment and some themes were privileged over others. The question therefore was how I could mediate between being true to the participant voices whilst engaging with the themes to synthesise the data and share their stories in the best possible way.

Rabinow and Sullivan (1988) cautioned against my earlier preoccupation in search of delineated form and structure or 'idée fixe'. They urged a shift back to the human world with all of its lack of clarity and depth rather than a formal deductive paradigm. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) argued that the narrative approach

explores how humans experience the world and as such should be employed in a way which is as free and open as possible.

The first stage of data analysis was to undertake a thorough reading of the data in order to familiarise myself. I undertook a vertical reading within each account which comprised the reflective journal and interviews (where these had taken place) but followed this with horizontal readings across accounts in response to each of the journal prompts. I made initial notes on emerging thoughts and ideas before moving on to generate initial codes.

For a new researcher, it was a challenge striking the balance between an inductive approach which allowed new insights and perspectives to emerge when searching for themes, but having the structural benefits of a deductive framework taken from theory. DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000) defined themes as an abstract entity which brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience in all its manifestations which captures and unifies the basis of the experience into a whole. Braun and Clark (2000) identified the validity of a theme by whether it captures something important in relation to the research questions. Once identified they take on significance as concepts which link portions of the data together. Given the breadth of some of the concepts touched upon by the conceptual framework, I used the literature initially to generate some broader codes relating to the decision to participate in online learning and factors shaping their experiences. This deductive approach provided me with a sound basis on which to start to organise the data whilst ensuring alignment to the research questions before moving on to a more inductive approach within that broad theme.

Ironically, having searched for an approach which provided some structure to the analysis, I attempted to use Nvivo twice in the early phases. However, having immersed myself in the personal accounts, I found Nvivo too clinical in apportioning and attributing the codes and that something of the ebb and flow of the narratives was being lost. Whilst Nvivo might have been useful in terms of the frequency and rigour of the codes, the themes in this study emerged in a very naturalistic and fluid way and were very much rooted within the participants' biography and voice.

Throughout the early phase of data analysis, I was aware of my presence and role as an interpreter of these stories, a role of responsibility to influence not only the report of the participant accounts but also in selecting what comprised those

accounts. I was also aware of my lack of impartiality as my story was intertwined with the stories of my participants, my liminal journey was theirs. I was mindful that my role was to be a 'faithful witness' (Nowell *et al.*, 2017, p.5) to the accounts in the data, remaining honest and vigilant about my own perspectives, values and beliefs.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Introduction

The following chapter presents the analysis of the reflective journals and interviews with the research participants. The findings and discussion aim to put the virtual voices of these learners and their personal reflections centre stage. Through the process of collecting this data, I was aware that I was privy to very personal stories. Some of this is left unreported where such detail may compromise anonymity.

This chapter combines the study's findings and analysis. This method was preferred as the analysis is intertwined with the discussions of the emerging themes, and the voices of different participants are incorporated within these discussions and analysis.

My objectives were therefore to uncover more about the context of being an online, adult learner, to find out what makes their early, individual experiences unique, what enables and challenges them in forming their emergent identity as an online learner and what happens at the boundaries when their lifeworld intersects with the world of the institution.

There are two key research questions:

1. How can the dynamic context of becoming a part-time, adult, online learner be explored and conceptualised?
2. What enablers and challenges do learners perceive as shaping their emergent studenthood and how do they experience and negotiate boundary encounters and liminal spaces?

This chapter opens with a focus on the first research question initially to understand more about how the dynamic landscapes of being a part-time, adult, online learner can be explored with regard to the conceptual framework which was derived from the literature review. In particular it focuses on the conditions which bring these adults to part-time, online learning drawing across the writing from Cross (1981), Mezirow (1978 and 1991) and Taylor (2000) on the decision to participate and the opportunities afforded by online study. The chapter then moves on to examine the participants' experiences and the liminal spaces which they encounter in the early stages of becoming an online learner in response to the second research question. It



explores their identities, how they hyphenate and conflict with existing ways of being and how being an online learner presents both challenges and opportunities to their fragile, emergent identity. It also examines how the participants negotiate liminality, the tools and devices which they have used to enable them to unstick (Field and Lynch, 2007) and (re)orientate their journeys.

Analysis of the journal and interview data highlighted three key themes with attendant sub-themes which are discussed in the following sections:

4.2 - The circumstances which instigated the decision to return to study (RQ1)

4.3 - How online learning enables these adults to participate (RQ1)

4.4 - The challenges and opportunities posed by their emergent learning identity and the 'tools' used to negotiate dilemmas (RQ2) which cut across;

- 4.4.1 - Self-seeking studenthood through emblems
- 4.4.2 - How traditional constructs of studenthood present real and imagined barriers to their emergent learning identity
- 4.4.3 - The significance of internal and external relationships
- 4.4.4 - How the emergent identity of studenthood in online learning may be congruous or incongruous with existing identities
- 4.4.5 - The emotional dimension of these early experiences

## **4.2 Degrees of Disorientation – the Decision to Return to Study**

The start of the adult learner's journey into online, undergraduate study is significant for this work as it provides subtle and personal insights into their individual circumstances, not only their reasons for selecting online learning for its transformative potential but also the life events and circumstances which brought them, through a process of self-evaluation, to the point of the act of participation and perspective change. Setting this within the context of Cross's Chain of Response Model (1981) highlights the entangled and interdependent nature of self-evaluation in the personal domain, with life transitions in the circumstantial domain and how institutional opportunities can facilitate action and participation. Such expectancies and values are influenced by life transitions undergone by the individual, and they interact with the opportunities and barriers experienced by the adult.

The first stage of this is one of perspective transformation which can be brought about by an acute internal/external personal crisis (Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow first used the terms 'dilemma' linked to dramatic, critical situations that can occur in adult life, which can be resolved through the critical analysis of assumptions,

'The traumatic severity of the disorienting dilemma is clearly a factor in establishing the probability of a transformation. Under pressing external circumstances, such as death of a mate, a divorce or a family breadwinner becoming incapacitated, a perspective transformation is more likely to occur.' (Mezirow, 1978, p.7)

However, Clark (1993) highlighted how perspective transformation may be brought about by more subtle change in a person's life. She wrote of how an individual might consciously or unconsciously search for something which is missing in their life and that when they find this 'missing piece' (p.81) the process of transformation is set into motion. Similarly, Taylor (2000) believed that change may be brought about through a subtle accumulation of opportunities which provide a basis for exploration and clarification of past experiences and accepted meanings rather than a specific crisis trigger.

For some participants, it may be that these events and life circumstances provide the backdrop or context for their stories, for others, it may be that they take centre stage, having a greater impact on their learning journey and emergent identity than could have otherwise been anticipated.

#### **4.2.1 The Decision to Act**

A key theme running through the reflective journals was the nature of the decision to act and participate in an online, undergraduate degree. This provides a foundation upon which to explore the impetus for action (whether sudden, accumulative or a result of integrating circumstances – 'the missing piece'), the nature of disorientation and the different ways in which it is brought about.

Rhiannon recounted the precipitous nature of her decision to study as 'revelatory',

*I wasn't content staying in the position for the rest of my life. I saw friends and colleagues take on new projects and felt it was my time to make a change and make something more of my life. (Rhiannon's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

Rhiannon's personal agency shines through in this extract as she takes control in her decision to affect change describing this as '*my time*'.

Philippa too explained how she had wanted to return to education for over 15 years but that her finances and family commitments had made this impossible until,

*One day I just realised I had been stagnant for too long and that now I needed to do that. (Philippa's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2)*

It is difficult to discern from these two accounts whether the decision to act is a sudden one or whether it is accumulative, a tipping point which catalyses change (Taylor, 2000). The nature of the decision to participate can frequently be found rooted in a disorientating life dilemma and, as such, it can be sudden, fraught and often unpredictable as it is bound up with other life events and experiences (Crossan *et al.*, 2003). Havinghurst (1971) viewed the identification of such life events with an interest in adult participation and a view of the transition as a positive force or a 'teachable moment'. At the core of the process of identification lies the act of self-reflection whether that was being stagnant for too long (Philippa) or seeing friends and colleagues move forward with new projects (Rhiannon).

Cross's Model (1981) highlighted the interdependence between the learner coming to the point of action and whether institutional opportunities or barriers lie ahead. Cross explained how learners who have a strong desire and motivation to participate (through their self-evaluation, attitudes and transition) will seek out special opportunities and will overcome 'modest barriers' (p.127). This decision is clearly and easily facilitated by the nature of admissions at the University which are direct entry rather than through the UCAS system and immediate access to the induction module and quarterly start. Karl highlighted their experience of first contact (Morgan, 2011) and the accessibility of the admissions process saying that their decision was a sudden one. Having procrastinated over whether or not to enrol for about a year, they did so after a telephone call with the Admissions Team. They had decided that, '*the time was now*' (Karl's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2). Lara too spoke of how, once she had made her decision to act, a quick call to the University '*got the ball rolling*' (Lara's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).

#### **4.2.2 External and Internal Dilemmas**

The participant journals and interviews suggest how disorientation or disequilibrium can arise through both the external dilemmas explored by Mezirow (1991); exposed

by extrinsic factors such as work or family as well as the internal dilemmas; internal anomalies or trigger events for which the existing modes of meaning-making will no longer suffice.

Charles came into study whilst experiencing extreme, challenging life circumstances which brought with them both internal and external dilemmas. A period of drug addiction, offending and criminal convictions had 'ravaged' his life, taking both a physical and psychological toll, leading to disorientation (*Charles' Journal – Weeks 1 and 2*). The sudden nature of his decision to participate is clear,

*I knew it was time to stop. I needed to urgently prove I am not this person.... What changed? The fact that I needed to change is what changed. (Charles' Journal – Weeks 1 and 2)*

It may be that Charles' circumstances provided a catalyst or trigger for his decision but also that his existing ways of being, knowledge and frames of reference were no longer sufficient (Mezirow, 1991). Charles' decision to participate provided a significant rupture whilst also giving new structure, focus and direction – a significant perspective change.

*Nothing is happening in my life right now. I am working hard to stay clean ... I spend my days home alone ... I have no social life. I am having to work hard to overcome procrastination even though I have nothing going on. I am managing to stay on track so far. (Charles' Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

Lara also spoke of a significant life crisis which had not only provided a catalyst for her participation in online study but had also instigated a decision about work to fulfil her dream.

*In August 2017, my life was turned upside down, I was diagnosed with MS, it was a shock, however, it made me realise there was never a right time, if you don't do this now you will never do it. With 6 children and 2 jobs, I realised it is basically now or never. So I quit the job I had been successfully doing for 17 years and decided to look at fulfilling my dream. (Lara's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

Similarly Caroline had experienced simultaneous and significant life crises through the loss of her mother to cancer. Her ideas and plans for the future had been put on hold whilst she provided care and her grief and bereavement were coupled with other significant life events such as moving home and losing her job. Again her personal capacity to access education and its potential to transform is evident,

*I am finally ready to be the best that I can be. (Caroline's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

The participants' journals highlighted the form and extent of externally imposed dilemmas through work and family. Some of the external dilemmas were significant and life-changing as in the case of Charles, Lara and Caroline; for others, the impetus for change arose out of less shattering but no less significant events. Ali spoke of how she had spent six years building up a small business but that when staff coincidentally resigned at the same time, she thought that it was pointless to start all over again and decided that it was time to '*achieve something different*' (Ali's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).

For some of the participants, the desire for change was a more subtle and longstanding one, better aligned to Taylor's view (2000) that the dilemma which brings about disorientation is not always attributable to a single act or experience but is more often accumulative. Taylor perceived this as a subtle accumulation of opportunities which provide a basis for exploration and clarification of past experiences and accepted meanings rather than a specific crisis trigger.

Phil had worked as a chef for a decade and knew that his opportunities for a career change with earnings potential were limited without an undergraduate qualification. He spoke of how a new relationship had triggered his decision to take the next step. Lara reported a similar set of circumstances and of how the courage she had summoned to leave her violent relationship and her diagnosis of MS had provided the catalyst for change. Similarly, Rhiannon spoke of her long-standing desire for change but being unable to break the cycle of working to live, to pay the bills and the rent. The achievements of friends and colleagues provided the impetus for change, a building of events leading to a questioning of her perspectives (Cranton, 2006).

One of the challenges of the notion of the disorientating dilemma is that it provides a reactive catalyst to events in the circumstantial domain which are beyond the participants' control. Karl's narrative provided a subtle nuance to that, as they sought to study towards a new career to offset potential future instability in their current job, during a period of relative financial stability.

*At the moment my life is much more stable ... I have a job, which I do not like but there are no other options as my previous degree is not recognized*

*but at least I have financial stability. So I am trying to gain as much [sic] qualifications as possible. (Karl's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

#### **4.2.3 The Missing Piece**

Clark (1993) too, showed how the trigger to transformative learning may not be catalysed by a crisis event or situation but may arise through a more subtle integration of circumstances in which an individual searches for the 'missing piece' (p.81) which, once found, invokes the process of change.

Joanne recounted how the opportunity to study online provided a means of her balancing work, study and personal life. She was at a point in her career where she didn't want to sit in a university classroom to obtain the professional qualification that she desired, she wanted to study at a UK university but did not want to leave her job. An online programme may be perceived as providing that missing piece which instigates the potential for change but also gives Joanne the ability to build on her professional experience and continue earning a salary. (Joanne's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).

Rhiannon too spoke of her long-held interest in psychology and how she had wanted to pursue these studies since she left school. She had not really heard of distance learning other than the Open University which she had written off as too expensive. Becoming an online learner enabled her to break the cycle that she had found difficult since entering full time employment on leaving school. Her emergent awareness of other, alternative online degree providers and the accessibility of the provision was the missing piece which facilitated her participation. The overcoming of Cross's (1981) institutional and circumstantial barriers had provided the key which unlocked her long-held potential for participation and perspective change. Similar longstanding desires were echoed by Chrissie, for whom withdrawing from her previous studies had, '*always felt like unfinished business*' (Chrissie's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2), Valeria who had always had it in the back of her mind to study again and Naioki who harboured a longstanding desire to achieve his BSc,

*I believe this has been my complex that I don't have one. I always felt weaker or that I had less of a chance or an opportunity than people who have one. (Naioki's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

What emerges from these narratives is the vision of the participants who can 'imagine themselves otherwise' (Field, 2010, p.xxiii), leveraging the potential for

change and new possibilities in the period of disorientation in an agentic and emancipatory way – a different self with different networks and relationships in the future (Field, 2015). In their earliest journal reflections, Joanne saw herself being the first of her siblings to have a professional degree, Ali saw herself working in a new field altogether, David was planning his career trajectory through the management hierarchy and Naioki was looking to a professional career in artificial intelligence. Karl imagined themselves moving to a new country to start a new life and career and already perceived the potential challenges posed by their changing perspective and that as they grew in confidence, their work might become even less tolerable. In many ways, Charles' personal 'imagined other' was the reality of now, putting an end to the destructive cycles of crime and addiction and working hard to stay clean. This was his, '*new identity and purpose*' (*Charles' Journal – Weeks 1 and 2*) in which he wanted to do well. However, his aspirations do not end there, he too imagines himself graduating with a Qualifying Law Degree, an ambition held for most of his adult life.

These stories also illustrate clearly, the personal and individual nature of the decision to participate in learning and its entanglement with the circumstantial domain. This pre-liminal phase is not the structured and ordered journey between two relatively fixed or stable conditions where the person is in a temporary state of ambiguity in between (Turner, 1967). The circumstances which bring the learner to participation are, in some cases, already fraught and unfamiliar. The transformation is not always the old into the new, for some the threshold has already been crossed and the old life left behind before the process of engagement and perspective transformation through learning is underway – this was clear from Karl's and Charles' stories. Mezirow's idea of alienation is similar to the process of separation put forward by Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1967) - a process of redefining, reframing and recognising the need for action and change. The exercise of individual agency is clearly evident with the participants here recognising the possibility of effecting change through their own initiative (Mezirow, 1981) and section 4.3 further examines how the opportunity to study online in particular provides a foundation upon which to exercise such agency. Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) highlighted the limitations of Turner's work as predicated on small scale, stable societies and cautioned against taking his ideas as a blueprint for large-scale HE in a fast-paced, multi-linear society. However, Turner's work does present insights into the uncertainty and fragility of the

process of identification and identity formation. The state of limbo and the uncertainty and vulnerability which that brings may already be part of their early journey as an adult learner and that has implications for our understanding as practitioners.

### **4.3 Pragmatism and Preference – the Choice to Study Online**

There is limited research exploring the reasons why adult learners choose to study online for their degrees (Henry, Pooley and Omari, 2014) and as such, the paths of convenience and flexibility are well trodden (Willging and Johnson, 2009; Dumais *et al.*, 2013, Firat, 2017; Kara *et al.*, 2019) but without deeper consideration of what those two concepts mean in reality for those who choose to participate in online learning. It was no surprise that the research participants headlined their decision as something which would work around time and family commitments. Lara needed the flexibility to run her business as well as being there for her children, Katie needed a programme which worked to her advantage and enabled her to continue to work full time. The participant accounts however, revealed more layers and complexity to this decision, the reasoning which lay behind their personal or circumstantial need and how online learning provided the opportunity to access learning and transformation.

#### **4.3.1 Pragmatism – the Flexibility and Accessibility of Online Study**

The narratives provided some interesting insights into why the participants had taken the decision to study online. The first theme was found in both the circumstantial domain and the institutional domain and concerned the participants' pragmatism in their decision-making. Time and flexibility were frequently cited which was to be expected (Willging and Johnson, 2009; Dumais *et al.*, 2013; Kara *et al.*, 2019). Ali sought the flexibility of online learning, preferring to '*work my studies around work rather than the other way around*' (Ali's Journal - Weeks 1 and 2). Caroline reported that her shifts at work are constantly changing and therefore studying online at her own pace can fit around her erratic work patterns and family commitments. Karl also wrote of experiencing unstable and demanding work hours. Naioki, Karl and Joanne were located outside the UK at the commencement of their studies. Online learning provided a means to access the UK HE market. Joanne saw this as an ideal opportunity rather than simply a pragmatic decision, as it enabled her to obtain a UK degree without leaving her job to go overseas to study, which



allowed her to both capitalise on and continue to build her professional experience. This was also reasoning which came through clearly in Firat's (2017) study where both developing within a career path to become a specialist as well as to gain promotion combined as key drivers. Naioki also mentioned that the favourable exchange rate currently made the tuition fees very affordable.

Healey (2013) explored the international demand for UK education showing how individuals look to study abroad if the domestic system is perceived as low quality or where access is difficult. Firat (2017) again considered institutional reputation as a driver, and online learning being a means of accessing a superior educational opportunity. Joanne wrote of her aspirations to study for a UK degree due to the '*remarkable high level of education*' (*Joanne's Journal - Weeks 1 and 2*) and Karl also recognised the importance of studying in the UK due to his extant qualifications not being recognised where he currently resides but being unable to leave work and move abroad to take this next step.

Financial considerations were also operative in the decision to study online and these provided benefit both to self-financing students but also to those sponsored by their employers. The University operates a pay as you go opportunity for self-financing students which means that modules can be purchased individually, by level, with a monthly payment plan on a credit facility or purchased outright. David highlighted his monthly outgoings and the considerable cost of studying. As the programme was online, he had been able to apply to his employer for sponsorship without incurring the additional costs of on-campus study relating to travel and accommodation, which would be prohibitive. Chrissie also considered the degree option to be '*flexible and at a fair price*' (*Chrissie's Journal - Weeks 1 and 2*).

#### **4.3.2 Personal Preference – the Desire to Study Online**

A second emergent theme around the decision to study online was located in the personal domain in terms of intrinsic personal preference with regard to the mode of study or a preference which emerges as a result of extrinsic factors in the past or present.

Distance, solitude and even isolation were a recurrent theme with some of the participants. Chrissie talked of how the online programme reduced the stress of needing to be in a certain place at a certain time for a lecture.

At least four of the participants' narratives revealed they were coping with a range of medical conditions which meant that they could not attend regular, timetabled, face-to-face study as their personal health circumstances were unpredictable.

Charles has been battling with agoraphobia, Karl has suffered with PTSD for more than ten years, both Lara and Josie had had recent diagnoses of multiple sclerosis, and Josie highlighted how a flare up of her symptoms could potentially put her out of action for months.

However, sometimes solitude or isolation may be a voluntary choice and an overriding consideration in the decision to study online. Katie relishes the fact that she can sit at home with her music on, in her pyjamas studying. She framed this as important to her success and persistence;

*Don't get me wrong, I love having the option to interact with other students as and when I want to but the thought of sitting in a classroom full of strangers scares the living daylights out of me. (Katie's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

Katie described her preference for instances of solitude comprising moments of isolation within a network of connections (Phirangee and Malec, 2017). Due to the nature of online study, this is an aspect of her learning over which she has choice and control, which suits her own needs and preference.

Naioki recounted his previous studies in the US which he had left without completing. With English as a second language, he felt isolated and unable to communicate with his fellow students at the time. Naioki did not have that subjective feeling of relatedness or connectedness (Thomas, 2012) and he perceives his inability to overcome this isolation as his '*weakness*' and the reason why he dropped out of traditional study and returned home.

*I could not stand for the loneliness, not able to communicate well with my fellow students in English at that time. My weakness towards this loneliness eventually caused unable [sic] to stay in the university in the US and I decided to leave. (Naioki's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

In a similar vein, Karl wrote of feelings of insecurity and low self-confidence which stemmed from their severe PTSD which they had battled for more than ten years. Karl's account makes reference to previous experiences of bullying in school due to their appearance and being made to pay to be part of a group and they felt that the distance of being online would afford some protection from that,

*Being online is good for a person with PTSD because it does not trigger bullying experiences in class. (Karl's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

Karl appeared to return to the theme of self-protection in Weeks 9 and 10 with the opportunity to submit their assignment anonymously, describing a feeling of safety that no one would discriminate against them.

What is interesting around the theme of distance and isolation is how the participants started to exercise their agency and to frame their degrees of belonging and engagement, according to their personal preference and need, so early on in their journey. Both Josie and Charles saw online learning as a means of mitigating what they perceived as inevitable periods of engagement, disengagement and reengagement (O'Brian and Toms, 2008) due to their unpredictable health conditions, and Chrissie saw it as one less thing to worry about as the stress of being on campus at a certain time was removed. Naioki's previous experiences of othering, not feeling accepted or being able to fit in and connect with his peer group in his previous study, shaped his frame of reference for now and online learning gave him a means of agency over that, which enabled him to pursue his ambition to achieve his Psychology degree. His early choice was a determined isolation rather than just solitude (Phirangee and Malec, 2017); a physical separation with limited interaction. Karl saw online learning as a means of protection from the longstanding trauma caused by bullying in their past experiences of face-to-face learning but aspired to go beyond simple participation and anticipate their own capacity to build confidence and self-esteem through the learning process with that specific threat taken away.

*As a person who has been bullied because of my appearance, not being seen makes it easier to progress and work on my traumas at the same time. (Karl's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

For these participants, the opportunity to study online for their degree course met their own specific needs and preferences which were deeply individual and rooted in the personal domain. In reviewing the usefulness of the literature on liminal spaces and rites of passage earlier in this study, it was clear that Van Gennep's physical separation phase becomes less pronounced in the online domain – that is a natural consequence of learning exclusively online. These participants voiced their own specific need not to be separated in a physical sense but this does not preclude the possibility of a symbolic or metaphoric state of separation and the potential for

transformation (Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011). As such, online learning enabled them to exercise a degree of agency in taking a next transformative step which would not be possible or desirable through a face-to-face or blended learning model.

#### **4.4 Journeying to Studenthood – Challenge and Opportunity in Emergent Identities**

Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) explored the idea of the transition into higher education as a liminal space; an institutionalised status that is explicitly betwixt and between two other statuses. The transition is to the status of studenthood, referred to in their paper as the different ways in which enrolling on a programme is implicated in who they are. Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) described studenthood as being a formal status which is 'clear cut in higher education' (p.1) and that it is in itself a transitory status after which most will expect to become something else e.g. a Graduate or Postgraduate. Baxter (2012) characterised its importance as a working identity which is key to individual self-salience and efficacy as well as the ability to develop resilience, particularly during periods of difficulty.

Field and Morgan-Klein's description of this liminal journey was represented in the linear, one-directional terms used by Turner (1967) as the liminar moves from a fixed point of departure to a new state and fully fledged identity, a process which is bounded by time, as well as by prescribed criteria of entrance and exit. They outlined how this identity is forged through interactions with staff and departments that 'constantly present the learner's status as student, and symbolically reinforce the learner's formal status as student' (p.3). Castells (2010) argued that change within individuals is mutually determined between the individual and the institution. Identities may originate from the institution but it requires social actors to internalise and construct their meaning before it becomes an identity. All identities have to be learned as well as actively presented and represented to others (Felstead *et al.*, 2010).

The significance of the separation phase of this liminal journey is key here if identity change is simultaneously internalised and constructed whilst being externally reproduced and affirmed through interactions with institutional processes. Part-time adult learners studying face-to-face experience some separation from their family

and friends to periodically attend lectures and to reinforce their emergent identity in their interactions with their peers, academics, facilitators and institutional processes.

For online, adult learners, the notion of separation needs to be understood very differently, as there is no obvious physical separation, but other forms of separation that are less tangible may take place. They inhabit multiple roles and their identity is not fixed but relational (Beijarrd, Meijer and Verloop, 2004) and consequently in constant flux. Furthermore, online learning might afford a more under-institutionalised process than that envisioned by Field and Morgan-Klein (2010), one in which there is greater flexibility and autonomy in self-guiding the process and in particular the timescales within accepted boundaries. Field (2012) emphasised the importance of this liminal phase as a safe place where newcomers can 'legitimately explore and experiment with their identities ... without serious risk,' (p.10) but it is also rife with elements of uncertainty as the journey may both progress and regress and the outcomes may be uncertain or multiple (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). This section will explore the challenges of emergent studenthood amongst the participants, how they perceived and recognised the characteristics of studenthood and the ways in which they forged their new identity and status as online learners. It will also explore how that identity may not be 'clear cut' when juxtaposed with the multiple roles inhabited within the circumstantial domain.

The recognition and acknowledgement of 'becoming' - a change in status and a new identity - comes through strongly in some of the narratives. Charles recognised studenthood and his new and positive status of '*being a "student"*' and distinguished this from other '*derogatory labels*' which have been attached to his name in the past. His use of punctuation here may denote this identity as separate from his identity at the time of the research and his journey towards that status was not yet something fully realised or familiar. However, this status of studenthood brought with it new potential and promise, providing a break from his old life and the possibility of a '*new identity and purpose*' in which he wanted to do well (Charles' Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).

Karl also reflected on their new status of being a university student and the potential for change and transformation that it brings,

*[it] made me feel reborn. Gave me a new meaning, motivation and something to look forward to. (Karl's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

Joanne recounted her upbringing on a small Caribbean island and the challenges of structure imposed by tradition. She saw her journey to studenthood as freeing her from those constraints where she would be recognised for her personal achievements in a society which prizes *'the connections you have or the people you know'* (Joanne's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2). Joanne recognised that she was entering into a liminal space and that her transition was *'part of a new beginning on whatever journey you embark on.'* Joanne recognised studenthood as an identity apart with its own *'mindset'* and *'study mode'* (Joanne's Journal – Weeks 5 and 6). Josie also recognised her new fledgling identity and the challenges that brought to her own perception and priorities, and she talked of changing her mindset, *'to become a student first'* (Josie's Journal – Weeks 3 and 4).

The narratives went on to explore the diverse ways in which these online learners began to forge their emergent identity of studenthood. These stories hint that this work and affirmation of their status as student is extended creatively both within and beyond the formal academic interactions with institutional processes, staff and departments outlined by Field and Morgan-Klein (2010). This identity work is challenging and brings with it some uncertainty with both psychological factors and emotional dynamics being at play (Christie *et al.*, 2008).

#### **4.4.1 Emblems of Studenthood**

Early reflections in the journal entries associated the identity of student with particular emblems; symbolic objects commensurate with this new status. Charles' first step in forging his new identity was to buy new equipment, desks, white boards and stationery, to support him with his studies. The trappings of studenthood and preparing the physical conditions for study were also reported in other journal entries. Josie wrote of her *'pile of textbooks'* and similarly Lara and Philippa purchased the recommended textbooks instead of accessing the copies available in the University online library (Lara and Josie's Journals – Weeks 3 and 4, Philippa's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8). Joanne's textbooks were posted to her as gifts from her friend in Cambridge (Joanne's Journal – Weeks 5 and 6). Participants also wrote of the significance of their student ID card arriving through the post. For Ali, the student card would enable her to purchase MS Office and *'get started'* (Ali's Journal –

Weeks 1 and 2). David wrote of his ID card arriving and it making him '*feel part of the university community*' (David's Interview).

Karl also attributed significance to fragility of this tentative first step, writing of how, on receiving their student card,

*I felt that it becomes more and more real. I still have constantly the fear of losing something, and that's why it takes me much more time to feel it is real .... (Karl's Journal – Weeks 9 and 10).*

Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009) explored the significance of such objects in supporting the transitions of traditional students in their first weeks at university. They saw the objects as providing an 'anchor' (p.51) of temporary support which bridges the home and university environment and highlighted how these transitional objects provide a defence against separation and emotional anxiety and control over a space which is neutral and in which experience is not challenged. Fawns, Aitken and Jones (2019) also recognised how material objects, environments, acts of configuration and rituals make significant contributions to online learning. For the participants here, such objects may have bridged forward, situating the university within the home environment and enacting institutional space (Bayne, Gallagher and Lamb, 2013) but still serve to mitigate the anxiety of separation and some exercise of control as they took their first steps.

Carvalho *et al.* (2018) referred to this as a 'learning imaginary' (p.45) and the ways in which learners imagine how they fit together with others and what expectations they will need to meet. The early emphasis on emblems of studenthood roots this fledgling status in material objects which the participants anticipate will shape their identity and guide their journey -mimicking their understanding of what studenthood means. This is bounded with their learning space and their objects of studenthood as they clearly start to define and add value to their new purpose. Their constructions of their early learning imaginaries were quite conventional amongst those who have chosen the dynamism, flexibility and convenience of being an online learner. Physical textbooks were chosen over online e-books and were placed in piles on desks, the arrival of the plastic student card was heralded as confirming membership and access to the university community and its privileges even though all necessary identifiers (STU numbers, and AU email addresses) were provided from the point of enrolment. Here we might see the early forging of studenthood, in the

absence of these wider social experiences, being represented through material media. Carvalho *et al.* (2018) explored how materiality can transcend the physical to bring a sense of order and connectedness for those who do not have a defined and constant study place and these emblems serve to give a sense of place for learning over which there is a sense of ownership and identity.

#### **4.4.2 Expectations of Studenthood – Real and Imagined Barriers**

Flexibility and convenience were widely cited by the participants as the reasons for them undertaking their studies online; the layers of what learners perceive this to be were explored further in section 4.3. The participants appeared to be active inhabitants of the discourse of modernity (Field and Lynch, 2007) with a readiness to demonstrate the dynamism and adaptability to leverage the flexibility of an online programme. Selwyn (2011) highlighted that the expectation of flexibility is a reciprocal one and learners who engage with online study are often anticipated to be able to show qualities of flexibility and adaptability to respond to changing knowledge demands and social uncertainties, to shift from being a passive negotiator of the prescribed rules to being an 'active founder and re-configurer of the rules' (p.368).

The University has developed its programmes with these needs in mind and offers a number of features which would not be available in a more traditional, face-to-face setting including;

- The opportunity to engage in live Adobe Connect sessions or to access recordings
- All module materials, module assessments and discussion fora are available to all students from the start of the module to enable learners to progress at a pace which works for them and around their other commitments
- The opportunity to receive formative feedback on an aspect of the assessment up to 10 days before submission
- The opportunity to defer assignment submission without application or supporting evidence on each module once without incurring any financial or mark penalties

However, analysis of the data may suggest they the participants appeared to struggle with the actual features which had guided them towards the benefits of being an online learner and a number of threads appeared across their narratives.



#### **4.4.2.1 Structure and Certainty**

An early but persistent sub-theme was around structure and certainty as many sought to establish patterns of engagement. Charles cited setting a 'regime' to study four times in weeks 5 and 6 and it was clearly something which he was struggling to establish half way through his first module. Philippa reflected on the perceived benefits of a face-to-face experience where the times and days of classes are set in advance (Philippa's Journal – Weeks 3 and 4). Structure also featured in Shelley and David's narratives as the desire to establish structure through a schedule became undone when events happened which were not foreseen including a bereavement, heavy workload and a hospitalised grandparent (David's Journal – Weeks 5 and 6). Shelley similarly struggled when her regime was disrupted when a change in her younger child's sleeping habits was coupled with her daughter's new gymnastics class shifting to three nights per week (Shelley's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8).

#### **4.4.2.2 Learning Places**

Learning places were also conceptualised in very traditional ways by the participants as they sought to create places of seclusion with the emblems of studenthood defining their boundaries. Phil reflected on how being in his living room on a laptop does not make him feel like a university student – the flexibility of online study and his construct of this hybridised space (Cohen, Nørgård and Mor, 2020) compromises his emergent identity of studenthood (Phil's Journal – Weeks 5 and 6). Charles' work in setting up his place of study has been explored in 4.4.1 – he averaged 6 hours a day study at his workstation but still does not read the textbooks when he is not at his desk (Charles' Journal – Weeks 3 and 4). There is an implied relationship between a learner and their learning place which brings with it connection where no other physical connection exists. Carvalho *et al.* (2018) highlighted how the act of defining such space can be seen as taking a professional outlook, an attempt to mark a clear, physical delineation between the circumstantial and institutional domains and a space in which studenthood can be exercised and forged.

#### **4.4.2.3 Marker of Success**

A further sub-theme which is linked to this discussion is the participants perceived markers of success in their studenthood. Many took up the opportunity to receive formative feedback on their work but their perception of the deferral opportunity was very different. Charles saw the opportunity to defer as making '*a very bad start*' and a poor habit which he did not want to get into (Charles' Journal – Weeks 9 and

10). Phil was also pleased that he'd managed to submit his assignments and had not had to defer (Phil's Journal – Weeks 9 and 10). Joanne had perceived deferring her studies on a previous programme as leading to her withdrawing and was determined not to do it again,

*The pressure was so real, trying to get my work in on time that I contemplated on deferring. But I was so determined to get on with my studies, I told myself no, whatever it takes I have to keep at it. So, for weeks, I kept my focus, sleepless nights seeing the sunrise and set, getting to work and using the little resources that I had to get my work down. (Joanne's Journal – Weeks 9 and 10).*

Selwyn (2011) argued that despite the citations of flexibility and adaptability of online learning for working adults, many lacked the self-efficacy and fluidity to engage and disengage with learning to meet the needs of their changing circumstances. Instead, adult, online learners preferred structured engagements which fit into structured routines as demonstrated by traditional educational engagement where learning is experienced and managed in rigid, routinised and inflexible ways (Kember, 1999; Selwyn, 2011).

Through the lens of their liminal journeys, these early narratives may propose an alternative view. The participants appeared to be engaging with the traditional expectations of studenthood, with which they were most familiar (e.g. adhering to a schedule, having study place, buying textbooks) and in doing so, they started to forge their emergent identity in ways which they perceived as institutionally and socially valued and acceptable. Mezirow (1991) touched on this as a process of meaning making where order is brought to the experience by integrating it with what we know. This helps to mitigate anxiety in seeking to understand the new environment in light of previous experiences. Knowles (1980) acknowledged how previous individual experiences could have a negative impact on learning through preconceived notions about reality, habitual ways of thinking and acting, and prejudices that had developed through life experiences. However these experiences were conceptualised, the students' engagements and endeavours might be evidence of and offset against their self-direction (Knowles, 1980), seeking out clarity and what might be acceptable to the University as they forged their early identity.

Selwyn (2011) argued that despite universities offering a range of learning opportunities through discussion fora, online content and additional learning

materials, full use of these was not always made with learners perceiving them as extraneous to the grade. Learners were content to forego learning activities which were not seen as integral to the core reading and subsequent assessment. This did not come through strongly in these narratives as the participants engaged diligently and as fully as their circumstances permitted with discussion fora, Adobe Connect sessions, lesson material, quizzes and formative assessment opportunities.

#### **4.4.3 Seeking 'Fixedness' - Lost and Found (and Lost Again) in Liminal Spaces**

The experience of online adult learners in negotiating the liminality and forging their new identity of studenthood is a non-linear and fraught process and can be a particularly challenging phase of the introduction to study (Morgan, 2011). The institutional state of studenthood challenges other statuses such as carer, parent, friend, worker. The liminal space is shared, interrupted, waxes and wanes with the interplay of the personal, circumstantial and institutional domains. Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) speculated that there is little opportunity to suspend past roles and identities as those are uncoupled from the journey and it is not unsurprising that there is the potential for disjuncture. Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016) called this 'seeking fixedness' (p.18) seeing how students sought to stabilise or 'fix' the self in order to re-establish identity coherence and in doing so drew on key relationships both within and without the University. The key relationships within the University are with academic staff and their fellow students; outside the University, it's family and friends. Kasworm (2010) referred to these as relational identities, ones in which the learners identify those individuals who they believe accept them as themselves and value them as students.

##### **4.4.3.1. Safe Places - the Importance of Friends and Family**

Some of the early narratives draw on the support of friends and family at home in tentatively taking the first steps and forging studenthood. This is a safe place in which that early identity can be exercised and the support of a strong family network can be key in establishing congruence between the institutional and circumstantial domains (Kember, 1999). Ali's partner showed understanding in allowing her to work as often as she needed to but did have difficulty in keeping quiet and permitting her to have the study space that she needed (Ali's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8). Charlotte's husband took the children out, adapting the family routines so that she could have more time to herself to study (Charlotte's Journal – Weeks 3 and 4) and Josie's mum offered her words of encouragement when she had moments of self-doubt (Josie's

Journal – Weeks 7 and 8). Alongside the support and acceptance of family, some of the narratives serve to show early signs of their new identity of studenthood. Joanne valued the support of her friend in Cambridge who has bought and sent her some law textbooks for times when her internet is disrupted (Joanne's Journal – Weeks 5 and 6). Charlotte described how different she feels,

*It's different in the fact of I feel that, with, it's really weird how people react to you when you tell them you're doing a degree in law. They're really impressed. You know, 'What? You're doing a degree in law? Wow!' And you're looked upon as something that, it's really hard to describe ... You get that bit more respect. So it's a change in the people around me as well as myself ... (Charlotte's Interview).*

Charlotte's feeling may be an indication of her self-salience and efficacy and her emergent studenthood beginning to permeate at a deep and integrative level, transforming the perceptions of friends and family and forming a recognisable new persona (Baxter, 2012). Chrissie went one step further in leveraging the potential of hybrid learning spaces and started to forge her emergent identity with her family and friends engaging in debates with them on the topics she is studying in order to develop a well-balanced view (Chrissie's Journal – Weeks 3 and 4). Her extended network acted as a 'bridging aid' (Cook, Mor and Santos, 2020, p.1156) and this positioning practice enabled her to engage in and test out the skills and knowledge which would underpin her emergent identity.

#### ***4.4.3.2 A Sense of Belonging - the Significance of Peer and Academic Relationships***

Charlotte was effective at establishing a network of institutional relationships with her academics and peers through which to forge her identity of studenthood and to access support. She identified in her first weeks' journal that she anticipated her degree to be difficult but rewarding and recognised the challenges of not being in a face-to-face, classroom environment. By week 5 she had engaged with the university Facebook group, her academic tutor and her peers through the module discussion fora. Through the introduction to study phase (Morgan, 2011) and her engagements with her academic tutor, Charlotte appeared to value the opportunity to test out her own competence to be allowed to stay in this university environment (Kasworm, 2010),

*... she is very approachable so I don't mind if I ask a question even if I feels [sic] it's stupid one. She has this way of explaining things and making you feel comfortable (Charlotte's Journal – Weeks 5 and 6).*

Charlotte also took the opportunity to have a one to one session with her tutor and came away with a strong sense of what was expected of her, and further through the module submitted work for formative feedback which was also positive. All the way through the first module, Charlotte seemed to use this relationship with her academic tutor to forge her right to the status of studenthood and affirm it,

*But then you get feedback on both your module essays and it gives you a lift because you don't have to rewrite the whole thing and in fact the teacher comments are, "I can see you understood the question, I really enjoyed reading this". You gain a bit of confidence back and feel happy that you can do this and you will kick its arse. (Charlotte's Journal – Weeks 9 and 10).*

Charlotte was gaining and maintaining a sense of perceived institutional acceptance (Kasworm 2010) and this was confirmed when a number of fellow students asked her for help (Charlotte's Interview).

Joanne also submitted her work to her academic tutor for formative feedback but did not get the comments that she'd hoped for,

*I felt so emotional because I felt that I hadn't hit the mark as I should. But I took in the good critic [sic] and the encouragement from my tutor and I tried my very best. (Joanne's Journal – Weeks 9 and 10).*

The opportunity to ask questions and gain feedback from her tutor made Joanne feel 'able' and the tone of the feedback and encouragement from her tutor was key to Joanne's persistence. Garrison (2017) emphasised the importance of the academic tutor in establishing a sense of belonging and security and the significance of creating an environment which is trusting, caring and encouraging. It is key to learners both re-establishing identity coherence on their journey and acceptance of their emergent status of studenthood by the academic community.

Christie *et al.* (2008) explored the challenges of developing a sense of belonging when learning identities are fragile and uncertain when engaging with new learning environments and learning communities. They described this as 'the culture shock' (p.569) on entering higher education where the anticipation of not knowing what is

expected becomes entangled with the learning process itself. This is exacerbated where there is no reservoir of insight or support to draw upon.

For online adult learners, the challenge of understanding what is expected of them is myriad, as the institutional benchmarks of perceived studenthood and membership extend across its standards, systems and processes. For online adult learners the virtual learning environment presents the challenge of how they manage the flexibility to shape their engagements – an experience which is very different at this level for all of the participants. Lee, Choi and Cho (2019) took up this theme of how online programmes aimed at adult learners are designed to provide them with individual choices and a range of multiple learning opportunities which fits their personal and circumstantial needs. They drew on Knowles' (1980) notion and popularisation of the concept of andragogy and his argument that adult learners are more self-directed, motivated and have acquired a valuable reservoir of life experience which provides a rich resource for learning. Lee, Choi and Cho questioned whether this approach which is problem-centred and self-directed fuels a disconnect between perceptions of adult learning and their actual experiences.

Lara spoke of her trepidation of what was expected of her when commencing her studies online and felt that she was not mentally prepared for not going to a class and meeting other students and tutors face-to-face. This resulted in her initially being a '*lurker*', watching discussions but not being an active participant, but she also recognised that she needed to be a '*poster*' if she wanted to increase her knowledge more (Lara's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2). Rhiannon was also daunted early on and struggled to understand what was expected of her with her first piece of writing. Despite having the opportunity to email it to her academic tutor for feedback, she felt that it was not the same as '*physically not being able to show a copy to someone to make sure that you are on the right track*' (Rhiannon's Journal – Weeks 3 and 4). In the following weeks she engaged with her peers on the discussion fora and found clear guidance from either fellow student or tutor posts on what was expected – the 'know hows' of being an online learner, the 'transferable strategies' and 'tacit knowledge' which is key to moving forward (Lee, Choi and Cho, 2019, p.30). Her self-efficacy and self-esteem in her fledgling identity as a student started to grow as she was '*getting to grips with the way things are done now*' (Rhiannon's Journal – Weeks 5 and 6). Charles also wondered if he would ever find

this to be a 'normal' experience and reflected on the challenges of understanding what was expected of him,

*I may never have the benefit of simply discussing this with a peer and establishing if my thoughts, feelings and experiences of not remembering everything are normal ... I cannot gauge my thoughts, feeling and experiences with anyone else. I understand we have a forum but I would not post such intimate thoughts on there as no one else is doing it. (Charles' Journal – Weeks 3 and 4).*

However, Charles started to settle in during the subsequent weeks, joining a WhatsApp group and communicating with one other student. This clarified his understanding of what was expected of him in providing a 'benchmark of sorts'. His peer had a clear study regime and time for study and Charles set about mirroring those study habits and behaviours,

*This student is much better organised than I am and has a much keener eye for detail. I have been lucky to learn early on that this person spends 7 hours a day studying and therefore I have amended myself to study 7 hours a day. (Charles' Journal – Weeks 5 and 6).*

Charles found direction and structure from this peer relationship. Whether this was realistic in terms of what the institution would expect in terms of study commitment, it allowed Charles to identify traits of studenthood which he perceived to be valuable. This relationship also provided the impetus to better self-regulate in this new environment where the in-built flexibility has left a vacuum for Charles – a lack of direction where he needs a 'regime'. Josie also noted how the flexibility of online learning can also drive a lack of direction and structure. She identified how more tutor control of the discussion fora and the debate rather than discussions being student-led would make the experience 'less disjointed' (Josie's Journal – Weeks 5 and 6).

For Ali, her engagement with the Facebook group enabled her to realise a degree of self-efficacy,

*Through this I have discovered that I may be more competent than I first thought. When others ask questions, I find that I mostly know the answers and that everyone else is struggling to find time just as much as I am. (Ali's Journal – Weeks 9 and 10).*

Online learners reported that greater collaboration with their peers in the online environment fostered a degree of camaraderie and belonging which could diffuse the isolation of learning at a distance. This was a concern which came through clearly in many of the early stories. Caroline anticipated that being an online learner would be *'very lonely and daunting'* (Caroline's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).

Phil reflected on his progress as an online learner and how his sense of belonging evolved. At first he felt like he was in a rat race with everyone scrambling through lessons with little communication,

*Now, however, it feels like everyone has had realised that we're all in this together. There's definitely more of a sense of community building and the idea that we're going to need each other to get through this course. If I'm honest, this isn't something that I thought I'd feel when I set out. (Phil's Journal – Weeks 5 and 6).*

Charlotte spoke of her Facebook group,

*...they're all really supportive. They're an awesome bunch and we're in touch with everyone. We've already been talking about graduation! (Charlotte's Interview).*

This was not simply about networks and making personal and professional connections but being part of an experience with their peers that only fellow online learners could understand (Delahunty, Verenikina and Jones, 2014). Charlotte and her peers co-constructed their shared imagined future and the status beyond studenthood, to that of graduate. Even if their present selves were ambiguous, unclear or in between, their future selves as graduates could be portrayed as clearly defined identities and they could put that to effective use (Ybema, Beech and Ellis, 2011).

Charlotte and Ali both reported leveraging the camaraderie of their peers to engender the skills and attributes of their emergent studenthood through flashcard style tests and debates, a hybrid interleaving of the formal and informal (Cook *et al.*, 2015).

*We do like little debates and stuff like that, which is pretty awesome. We'll debate about a question outside of uni and stuff. That's what I wanted. I did miss the classroom vibe. (Charlotte's Interview).*



Josie valued the multiple opportunities to form relationships with her peers and felt a greater sense of belonging by virtue of the online fora (Josie's Journal – Weeks 5 and 6). She reflected on how the relative anonymity of the online channels meant not having to fit into or conform to any category as she perceived she would have had to in a face-to-face setting and that made it easier to settle in.

*In my previous studies, students were expected to 'just get on' with making friends and forming relationships - which is obviously what us, as people do - but there was no obligation and therefore, unless you were the 'let's do an all-night drink fest' ... uni had no place for you, especially the 'single-parent-who-works-full-time' person, which was the category that I fitted into. (Josie's Journal – Weeks 5 and 6).*

Being an online learner enabled her to frame her own degrees of belonging, dipping into and out of these communities in a way which fitted with her needs (Peacock and Cowan, 2019).

Czarniawska and Mazza (2003), recognised this heightened sense of belonging and togetherness with each other as a response to times of incoherence but Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016) also identified early instances where the scaffolding provided by these same peers was shaky and led to further feelings of inadequacy.

Ali enjoyed doing the first task but after discussions with some of her fellow learners started to worry and question what she had understood was expected of her,

*I'm worried that I have not included enough information. My understanding of a presentation is to keep the visual wording to a minimum ... but I am now worried that I will not reach the necessary word count for the entire assignment. (Ali's Journal – Weeks 3 and 4).*

However, Ali is pragmatic and her self-efficacy was apparent as she recognised that she would continue to learn and self-regulate as she went.

Through their relationships with both academic staff and their peers, the participants started to scaffold their experience (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016), develop a clearer understanding of what was expected in their emergent studenthood and steady themselves. The narratives show how through scaffolding with their academic tutors and their peers, they started to develop habits of studenthood as well as sourcing tacit knowledge and strategies – the 'know hows' of studenthood (Lee, Choi and Cho, 2019), all part of their negotiation of this liminal space.

#### 4.4.4 Complementary and Contrapuntal Aspects of Studenthood

The journey to studenthood not only provides the foundations on which to build new skills and learning but also the opportunity to re-construct a new identity. In his exploration of the liminal space occupied by adult returners, Field (2012) highlighted how the separation phase of liminality permits learners to play with new identities. Field (2012) reminded us of this process and cautions that we should, 'seek to understand university studenthood as a liminal process, in which newcomers may legitimately explore and experiment with their identities, including their cultural and social allegiances, without serious risk' (p.10).

The lack of physical separation in the journeys of these online participants, the absence of a clear delineation of the old from the new as well as the institutional from the circumstantial, presents challenges. The space to play risk free and explore their new identity is shared with those identities which have long been formed - a trajectory which is both complementary and contrasting (Baxter, 2012). The flexibility and convenience of online learning permeates traditional institutional membranes which would provide some limited degree of separation in which to forge the new identity. This important identity work is delivered abruptly into the heart of family life, work commitments and social networks – the circumstantial domain. The notion of movement and transition through the learning and re-learning of the self becomes inherently difficult when the conditions of 'becoming' have the potential to serve to re-affirm rather than re-construct (Field and Lynch, 2007) and multiple roles and past identities begin to vie for attention.

##### 4.4.4.1 Congruent Identities

Some participants clearly identified the process of the formation of their emergent identity (or aspects of it) as complementary or congruent to their existing roles and identities. Charles not only saw the label of studenthood as a marked turn away from derogatory labels of the past, but this emergent identity also complemented that of a good son. His movement towards re-constructing his new self, and his desire not to return to the old, provided movement when he got stuck (Field and Lynch, 2007),

*I often feel extremely disheartened and think 'What's the point?' but then I think of my mam and everything that has happened and I realise I need to do this. (Charles' Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

For Charles, the process of constructing and reconstructing identity was key to enabling him to acquire a new sense of meaning, self-concept and direction in his life (Mezirow, 1975).

David also recognised aspects of his emergent identity which complemented and gave direction to his professional life. He knew that he would not be able to progress in his career without a degree and was therefore personally motivated to progress further and was supported to do so by his employer,

*I do not have a degree to my name and feel this will help with career progression opportunities which I am now in a position to plan for ... I have started planning with my manager (David's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).*

Joanne was also in a similar position and recognised that her studies were a building block to a more professional and practical outcome. Joanne also imagined her future self and how, on completing her degree, she would be able to 'give back to society' and help make a change in someone else's life (Joanne's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8).

#### **4.4.4.2 Discongruent Identities and Managing Boundary Encounters**

However, other participants voiced tension and conflict at the boundary between their emergent identity as students with existing and competing roles. Whilst a number of participants, both male and female, recounted the difficulties posed by unpredictable work hours and patterns, the stories became particularly gendered around the tensions posed between the demands of studenthood and family commitments.

Home (1998) reported three dimensions of conflict in multiple roles and identities among women namely; role conflict from simultaneous, incompatible demands; role overload, or insufficient time to meet all demands; role contagion, or preoccupation with one role while performing another.

Ali's Journal (Weeks 7 and 8) highlighted these tensions. Christmas had brought with it extra social demands and she was glad to put it behind her to start making headway again. However, in order to do so she had forgone visits to her family which had made her feel unhappy as her father was recovering from illness. Charlotte also referenced the demands of the Christmas period but her multiple roles extended to being both mother to her two young boys and a carer to her

father whilst also looking for a new job (Charlotte's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8).

Charlotte reflected on her family's reaction to her returning to university,

*I do so much for my family, that they're saying to me 'Are you sure? You're going to exhaust yourself.' And sometimes I do feel exhausted. I'm not being funny. I do feel exhausted. (Charlotte's Interview).*

Philippa recounted her experiences of simultaneous incompatible demands,

*Studying has not been easy. There never seems to be a right time. Fighting a baby to retrieve a textbook is not the ideal way to study. The night comes and I am even more exhausted. (Philippa's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8).*

Philippa reflected on the benefits of online study which she recognised and appreciated, *'it allows me to prioritise and find balance without feeling bad about doing something for myself'* (Philippa's Journal - Weeks 1 and 2) but also wrestled with her struggles to establish a pattern of study. She considered whether having *'fixed days and times for classes'* would be easier and would stop her feeling that she had to *'borrow time'* from her family. She thought her approach would be different in a *'physical school'* (Philippa's Journal – Weeks 3 and 4 and 7 and 8) where she would have to leave the house to go and study. Philippa's account chimes with the idea of female learners in particular perceiving that they have to borrow or carve out time from the temporal patterns of others (particularly family members) or this has to be guarded, borrowed or bought through negotiations or paid arrangements such as additional childcare (Selwyn, 2011).

In acknowledging their multiple roles, these participants began to show an awareness that they are part of different and evolving role-based identities, such as student, carer, job-seeker, wife, entrepreneur, mother, daughter etc. Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) referred to these identities as relational and context driven. Some identities rise to prominence whilst others are subsumed as the environment morphs and changes. It is therefore difficult to settle into any pattern, illustrating the non-linear nature of these journeys.

The stories show a variety of strategies for negotiating the uncertainty and conflict at the boundary between their existing roles and emergent identity. Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016) explored *'bracketing'* (p.24) as a tool used by liminars during the periods of uncertainty created by emergent but conflicting new identities juxtaposed

with the multiple roles inhabited by individuals. Bracketing enables liminars to suspend established relational webs and therefore the obligations that go with them; suspending some obligations whilst invoking others. The separation phase would usually facilitate this state but the participants here, as online learners, had to actively create this space rather than receiving it passively.

Josie was engaged in active bracketing work as she set up a timetable to set aside lecture, reading and assignment time. However her challenge arose not so much with her ability to get the work done but in being firm with her family to follow the timetable and suspend that space and time for her to study (Josie's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8). Rhiannon took a similar approach, timetabling her study time once her forthcoming shifts were confirmed at work to set aside study time. With a 6 year old and a 1½ year old, Shelley's attempts to bracket and carve out time for study were unpredictable. In Weeks 1 and 2 she was clear in her plans to reorganise her time and figure out the best way to engage as fully as she could. However, the children 'do not conform' to the plan and the shifts in their patterns and the impact on her study space and time were not anticipated (Shelley's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8).

Some participants also used their experience by back-bridging to their established skills sets. Josie drew on her strengths of organisation as a self-employed entrepreneur and her experience at managing multiple projects. She calculated that she had 25+ hours per week to spare to work on her online degree.

*Of course it means having to be very organised and focused and making sure that when the 'I can't be bothered' feeling flares, I am able to shut it down. (Josie's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8).*

Josie's narrative of her liminal journey intertwined with all of her other projects that she was managing from her voluntary work, to the workmen fixing the damp patch in her kitchen, the insurance assessor and the carnival committee. Her journey to studenthood could be perceived as ranking alongside her other projects as she appeared to back-bridge and put her past to work in enabling her to negotiate this liminal space. Knowles (1980) valued the experience that adult learners brought to the educational environment, viewing it as an important resource for learners. Here is extended beyond the collaborative setting for learning to being a key tool with which to negotiate boundary encounters. Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016) referred to this as an often 'taken for granted' method (p.22) which enables students to bring

coherence to their liminal state recognising the significance and importance of their individual histories, previous experiences and particular skills sets. Josie was not alone in this as Chrissie too, approached the demands of this challenging space in the same way as the other professional development opportunities she has had throughout her working career. These have equipped her to be '*nimble enough to work through it and mature enough to ask for help when I need it*' (Chrissie's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2), an approach which enabled her to keep everything that was going on in her life organised. Joanne also drew on her past when flashpoints arose and she questioned why she was doing this degree and its value,

*It's all just the pressure of the workload kicking in, making you want to lay down and not fight. But you keep reminding yourself that you have come a long way to be where you are and as the saying goes, 'a smooth sea never made a skilful sailor'. (Joanne's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8).*

Joanne recognised in her closing journal comments (Weeks 9 and 10) how she could draw on the points in her life where she had learnt to use change to transform her own mindset, to think more clearly and work towards what she wanted to achieve. Lara similarly reflected on how, had she tried this 20 years ago, she would not have had the determination to succeed (Lara's Journal – Weeks 1 and 2).

In all of these stories, their past, when creatively mobilised, enabled their becoming (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016). It provided a rich resource of skills and experience on which they drew in order to navigate the uncertainty of this liminal space but also served as a positive reinforcement and reminder of their motivation for this change and transformation. It was an asset to their agency.

#### **4.4.5 'Holding on Tight' – Emotion in Transition**

The nature of the disorientating dilemma, the decision to participate and the early experiences of negotiating the transition to studenthood bring about new perspectives and with them an emotional dimension. Taylor and Jarecke (2009) made the link between such transitions and emotions and referred to transformative learning as '*messy, time-consuming, emotionally laden, risky and replete with particular potholes and ill-structured problems*' (p.278). The emotional dimension of this transition is experienced by part-time adult learners whatever their chosen mode of study. The participant narratives here were laden with emotion throughout this first online module; the consideration of the emotional aspects generated by

this journey are important to our professional practice in the field of online learning. Harnessing the potent energy of emotion to empower and catalyse a transformative learning experience is what we want for our students but as Mälkki and Green (2014) highlighted, transformation involves 'psychic turmoil' (p.3) and the difficulty of this journey is often neglected, particularly in the online space.

Zembylas (2008) identified how the emotions in online learning are often manifest but are expressed in ambivalent ways, as both positive and negative emotions co-exist. This is unsurprising as emotions are so specific to particular contexts that they are neither fixed nor generalisable. Charlotte summed up this ambivalence in her final journal entry,

*I'm at the emotional stage of being happy in the fact that I have completed my first 2 modules ... I feel relief as I can relax somewhat and also dread as law is coming next ... So I guess to round it up it's been a roller-coaster, but a roller-coaster I have enjoyed riding so far even with the emotions that I don't quite like. (Charlotte's Journal – Weeks 9 and 10).*

Josie similarly described her feelings as an online learner as '*swinging like a pendulum*' between the uncertainty of having made the right decision in choosing her course and the desire and motivation to do something positive for herself (Josie's Journal – Weeks 3 and 4).

Zembylas' (2008) findings alongside those of Conrad (2002) around positive emotions were reflected in this study with the excitement of being able to take the next step through the flexibility of online learning together with pride and contentment of having met the entry criteria and being accepted onto the course. Charlotte described the joy of telling her friends and family that she was doing a law degree and that she had '*finally found something that [I] may belong to*' (Charlotte's Journal – Weeks 9 and 10). Over the course of the journals, further, specific, positive emotions were generated in some cases in this study by the relationships established with the University academics as well as their peers through formal and informal discussion channels which were explored in detail in Chapter 4.4.3 and feelings of growing competence and confidence (Ali's Journal – Weeks 9 and 10). Alongside this in the last journal entries were feelings of contentment at developing their self-efficacy and self-regulation to demonstrate the skills which support their

online learning, submitting formative and summative assignments on time, not using the deferral opportunity and also starting to read ahead for the next module.

Positive emotions around the flexibility of online learning and their ability to take the next step were coupled with fear and anxiety around the unknown or unfamiliar methodology of online learning. Central to these challenging emotions was not knowing what was expected of them in terms of time commitments, action and engagement as well as the academic standard. None of the participants expressed concerns about their internet self-efficacy although Caroline and Joanne were both anxious about the reliability of their internet connection, particularly when it came to assignment submission.

Chrissie was unsure as to what external library resources were available and how to access them (Chrissie's Journal – Weeks 3 and 4), Rhiannon had researched the experience of being an online learner at length before enrolling onto the course and also took the time to ensure that she was familiar with the VLE and the important information. However, she was concerned about how to structure her essay, what '*degree standard*' looks like and whether she was referencing correctly. Rhiannon spoke of her struggle of physically not being able to show a copy of her assignment to someone for assurance that she is on the right track. She was fearful and daunted about whether her work met the standard expected. (Rhiannon's Journal – Weeks 3 and 4). Phil reported similar concerns with regard to understanding what was expected of him '*with no real-life tutor to talk to*'. The worry of this led to him struggling to sleep and he adopted some basic relaxation and breathing techniques to overcome this (Phil's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8). Phil's view, towards the end of his first module, that there is no real-life tutor to talk to was misplaced as was Rhiannon's concern that she could not show a physical copy of her assignment to someone for their view. Both provided further examples of learning which may still be constructed in ways which are familiar rather than real.

Charles' anxiety was compounded by the online environment and the fact that he could not gauge his thoughts, feelings and experience with anyone else and he saw this as the most detrimental aspect of being an online learner (Charles' Journal – Weeks 3 and 4). The participants also shared their feelings of isolation and loneliness in being an online learner. For some this was expected from the outset. Caroline wrote in her first journal entry that she expected the experience of being an online



learner to be very daunting and lonely at times but this was coupled with confidence in her own self-efficacy in working independently and time management. The negative emotions associated with expectations and the perceived challenges appear to ameliorate over time. Zembylas (2008) highlighted that these are specific emotional responses to certain aspects of being an online learner and that these become more nuanced and contextualised over time which was evidenced in these stories.

The most significant negative emotions expressed across the narratives were the stress and guilt which was experienced from the participants' attempts to balance multiple roles and responsibilities, in particular work and family. These were more challenging not only by their pervasive and variable nature but also by their persistence, with neither emotion being likely to resolve fully. David sometimes felt overwhelmed, working 50+ hours some weeks and his wife worked shifts extending over the weekend, making it rare to get time together (David's Journal- Weeks 1 and 2). Phil reflected on how his studies have become a major part of his life, taking up the majority of his time outside of work and making it hard to see friends and family. Shelley reflected on having to deal with two children over the half term break and Christmas and how this impacted on her motivation and feeling that she was, '*... in over my head*' (Shelley's Journal – Weeks 3 and 4). She recounted feelings of guilt and being torn as to whether to put the baby into childcare for an extra day to give herself the time to study, '*Study is a choice I made. Is it fair on him? I've still not decided*' (Shelley's Journal – Weeks 7 and 8). She was clearly struggling to respond adequately to the emotional demands of her multiple roles.

Squeezing online study into the metaphorical and physical heart of their already busy lives produced a range of very intense emotions (Zembylas, 2008) and these insights, although small scale, provide evidence of particular vulnerabilities which can then guide professional action for positive change.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

In this final chapter, I will revisit the research questions in the light of the findings and discussion and address how they have been answered with any considerations which I will be taking forward into my own professional practice. The findings and their implications may shape our understanding of how we approach decision-making and next steps rather than reveal concrete recommendations – providing a lens through which to have informed conversations and shape professional practice. These are considered in terms of the methodological and practical implications for teaching, learning and practitioner research as well as any institutional and broader policy considerations. I will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this study, reflecting particularly on the use of the online reflective journals as a research tool in both this study and for current considerations for online learning transitions in light of Covid-19, as well as the implications for further research. Finally, I will reflect on my own liminal journey in completing the EdD.

For practitioners working in the field of part-time, adult, online learning, the focus of supporting the early stages of this transition is predominantly framed by the institutional perspective – comprising an induction into the systems of their online programme, its VLE and the processes of the university. However, this study has revealed that the ways in which learners forge their early identity of studenthood i.e. the ways in which their enrolment on their online programme is implicated in who they are (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2010), cannot be fully appreciated from this institutional vantage point alone. The conceptual framework seeks to provide a means, for interested educator-researchers, to consider how that experience can be better conceptualised, extending beyond the institutional domain over which we exercise some oversight and control and then explored in such a way as to take a more genuine, authentic and holistic view – the interplay of the personal, institutional and circumstantial domains.

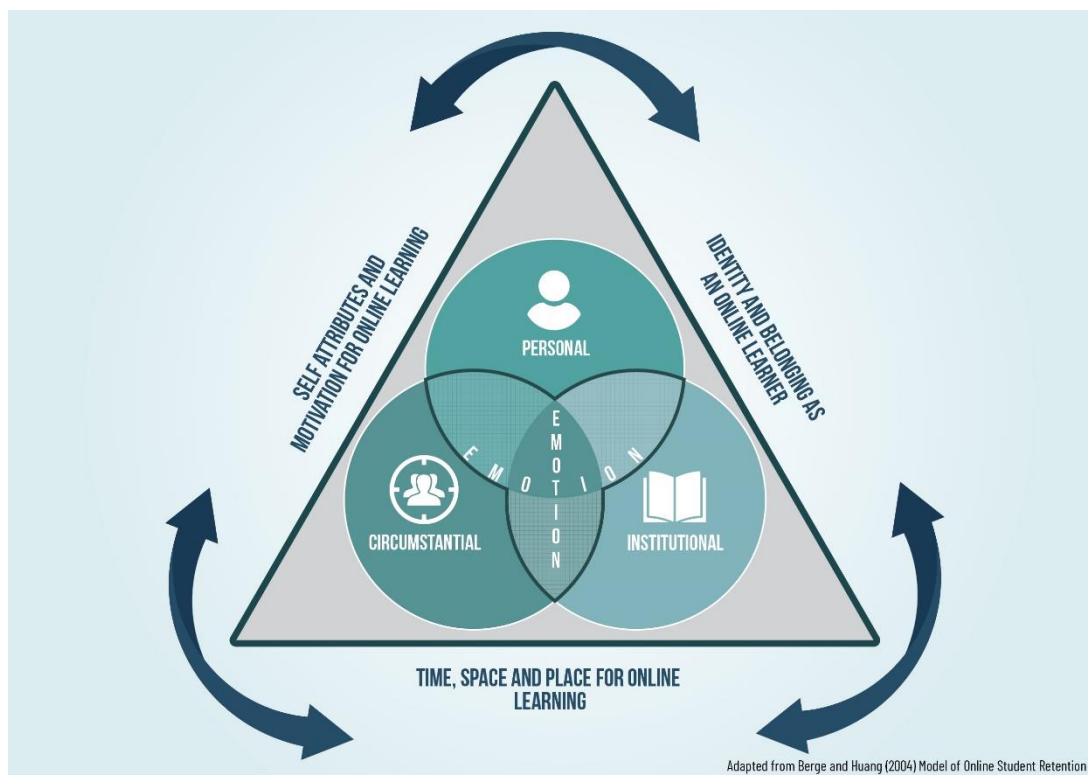


Figure 2 – The Conceptual Framework

The research questions aimed to uncover more about the context which instigates the decision to return to study as an online adult learner, to identify what characterises their early experiences, what enables and challenges them in forging their learning identity and what happens at the boundaries when their lifeworld intersects with the world of the institution.

I am mindful of my privilege in having access to these stories which would have been unlikely to emerge and be captured through any other means.

### 5.1 Exploring and conceptualising the context of becoming an adult, online learner (RQ1)

The narratives clearly illustrated the extent and the emotion of the entanglement between the decision to participate in learning and the participants' individual and quite often fraught lifeworld – a convergence of the personal, institutional and circumstantial domains. The very act of participation can lead to disorientation but the majority of the participants were already experiencing 'turbulence', 'statelessness' or 'limbo' in the circumstantial domain as a range of life events had catalysed their participation (Mezirow, 1978; Cross, 1980) into online study. For some

this was a diagnosis of a chronic health condition, the death of a close relative, a criminal conviction or a more subtle accumulation of events arising from friends pursuing their goals or professional dissatisfaction. This pre-liminal phase which brought them to participate is not the structured and ordered journey between two relatively fixed or stable conditions where the person is in a temporary state of ambiguity (Turner, 1967). The circumstances in which these participants found themselves which brought them to participate in part-time, online study were already emotional, fraught and unfamiliar.

Consideration of the decision to study online enabled me to dig deeper, beyond the pragmatic reasons of flexibility and convenience which are cited in the literature. The narratives brought the personal domain into focus, and in particular six participants shared how their chronic physical or mental health conditions or previous experiences of learning would render their participation in a face-to-face degree programme difficult, if not impossible. Cross (1981) explained how learners who have a strong desire and motivation to participate (through their self-evaluation, attitudes and transition) will seek out special opportunities and will overcome modest barriers. Cross and Zusman (1979 in Cross, 1981) ranked the major barriers to adult participation as: (1) time; (2) cost; (3) timetabling problems; (4) red tape; (5) lack of information about opportunities; (6) problems with transport/childcare; (7) lack of confidence. It is clear to see how the institutional offer of online study appears to address the concerns which lie firmly within the circumstantial and institutional domains relating to time, finances, timetabling and childcare. What Cross did not unpick (possibly subsumed under the headline of 'lack of confidence') are those factors which are rooted deeply within the personal domain which these narratives have touched upon. The extent to which these personal factors may be generalised across other student populations cannot be ascertained from this small scale qualitative study but what these numerous stories highlight is their exclusionary and often paralysing nature which could make the exercise of agency and the path to transformation practically impossible without the opportunity of online study in their cases. Ecclestone (2009) highlighted how shifts in policy making give rise to events and milestones which are experienced in a linear progression which are then reflected in the funding mechanisms and achievement frameworks. This is reflected in the current policy framing by the Office for Students (OFS) which is designed to raise and account for improvements in participation, progression and

achievement. The OFS 2020 Annual Review recognised an expectation of more demand from adults to study in higher education for retraining in 2021. This is a trend which we need to encourage, not least as a way of ensuring that a highly skilled graduate workforce can support the economy, but also as the country emerges from the global Covid-19 pandemic and adjusts to life outside the European Union. The report focuses on how higher education courses can be made more attractive and responsive to mature students and how opportunities for mature students can be improved with clearer advice, access and support. For our professional practice, these personal stories need to challenge both our assumptions around the sequential nature of progression for those learners who may need to engage, disengage and reengage (O'Brian and Toms, 2008) on account of their health conditions, personal circumstances or work/family commitments and also the measures or metrics for what is to count and be valued as engagement, progression and success in online learning. Our understanding of the important potential for agency amongst this group should be a key consideration which must not be edited to the extent which it stifles the transformative potential of these groups and narrows participation (Field, 2010; Quinn, 2010).

## **5.2 The enablers and challenges that learners perceive as shaping their emergent studenthood and their experience of negotiating liminal spaces (RQ2)**

Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) explored the idea of the transition into higher education as a liminal space; an institutionalised status that is explicitly 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1967, p.96) two other statuses. The transition is to the status of studenthood, referred to in their paper as the different ways in which enrolling on a programme is implicated in who they are (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2010). This study examined this emergent identity and the opportunities and dilemmas it presents through the lens of becoming an online learner. In this study, these liminal spaces were apparent at the interplay of the personal, institutional and circumstantial domains creating dynamic and ambivalent spaces of ambiguity and uncertainty with emotion at the thresholds.

The stories provided privileged insights into the intense, frustrating but often rewarding endeavour in the early stages of becoming an online learner, which is

apparent in this identity work. The narratives here reflected some of the aspects found in Lee, Choi and Cho's study (2019) where the experience of the early journey to studenthood for online adult learners was described as an ambiguous 'Wonderland' (p.29) - an imagined land of opportunities from the outside but one which can present some uncertainty from the inside.

Lee, Choi and Cho (2019) recognised the commitment and energy required in this formative work by their participants, in adjusting to what is expected of studenthood and how it may lead to conservative approaches and preferences to learning opportunities (Selwyn, 2011). This was reflected in one of the most ordinary, yet insightful, findings from the study which permeated the boundary of the institutional domain and explored the objects or emblems of studenthood, a rare peek into the quotidian practices of these learners early in their online studies. Their actions sought to bring some formality and structure to this first step on their journey through objects of studenthood such as textbooks, laptops and their student ID card, to draw boundaries around their physical study space but also recognised the capacity for transformation and renewal (Fawns, Aitken and Jones, 2019). For our professional practice, these are their real 'arrival stories' (Bayne, Gallagher and Lamb, 2014, p.574) and the formative identity work which subsists beyond the institutional domain and its onboarding and induction processes.

In the absence of any other direction or guidance, the participants, in this liminal space, appeared to be engaging with the traditional expectations of studenthood, with which they were most familiar (e.g. adhering to a schedule, having study place, buying textbooks) and in doing so, they started to forge their emergent identity in ways which they perceived as institutionally and socially valued and acceptable. Mezirow (1991) touched on this as a process of meaning making where order is brought to the experience by integrating it with what we know. This helps to mitigate anxiety in seeking to understand the new environment in light of previous experiences (Knowles, 1980). Blondy and Arbor (2007) warned against mistaking a lack of self-direction and independence for a desire for clear guidance around learning and assessment. This may provide pause for reflection into our professional practice as it imparts new insights into why adult online learners may prefer a standardised and familiar approach to both content and format across their modules which limits flexibility in pedagogic tasks, activities and choices. It may provide the

opportunity to further employ such habits and 'know-hows' (Lee, Choi and Cho, 2019, p.30) and remove the potential uncertainty by being able to anticipate and rely upon the standardised structures – to fix the ship on a steady course. These might not quite be the self-imposed limitations outlined by Selwyn (2011) but a more considered and bounded experience which is relational and context-specific to the early emergent identity and the disorientation which that creates, and therefore provides an opportunity for further research.

This identity work around their emergent studenthood presented further dilemmas for a number of the participants, particularly where this new status, found at the intersection of the circumstantial and institutional domains, was discongruent with other roles and identities. The stories became gendered around this theme and present clear opportunities for further research in uncovering and recounting the complex, first-hand experiences of women who engage in part-time, online learning and the tensions between studenthood and family commitments.

The journey to studenthood for part-time adult, online learners appears to present particular demands as the participant stories highlighted the challenges of never being completely separated from their previous or simultaneous ways of being (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016). The stories moved back and forth between the unfamiliar realm of studenthood, the university VLE, social media groups and institutional processes and practices into the familiarity of the workplace, home and social networks. Their journey was not a linear one of separation, transition and re-assimilation and the presence and impact of the pre-liminal on this journey cannot be underestimated – it leaks into the liminal space. Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2016) explained how these fluctuating conditions of separation are amplified by the online domain and challenge the coherence of this important identity work. In exploring how the liminars 'seek fixedness' (p.18), it is clear that such flashpoints serve to disrupt perceptions of self-efficacy and the participants' ability to self-regulate but there are positive and heartening narratives here of the 'taken for granted' (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016, p.22) enablers such as scaffolding, bracketing and back-bridging, that they use to settle and re-orientate their journeys through this liminal space.

Key to these enablers is the scaffolding (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016) provided through the support of family and friends which both gives a platform upon which

to forge early aspects of their emergent identity and also establishes congruence between the demands of the institutional and circumstantial domains (Kember, 1999). Throughout their first module the participants worked to establish relationships with both academic staff and their peers, and began to further scaffold their experience, developing a clearer understanding of what is expected of them in their emergent studenthood and bringing about a degree of stability. Whilst scaffolding work with academics was done through the formal, virtual channels provided for in the institutional domain, social media groups were informally utilised in establishing a sense of belonging amongst their peers. Through these relationships they further developed tacit 'know hows' around what was expected of them as online learners and this was valued as they were part of something that only fellow online learners could understand (Delahunty, Verenikina and Jones, 2014). What is remarkable for professional practice is how these stories highlighted the importance of the relationships which exist outside the institutional domain and how, through these relationships, networks and communities, the participants began to forge their identity of studenthood and also to co-construct their shared imagined future and their status beyond that.

The overarching theme which permeated each stage of these stories was the emotional dimension of their experience of becoming online learners. In the conceptual framework, emotion was positioned at the thresholds as a product of the interplay of the personal, institutional and circumstantial domains due to its potential to both bind and expose the fragility of these dynamic interrelationships with the pull and push of the demands in each domain.

Whilst the male participants reported the stress of the demands made by their studies, the female narratives reported feelings of guilt as their values and aspirations invested in their studenthood conflicted more starkly with their other roles and responsibilities. Ybema, Beech and Ellis (2011) identified that where the process which brings about the emergent identity is so immersed and entangled in the circumstances which incorporate these multiple roles, individuals may find themselves in a state of perpetual rather than transitional liminality. Old identities may not completely give way to the construction of new ones and they may resign themselves to negotiating that hyphen and the conflicting emotions, loyalties and obligations that it brings. The intersections of the personal, circumstantial and



institutional domains can clearly therefore create affective pockets and ambivalent emotion. Given this knowledge, our professional consideration should be how to best strike a balance between the intellectual and cognitive support provided by the academic team and relational support which scaffolds these emotional aspects of learning. Kember (1999) argued that a focus on intellectual and academic support may lead to a depreciation of other equally valid dimensions of the student as a person when the emotional aspects of their experience have a powerful impact on the learning process. This support in the affective domain is rooted in interpersonal relationships and whilst technology can replicate resources, it cannot address the fundamental requirement of skilled staff and time vested in individual students – the nature of this support cannot be easily scaled.

### **5.3 The 'New Normal' – the Impact of Covid-19 on Part-time, Adult Online Learners**

This study commenced in January 2017 but at the time of formulating the concluding comments, the Covid-19 pandemic swept across the globe. The pandemic has shaken all aspects of life, social, family, education and work, to their very core and in unforeseen and unpredictable ways. It therefore seems appropriate to speculate upon the impact on students such as those who participated in this study and the effect on the already volatile circumstantial domain. The pandemic and subsequent restrictions here in the UK would have impacted on the circumstances of at least 80% of the sample who took part in the research project and they would have faced a number of disruptive challenges to their studies against the backdrop and fear of the risk of infection.

At the height of the pandemic in April-May 2020, Beaunoyer, Dupere and Guitton (2020) estimated that there were more than three billion people globally, in isolation and, as such, the status of digital spaces began to switch from being an amenity into a necessity, serving not only to provide a means of accessing information and services but becoming one of the only remaining means for educational and social interactions to take place.

Although learners who study exclusively online may, at a superficial level, be perceived to be relatively unaffected in comparison with their face-to-face counterparts, the pandemic and restrictions here in the UK brought economic

uncertainty for individuals of a timing and on a scale rarely seen before. The government's furlough scheme sought to protect 9 million jobs by guaranteeing 80% of salary for those affected by lockdown restrictions rendering them unable to work ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)). For those in self-employment, the commitment was less certain. Adult online learners, such as those who participated in this study, have suddenly faced unemployment or economic uncertainty, having to prioritise finding means to support themselves and their families, putting earning before learning and by working longer hours and taking extra jobs to protect household incomes (Pember and Corney, 2020). Moreover, the pandemic has transformed roles, priorities and responsibilities, abruptly inverting any existing study patterns and routines which are formative in the early transitional phase of becoming an online learner. The 'pay as you go' flexibility of the University's offer saw 8% fewer existing online adult learner's paying for and releasing their first or next study module at the July 2020 and October 2020 study blocks and an accompanying increase in existing learners exercising their deferral opportunity or submitting a claim for mitigating circumstances, citing and evidencing the impact of Covid-19 in their submission.

A further impact within the circumstantial domain has been seen with the closure of schools and colleges which brought with it sudden and unforeseen additional demands on the time and space for adult learners to engage with online study – an abrupt and unforeseen intrusion into the circumstantial domain. The lockdown saw formal compulsory education move to often incoherent patterns of self-directed study and online synchronous learning as schools and colleges digitally equipped and upskilled to facilitate a more engaging experience. The physical and metaphorical boundaries explored in the findings (4.4.1 and 4.4.2), which had previously been clearly and predictably delineated by the formal education of children in school, became blurred and another emergent role of 'home educator' was abruptly added to that of parent and adult online learner.

The pandemic has further served to expose digital divides and practical challenges of PC access and connectivity as home-schooling became a competing priority with part-time, undergraduate study within the circumstantial domain. Boeren, Roumell and Roessger (2020) highlighted that many adults may be reliant on their mobile phones as their primary source of internet access at this time and often with limited

data plans. They are likely to use their data to access public services, search for jobs, or help their children with their schooling.

One source of reassurance for online learners has been the continuation of the formal and informal support networks such as those explored in the findings (4.4.3) which have flourished and the significance of belonging to the university community. The University has worked to bring opportunities to those who feel isolated to participate in a weekly social activity, sharing learners' lockdown schedules of how they are combining their studies with home-schooling alongside enhancing support for wellbeing and mental health. This work to engender a sense of belonging at such a turbulent time can only serve to reduce isolation, to create camaraderie, or simply to build scaffolding and support to reduce anxiety and manage uncertainty. The thread of relatedness or connectedness (Thomas, 2012) has proved more vital than ever.

The picture amongst new applicants to online programme is very different with the pandemic prompting a rush of new adult learners into online courses and the University seeing a 28% increase in new student enrolments in October 2020 (compared to October 2019). This is mirrored across a number of online providers and it may appear that online pedagogies and hybrid learning spaces are perceived to exist beyond the immediate reach of the Covid-19 virus and restrictions which have brought about such circumstances and the imminent need to upskill or reskill.

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on part-time, adult online learners and the sector as a whole will unfold in the coming months and years. It is likely that the crisis will force a review of adult education more holistically and online learning's role within that. As James and Theriault (2020) highlighted, when the informal, non-formal, and formal structures of adult education engage with external social forces they can play a constructive and dynamic role and this is even more important in such unprecedented times.

#### **5.4 What the Study has Achieved**

As educator-researchers working in the field of adult learning, we need to understand the less tangible aspects which instigate the decision to participate in a part-time, online degree and also the participant's first-hand narratives of forging a

new identity as an online learner alongside their demanding work and family commitments. I feel that examining the liminal experiences of students through a narrative framework can help us to understand the dilemmas and opportunities that they face, which cannot be fully understood at arm's length and from the institutional viewpoint alone.

This study makes a contribution to knowledge through extending the educational writing of liminal spaces and the concept of boundary encounters into the experiences of online learners and their emergent studenthood. The work in this field emphasises the importance of the phase of separation from the structural obligations of work, family and existing social networks if only for a short while. For online, adult learners, the notion of separation needs to be understood very differently, as there is no obvious physical separation as they inhabit concurrent, multiple roles and this can present new challenges. Through this lens, the study has adapted Berge and Huang's (2004) model of student retention to consider the liminal experiences of part-time, adult online learners at the boundaries where their lifeworld (the personal and circumstantial domains) intersect with that of the university (the institutional domain). The study also adds to the writing on the tools which liminars employ to negotiate such spaces.

This work has also examined in detail why students choose to study online beyond the headlines of convenience and flexibility. This study revealed that for some online learners it provides an important mode of study which meets their own specific needs and preferences which are deeply individual and rooted in the personal domain and which would otherwise not be met.

Finally, a key driver for the study was to employ online methodological innovation and creativity for the benefit of educator-researchers thereby making a contribution to professional practice. This was achieved through the construction of a private online space for reflective journaling which was barrier-free, immersed within the learning experience and was therefore congruent with it through O365 OneNote. This innovative approach provided both temporality and situatedness to capture states of flux and provided insights into how change and adaptation are brought about through the agency of the participants.

### 5.4.1 Methodological Implications of the Study

The use of online, reflective journals as the key data collection tool in this study was designed to provide an effective method for educator-researchers which was congruent to the online learning environment (Burton and Goldsmith, 2002) and provided data in a format which was set for analysis without transcription. The method proved itself to be far more valuable and powerful than to serve just as a data collection tool and consequently may have impacted positively on the research environment as experienced by my participants. Some of the early narratives reflected the nature of the power dynamics at play between myself as researcher, my participants and the purpose for which they were telling their stories. Joanna, Charles and Josie all apologised for their long posts in their Week 1 and 2 entries, whilst Chrissie ended her first post with 'Does that capture what you're looking for?' However, over the course of the study the power balance appeared to shift as some participants effectively started to employ the reflective journaling as a further tool which enabled them to steady themselves and 'seek fixedness'. Lisa's final comment was how she enjoyed participating in the reflective journals. In her last journal entry, Joanne remarks,

*It was a pleasure participating in this journal ... [it] was like my ... diary helping me to pour into its pages at most needed times. I would be [sic] so elated to give my responses. I liked the phases in which they came, so timely. (Joanne's Journal – Weeks 9 and 10).*

Phil, in his final post, also evaluated how taking part in the journal helped him on his path,

*I would never have put my thoughts about the course down on paper but it has helped me to clear my head at times when there was a lot of information to take in as well as remind [sic] of the long term benefits of taking this course and attaining a degree. (Phil's Journal – Weeks 9 and 10).*

The space provided by the online journals was a point for reflection and making sense of the dilemmas presented by the challenge of forging studenthood in the online domain. This duality and mutuality of a space of data collection intermeshing with one of personal reflection, the two constituents distinctively yet at once, created something new (Cohen, Nørgård and Mor, 2020). Such an approach through online journaling afforded a valuable space in an unfamiliar landscape within which agency and a degree of ownership could be exercised permitting honest and profound

exposure, genuine reflective writing and the possibility of self-exploration (Biberman-Shalev, 2018).

Tools such as reflective journaling alongside a collaborative approach with students as partners may provide vital insights for traditional, face-to-face, universities in assessing the effectiveness of their move to online learning and what the 'new normal' may look like in response to Covid-19. Such an approach also provides space for students to explore the abrupt disorientation brought about by the sudden restrictions, the loss of their academic and peer networks in their familiar form, and the social aspects of being, living, studying and working on campus. Students also feel vulnerable to the threat of the virus for themselves as well as their friends and families – a factor which Slick (2020) highlighted as a key consideration for any institution before considering any return to campus. Slick (2020) likened the loss of campus life to the emotion of the grieving process and urged that students are given space before envisioning what the future of their learning at a distance may be and how they might seek fixedness through re-scaffolding with their existing networks in the new learning environment.

#### **5.4.2 Practical Implications of the Study for Teaching and Learning**

As the study explored the pre-liminal as well as the liminal phase of the experience of the participants, it provides fresh insights for our professional practice and the disorientating dilemmas which may have brought these adults back into study through the means of an online programme. This extends beyond the institutional domain to which professional perspectives are usually limited and into the circumstantial domain. A key consideration is how we effectively support the early onboarding of adult learners. In my own organisation, early student support work is often performative and focused around learners finding their feet within the VLE, understanding how they will learn, how to access the academic resources which will support them and understanding the formal processes of assessment and how that is regulated. The participant data did not present any of these factors as problematic beyond the initial journal posts which may be an indication of a job well done or could suggest that these are not major barriers to be overcome. The pastoral support provision needs to extend that reach beyond the institutional domain, and to do so from the point of enrolment, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the circumstantial domain, what brought this learner to participate and how this transition might be best supported and given some early stability at this turbulent

time. The importance of such support is brought more clearly into focus with the increase in enrolments on account of the Covid-19 pandemic and the accompanying and unprecedented volatility of the circumstantial domain.

The narratives also clearly showed how, in the absence of guidance and direction from the University, the participants demonstrated a tendency to construct their emergent identity of studenthood in traditional ways, often influenced by past experiences of face-to-face learning and anticipating what may be acceptable to the University. The challenge for our professional practice is how we move forward, supporting our learners in building self-efficacy to shift their traditional constructs of studenthood and learning to embrace the opportunities afforded by the online domain and ultimately, the opportunity for them to reinvent and re-orientate themselves. Morgan (2011) highlighted how the pre-arrival, arrival and orientation phases of the transition can be utilised as early touchpoints for this formative work on setting expectations.

Shifting well-established perceptions of what studenthood traditionally looks like can only be gradual and incremental, allowing students to play with what might work for them whilst recognising that events in the circumstantial domain may require some constant re-adjustment and orientation. There must be clear institutional messages around regulatory provisions (such as deferral or mitigation opportunities) being a tool to support success rather than a last resort of failure, and case studies showing new constructs of how other students have approached their learning – what works for them and what doesn't. Without direction and guidance as to what is possible, the pull of the circumstantial domain may prove too strong, and old perceptions of what is valued and accepted in more traditional educational settings take hold and imagined barriers are put in place. The challenge for our professional practice is one of consistency, ensuring that at all touchpoints across the early experience, opportunities to leverage the affordances of such hybrid spaces serve to scaffold, build and support shifting learner perspectives, habits and 'know hows' – the pull of the 'old' ways of being is not the exclusive preserve of our students. These narratives show that whilst this may be a time of uncertainty and disorientation it is coupled with a great deal of energy, potential and individual endeavour and the opportunity to build confidence and shift perceptions.

The study also highlighted how online learning can be a bridge to transformation for learners facing challenges within the personal domain, such as disability, illness or mental health conditions, who consequently feel excluded from more traditional, face-to-face study. The need to engage, disengage and reengage (O'Brian and Toms, 2008) amongst adult learners brings the fifth phase of Morgan's SET Model (2011) into focus and is highly significant on account of the pandemic. Whilst the re-orientation and re-induction phase focuses on students returning to study after a calendar break in the academic year and the move between levels of study, there may well be lessons to be learned for part-time adult students who return after a period of disengagement. The findings here may be of significance to our practice in better understanding and encouraging those who do not yet have the courage to access HE because of fragile learner identities (Crossan *et al.* 2003). This, in itself, can help us put structures in place which may help those marginalised learners to engage with education.

#### **5.4.3 Wider Policy Considerations Raised by the Study**

One final consideration which returns into view (Ecclestone, 2009) sits at policy level – both institutionally and nationally. That is the question of how, as practitioners, we can reconcile these narratives of part-time, adult learners with a linear approach to milestones and measures of value, progression and achievement. Driving policy in this area is the view that better management of educational transitions is crucial in breaking cycles of social and economic disadvantage (Ecclestone, 2009) a view which is sustained in the OFS Annual Review (2020) and the current and unfolding pandemic landscape. Such challenges are brought sharply into view at an institutional level where, paradoxically, the measure and trends of progression may fall short of national benchmarks as adult learners have utilised the deferral or mitigation provisions which have enabled their participation from the outset. At an institutional level, managing the student journey or experience has to be more than facilitating a change in context and measuring success against linear achievement milestones. If the potential of part-time, adult online learning is a means to address barriers to learning, training and work transitions (OECD, 2020), it demands a better understanding of how learners forge their identity, progress emotionally and socially between the stages of their learning and navigate the complex interrelationship between the personal, circumstantial and emotional domains – the process of 'becoming' rather than 'being' (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996; Ecclestone, 2009). Sissel,



Hansman and Kasworm (2001) positioned this as creating and promoting a privileged space for adult learners by institutions working in the interests of all learners, to develop new understandings of adult life and work through our research, adult learning through our research-informed approach to teaching and learning and by foregrounding the valued role of adults in our universities. Commitment to ongoing action in these areas will serve to enrich access, support and learning experiences for part-time, adult learners pursuing online undergraduate study.

### **5.5 Limitations of the Research**

My research interests lie in the liminal experiences of adult learners as they embark upon online undergraduate study – this is at the heart of the work of the University. This gives rise to me being in both a privileged and challenging position as an educator-researcher. I am no longer objectively external to the research setting but am firmly rooted within it. Such familiarity presents a common paradox and unique challenge for practitioner research where it is not the case that we ‘know too little’ but rather than we ‘know too much’ (van Manen, 1984, p.46). The implications of being an insider to the research setting bring with it a distinct set of assets and liabilities (Merton and Storer, 1973) which are unique to me and my role within the practice setting. The privileges of access to information and conversance with language and behaviours need to be offset against informant bias and subjectivity. However, this is mitigated by the fact that my experiences and knowledge were helpful in sensitising me to the themes and issues which were apparent in this study. My insider position also gave me access to the participants in a congruous online environment and the opportunity to inquire in a more meaningful and insightful way and a sharing of common language and repertoire. This resulted in trust, openness and honesty in the reflective journal entries and Skype interviews.

At the time of formalising the conclusions to this study (April 2020) 10 out of the 15 participants remained enrolled and actively engaged in their studies with two already having moved onto Level 6 modules – progressing more quickly than the anticipated part-time study rate. At 67% this presents a higher continuation rate than the University average (42%) for part-time online learners, and it could be argued that the purposeful nature of the sampling for this study was attractive to those students who already had a confident level of internet self-efficacy and for whom participation in an online reflective journal was unproblematic. Tanner, Noser,

and Totaro (2009) suggested that this may be at the expense of an appreciation of the challenges of online learning and the problem that some adult learners may not be sufficiently and suitably prepared for online study in terms of their readiness, skills and capability to access resources. This may therefore skew some of the findings in the area of readiness for online learning which featured in some of the literature but was not evident in the findings from this study and there may be further narratives to explore which may present methodological challenges in terms of access. The findings from the sample size are not generalisable, however Burgess, Sieminski and Arthur (2009) pointed out that greater importance could be given to the relevance of findings to professional practice and how useful they are to others in similar situations.

## 5.6 Conclusion

This study has shown the extent to which the early experiences of adult learners returning to online, part-time study are dynamic, complex and multifaceted. The influence and pull of structures which exist within the circumstantial domain will be the volatile variable which throws up risk, challenge and dilemma as learners find themselves 'betwixt and between'. The title of this thesis makes reference to contrapuntal melodies which may encapsulate the experiences of these participants. These stories suggest an experience which is quite removed from the seamless harmony of combining work and family with the often-marketed flexibility and convenience of online study. Instead the interplay of the lifeworld with the institutional domain sits at the counterpoint – an interdependent relationship but two independent rhythms.

These narratives show above all else, the tremendous will, energy and desire for change and transformation even if this is only to steady the self in the early phases. The risk, for us as educator-researchers, is that we can see, understand, support and facilitate aspects of that change but must be acutely aware of the dominant rhythm of the structures in the circumstantial domain and their potential to reinforce old constructs. As Maher and Tetrault (1994) contended,

'when we come to see and understand the workings of positional dynamics in their lives, to see them through their 'third eye,' then they can begin to challenge them and to create change.' (p.203)

The global pandemic makes our position, as professionals in the field of online education, more significant than ever. The unsettling and disruption to academics and students alike positions the future direction of online learning on a knife edge – we don't know what the future of online higher education will look like or its impact on learners and communities. Will it be driven forward by those of knowledge, understanding and passion or by others who lack such interest (Coates, 2021)?

The work raises opportunities for further research, in particular into the impact of Covid-19 on part-time, adult online learners due to the unforeseen and violent unsettling of the circumstantial domain and consequential creep into the personal domain. The issues raised by the gendered narratives around discongruent identities and the impact on emotion also merit deeper exploration. The concept of liminal spaces provides an opportunity to explore other educational transitions such as onboarding and induction, disengagements and reengagements with learning, work placements and experience and professional legal identities under the new qualifying framework.

My pressing concern, for now, is the hidden nature of this formative work which I have had the privilege to glimpse. The fact that my participants have given not only their time, but have shared personal and difficult experiences with me is not taken lightly. I am aware that this is my award of an EdD and that their contribution lies in these pages but is otherwise unrecognised.

In terms of a professional doctorate I hope that this thesis will allow further and deeper insights into the online educational experiences of these adults and how their journeys are navigated, negotiated, influenced and achieved. Both the findings and the method separately constitute credible publications for both academic and professional readers.

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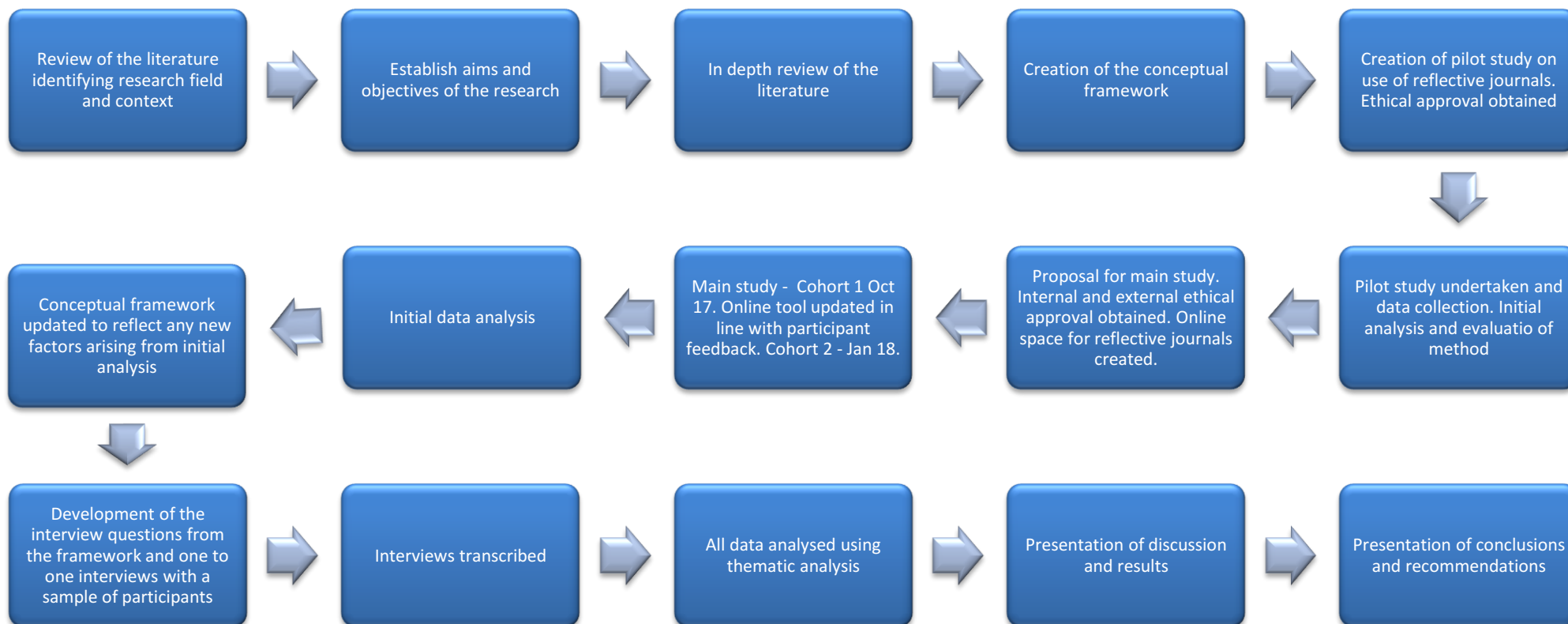
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## Appendix 1 The Research Process



## Appendix 2 – Mapping of Reflective Journal Prompts to the Research Questions

Two key data collection tools were identified to balance both innovation with rigour; online reflective journals, online interviews. These tools provided points of triangulation across the project and in key areas of interest and consent was also sought to draw in the student application form for study at the university if further clarification was necessary. The research questions and data sources are mapped below:

	<b>Reflective Journal Prompt</b>	<b>Justification</b>	<b>Research Question</b>
1 Weeks 1-2	Tell me more about your decision to participate in an online course for your degree. What motivated you to study online for your degree? What do you expect it to be like? What challenges do you expect to face along the way?	This follows on from the initial scoping exercise to recruit the sample from the student blog induction activity. It revisits the question of reasons for participation now that students have commenced study on the first module. It also probes anticipated expectations and challenges which students may have been less comfortable to share in the public space.	1(i) and 1(ii) Why do adults choose to participate in online undergraduate study?
2 Weeks 3-4	In your post this week I would like you to focus on your own skills and attributes. You've now had three weeks of studying on your module. Do you feel that you are well prepared for online study? Which skills do you think that you will need to develop further and how do you think you will go about that? Give any examples of challenges that you have faced and how you have overcome these. Were there any big surprises in being an online student? Do you find your module interesting and are you enjoying it?	This blog post will follow a period of familiarisation and engagement with the materials in the VLE and possible a first Adobe Connect session with peers and the module tutor. It aims to explore aspects of the personal domain (Berge and Huang, 2004); in particular personal skills and attributes within the context of online learning. Social and cultural aspects may also be apparent as a dimension of the personal domain and these will further clarify the scope of that domain in this context. Ideas of interest and enjoyment are introduced as two of the strands of Kahu's (2014) aspect of the affective domain of engagement. The prompt also probes nudging and threshold crossing in exploring how any challenges were overcome.	2 What factors do learners perceive as shaping these landscapes and how do they invoke their individual agency to negotiate boundary encounters. (i) What factors do learners perceive as enablers/barriers to their engagement in online undergraduate study and how can these be conceptualised?

<p>3 Weeks 5-6</p>	<p>You are now halfway through your first module. How do you feel that you have settled in as a student of The University? Are you clear on what the university expects of you as an online student? Are the University's processes and practices clear and easy to follow? What about using the VLE? Give any examples of challenges that you have faced. How did they make you feel? How did you overcome these and what help and support did you receive?</p>	<p>This blog post probes the institutional domain and the concept of transition as navigating institutional norms and procedures (Ecclestone, 2009). Ideas of belonging are introduced as one of the strands of Kahu's (2014) aspect of the affective domain of engagement. Again, the prompt also probes nudging and threshold crossing in exploring how any challenges were overcome.</p>	<p>2 What factors do learners perceive as shaping these landscapes and how do they invoke their individual agency to negotiate boundary encounters.</p> <p>(i) What factors do learners perceive as enablers/barriers to their engagement in online undergraduate study and how can these be conceptualised?</p>
<p>4 Weeks 7-8</p>	<p>So how are your studies fitting in with 'real life'? How do they fit with your work, family and social commitments? Have there been any major flashpoints in these first eight weeks of study? How did they make you feel? Did you manage to overcome them and how?</p>	<p>This blog post probes the circumstantial domain and its interplay with the institutional and personal. The context of engagement is explored and an emotional dimension is introduced as part of this. Tensions are explored through key flashpoints. This is a pivotal time as students will be starting to prepare the assessment for the module.</p>	<p>2 What factors do learners perceive as shaping these landscapes and how do they invoke their individual agency to negotiate boundary encounters.</p> <p>(i) What factors do learners perceive as enablers/barriers to their</p>

			engagement in online undergraduate study and how can these be conceptualised?
5 Weeks 9-10	In your first four posts to the blog, you have written about three different aspects of life as an online student; the personal aspect, the institutional aspect and your own individual circumstances. In your final post I would like you to write about the emotional aspect of being an online student. What have been your thoughts and feelings with regard to your engagement with the materials, your tutor and your peers on the module? What have been the emotional 'highs and lows' over the past 10 weeks? Have there been any critical incidents and how did they affect your engagement with the module? How are you feeling now? Will you be submitting your module assessment or have you chosen to defer?	This final blog post synthesises the previous student responses in terms of domains and probes the emotional intersections between them in terms of highs and lows. This will facilitate initial mapping of frontiers and flashpoints across the interplaying domains.	2 What factors do learners perceive as shaping these landscapes and how do they invoke their individual agency to negotiate boundary encounters.  (i) and 2(ii) How do learners negotiate frontiers and flashpoints?

### Appendix 3 – Mapping of Interview Questions to Research Questions

Interview Question	Justification	Research Question
<p>How would you describe yourself?</p> <p>Tell me about your experience of education so far?</p> <p>Can you describe the moment that it first occurred to you to return to study and do a degree?</p> <p>What was happening in your life at that time?</p> <p>What did you do next?</p> <p>What did your friends and family say? Were they supportive?</p> <p>How would you describe your feelings about going to university?</p> <p>What did you hope to achieve?</p> <p>Were there any obstacles that you had to overcome before you enrolled on your course?</p>	<p>This set of interview questions revisit in more personal detail, the reasons for participation aligned to Cross’s Chain of Response Model (1981) and also starts to scope out the circumstantial domain by exploring the landscape at the point of the decision to participate. These questions also start to track the thread of emotion through the journey right from the outset.</p>	<p>1(i) and 1(ii)</p> <p>Why do adults choose to participate in online undergraduate study?</p>

<p>When you started your online student induction and first module, was it what you expected?</p> <p>Probe: Harder? Easier? Surprising? In what way?</p> <p>How did you feel? Did those feelings stay the same or did they change?</p> <p>If so when and why?</p> <p>Did you question your decision to do a degree or your decision to study online?</p> <p>Did your friends and family ask how you were getting on with your studies? What did you say to them?</p>	<p>This set of interview questions aim to explore in more personal detail aspects. It aims to explore aspects of the personal domain and those initial encounters with the institutional domain; in particular personal skills and attributes within the context of online learning. Social and cultural aspects may also be apparent as a dimension of the personal domain and these will further clarify the scope of that domain in this context.</p> <p>Ideas of interest and enjoyment are introduced as two of the strands of Kahu's (2014) aspect of the affective domain of engagement.</p> <p>The prompt also probes nudging and threshold crossing in exploring how any challenges were overcome.</p>	<p>2</p> <p>What factors do learners perceive as shaping these landscapes and how do they invoke their individual agency to negotiate boundary encounters.</p> <p>(i)</p> <p>What factors do learners perceive as enablers/barriers to their engagement in online undergraduate study and how can these be conceptualised?</p>
<p>Who did you engage with at The University? Tutor? Student Support? Study Skills Tutor? Librarian?</p> <p>How have you engaged with your fellow students on your module? What means have you used to do this? Have they worked?</p>	<p>This set of questions probe the institutional domain and the concept of transition as navigating institutional norms and procedures (Ecclestone, 2009).</p> <p>Ideas of belonging are introduced as one of the strands of Kahu's (2014) aspect of the affective domain of engagement.</p>	<p>2</p> <p>What factors do learners perceive as shaping these landscapes and how do they invoke their individual agency</p>

<p>Is there a way that you would have liked to engage with your peers and the university which you have not been given the opportunity to do?</p> <p>Do you feel like a student of The University? Why/Why not?</p> <p>What one thing could The University have done to support you better?</p>	<p>Again, the prompt also probes nudging and threshold crossing in exploring how any challenges were overcome.</p>	<p>to negotiate boundary encounters.</p> <p>(i)</p> <p>What factors do learners perceive as enablers/barriers to their engagement in online undergraduate study and how can these be conceptualised?</p>
<p>Tell me about a critical incident which has happened since you started your studies. <i>A critical incident need not be a dramatic event: usually it is an incident which has significance for you. It is often an event which made you stop and think, or one that raised questions for you</i></p> <p>How did it impact on you as an online learner? How did that make you feel?</p> <p>How did you work through it and who helped you?</p>	<p>This set of questions probe the circumstantial domain and its interplay with the institutional and personal. The context of engagement is explored and an emotional dimension is introduced as part of this. Tensions are explored through key flashpoints or boundary encounters. This is a pivotal time as students will be starting to prepare the assessment for the module.</p>	<p>2</p> <p>What factors do learners perceive as shaping these landscapes and how do they invoke their individual agency to negotiate boundary encounters.</p> <p>(i)</p> <p>What factors do learners perceive as enablers/barriers to</p>



		their engagement in online undergraduate study and how can these be conceptualised?
<p>How would you describe your journey as an adult online learner over the last three months since you started on your degree?</p> <p>How would you describe the emotional journey?</p> <p>How would you describe your 'will to learn'?</p> <p><i>Will to learn : Energy within that drives you forward and gives you courage. Gives a sense of purpose and future. Steadies the ship in times of trouble. Sustains (Barnett, 2007)</i></p> <p>When has it been at its most fragile? Why?</p> <p>When has it been most challenged? Why?</p> <p>How is life different now to the first time that you thought about and took steps to become an online learner?</p>	<p>This final set of questions synthesise the previous student responses in terms of domains and probes the emotional intersections between them in terms of highs and lows (boundary encounters – see above). This will facilitate initial mapping of frontiers and flashpoints across the interplaying domains. Participants are also encouraged to reflect upon the landscape now and at that earlier point when then decided to become an online learner.</p>	<p>2</p> <p>What factors do learners perceive as shaping these landscapes and how do they invoke their individual agency to negotiate boundary encounters.</p> <p>(ii)</p> <p>How do learners negotiate frontiers and flashpoints?</p>

### **Participant Information**

#### **Using reflective accounts to explore the factors which shape the experiences of adult learners in undertaking online undergraduate study**

##### **Your Invitation:**

My name is Kara Johnson and I am the Director of Undergraduate Programmes here at the University.

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or would like more information.

This study will use reflective responses by email to capture the story of your educational journey so far and as you begin your degree online.

The study aims to explore the factors which shape the experiences of adult learners, like you, as they enter online undergraduate study. The work aims to give a holistic insight into your first-hand experiences to uncover more about what makes you unique, what motivates and challenges you on your online journey and what happens when your world intersects with that of the online university.

The study will address the following questions:

- Why do adults choose to participate in online undergraduate study?
- What factors do learners perceive as enablers/barriers to their engagement in online undergraduate study?
- How are these be conceptualised?
- How do learners negotiate frontiers and flashpoints?

##### **Why Have I Been Invited?**

All January 2018 intake students studying on a full undergraduate degree in the Law, Psychology and Health portfolio have been invited to participate in the study.

##### **Do I Have to Take Part?**

Taking part in the study is completely voluntary. Participation, or non-participation in this study will not have any effect on your progress or studies with the University. It is therefore up to you to decide.

If you choose to participate in the study, you will need to read this Participant Information carefully and then complete the Consent form, both of which are found in the Welcome section of your reflective journal.

### **What Will I Have To Do?**

Approximately every two weeks between 31<sup>st</sup> Jan 2018 and 31<sup>st</sup> April 2018, you will be asked to complete a short reflection on your experiences so far. You will be asked to write this in your reflective journal and it will be completely confidential. There will be a total of five reflections on different themes prompted across this first module. Each journal entry should be around 500 words but this may be shorter or longer depending on your thoughts at the time.

### **What Are The Possible Benefits of Taking Part?**

We cannot promise the study will help you but the information we get from the study will help to increase the understanding of why adults choose to study online and how best to support them in their educational journey. This will inform our future inductions and programme developments.

### **Can I Withdraw from the Project?**

You can withdraw your consent even after completion of the data collection procedure up to the point of data analysis if you wish to do so.

### **Confidentiality & Data Protection**

The data collected will be anonymised for presentation and further information which may allude to the identity of any participant will be excluded from publication and public discussion. The Data Protection Act 1998 will be complied with in accordance with University policy.

### **Who Can I Contact For More Information?**

If you have any questions about the pilot research project, please email me [kjohnson@XXX.ac.uk](mailto:kjohnson@XXX.ac.uk)

## Appendix 5 Interview Protocol

### Introduction

My name is Kara Johnson and I have worked with the University for the last 11 years. My work currently is as Director of Programmes for Law, Psychology and Health but my keen interest and focus of research is to understand better the experiences of adult learners in the online environment.

I started to study for my Doctorate with Wolverhampton University in 2015 and this interview forms part of my research study for that thesis.

The general aim of this research study is to examine why adult learners choose online study and to explore the experiences of these learners in embarking upon their online undergraduate degree. In particular I will be focusing on how your online studies intersect and interact with different aspects of your life, such as work and family, and your own personality and preferences for learning. I hope to explore with you both highs and lows; moments of opportunity and elation alongside moments of tension and drama. There are no right or wrong answers and I would like you to be comfortable to say what you think and how you really feel.

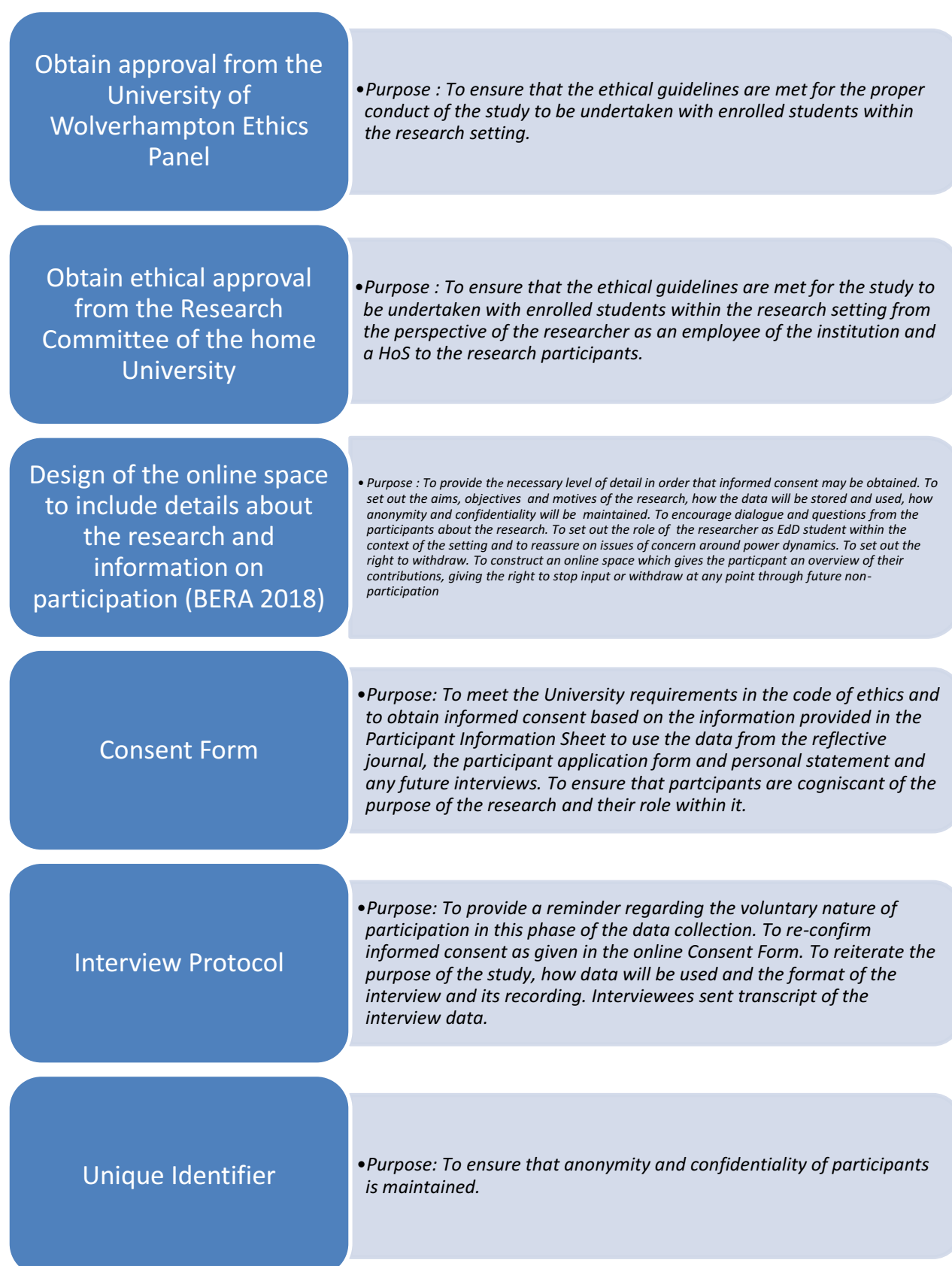
### Recording

If it is okay with you, I will be recording our conversation. The purpose of this is so that I can get all the details but at the same time be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. I assure you that all your comments will remain confidential. I will be compiling a report which will contain all students' comments without any reference to specific individuals.

### Consent

You have completed the Consent Form for this interview in O365 forms.

## Appendix 6 Ethics Approval Process



## Appendix 7 – Participant Pen Portraits

Name	Personal Portrait	HEQ	Location	Award
<p>Joanne <i>Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Joanne is 25 years old and lives in the Caribbean. She works as a secretary and her ambition is to achieve both personal and academic success in order to enhance her life. She dreams of becoming a successful attorney, and is interested in criminal law, corporate law or international law.</p> <p>She chose the Qualifying Law course because this will bring her one step closer to achieving both her career goal and her childhood dream of obtaining an undergraduate degree from a UK educational establishment.</p> <p>She chose the University because it was very highly recommended as a reputable distance learning institution by several of her friends and because the Qualifying Law course offers her the perfect opportunity to begin pursuing her goal: to become a professional attorney in today's environment.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: She, her, hers</p>	<p>HE Diploma (NARIC equivalent)</p>	<p>Overseas</p>	<p>LLB</p>
<p>Philippa <i>Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Philippa is 34 years old and lives in the south of England. She is currently working as an Early Years Practitioner and studying for her Early Years Educator Level 3 qualification. She dreams of becoming a Child Psychologist and has spent the past 18 years working with children of all ages and has learned a lot about child behaviour, but she wants to find out more. This, combined with a love of writing and research, is why she has decided to pursue her child psychology studies with the University. Philippa embraces adventure and challenge, and never gives up. She always gives her best and she is determined, above all, to make a contribution to child development.</p> <p>The other inspiration in Philippa's life is her family, and she has chosen to study with the University so that her family can remain in London, where they currently reside.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: She, her, hers</p>	<p>NVQ L3 Diploma</p>	<p>UK</p>	<p>BSc Psy</p>

<p>Ali <i>Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Ali is 33 years old and lives in the south of England. For the past 18 years, Ali has worked primarily in hospitality, but a fascination with psychology and sociology fuels her lifelong dream of achieving a career in government, where she hopes to influence policies to improve the lives of others within the education sector. Ali feels that the university course in psychology and sociology will help her to pursue her goal.</p> <p>Her personal qualities and her education to date provide a good grounding for her chosen career path. She is an inquisitive and analytical person with a passion for self-development and a desire to instigate positive change in the world. She enjoys online debating and has an interest in philosophy and politics.</p> <p>Previous qualifications in social work with children and families, psychology and counselling skills have provided Ali with a valuable insight into how the system works and how she might best help the vulnerable in society, whilst also igniting her interest in the study of the human mind.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: She, her, hers</p>	<p>NVQ L4 Diploma</p>	<p>UK</p>	<p>BSc Psy</p>
<p>Shelley <i>Online Reflective Journal and Online Interview</i></p>	<p>Shelley is 35 years old and lives in the southeast of England. She currently works within the care/legal aid sector of family law, but has always held a fascination with both law and psychology. Her childhood dream of becoming a barrister became less clear-cut as her interest in human interaction and psychology grew.</p> <p>Following a successful secondary school education, Shelley chose to pursue a career in the banking industry, but for the past 8 years, she has worked within the law. It was during this time that she realised that she could fulfil her desire to work within both law and psychology if she could obtain the correct qualifications. This gave her the impetus to apply for the law and psychology degree at the University.</p> <p>As a busy working mother of two young children, her planning and organisational skills are exceptional. She is a dedicated person who considers her choices carefully and takes pride in seeing things through to completion. Shelley believes that these qualities will give her a good foundation for the course.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: She, her, hers</p>	<p>GCSE (with relevant work experience)</p>	<p>UK</p>	<p>LLB</p>
<p>Charlotte</p>	<p>Charlotte is 29 years old and lives in London. Following her secondary school education, Charlotte completed a GNVQ in Business Studies and pursued a career in recruitment. Her</p>	<p>GNVQ L3 Diploma</p>	<p>UK</p>	<p>LLB</p>

<p><i>Online Reflective Journal and Online Interview</i></p>	<p>ambition and determination fast-tracked her from an administrator role to that of a successful recruitment consultant.</p> <p>It was whilst studying for a Level 3 Diploma in Law (which she completed with distinction last year) that Charlotte felt her eyes were truly opened to the law. A confident debater, Charlotte loved role-playing legal scenarios with her peers. Her interest was piqued and she wanted to learn more.</p> <p>Charlotte wants to study for a law degree with the University because she is passionate about the law and would like a career in the law. She likes to be challenged, and the ever-changing nature of law appeals to her thirst for learning. Ultimately, Charlotte feels that a career in the law would make her feel at her best and at her happiest.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: She, her, hers</p>			
<p><i>Chrissie Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Chrissie is 50 years old and lives in London. She has a strong background in Human Resources and strategic support and is currently enjoying a role on the global leadership team of an international bank. She is responsible for the execution, creation, development and delivery of strategies at a senior management level.</p> <p>She is extremely passionate about human resources and the impact that we have on organisations and the people in them, which is why the human resource management and psychology course at the University appeals to her. It fuels her interest in how human resources and psychology intertwine.</p> <p>Chrissie also feels that the degree at the University will help to provide her with the knowledge, skills and perspective to achieve her goal of furthering her career as an HR professional and leader. She chose the University because of its good reputation and the fact that she can further her education whilst continuing to maintain success in her career.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: She, her, hers</p>	<p>GCSE (with relevant work experience)</p>	<p>UK</p>	<p>BA HRM &amp; Psy</p>
<p><i>David Online Reflective Journal and Online Interview</i></p>	<p>David is 34 years old and lives in the southwest of England. Following A-Level studies, David pursued a career within the ambulance service. He rose quickly through the ranks, progressing from 999 Call Taker to Control Manager within the ambulance service.</p> <p>David's work with the ambulance service led him to a managerial role within service improvement for the control room, but frustration at economic restraints led to David accepting an external role. Here he could put his passion for patient care first, and was able</p>	<p>A Level</p>	<p>UK</p>	<p>BA HCMgt</p>



	<p>to drive forward improvements within the sector. He is currently working as a manager, but his ambition is to progress to more senior leadership roles.</p> <p>David would like to obtain a degree to both give him the qualification to achieve his career aspirations, but also to help him to develop his existing skills and to help him to learn new ones, to allow him to reach his full potential.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: He, him, his</p>			
<p>Caroline <i>Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Caroline is 24 years old and lives in the northwest of England. It was whilst enjoying a college debate on 'Why criminals commit their crimes?' that Caroline's fascination with psychology was born. Her analytical inquisitive mind drove her curiosity about the complexity of human behaviour, and she wanted to find out more.</p> <p>Caroline's dream is to pursue a career in cognitive behavioural therapy. To date, she has always worked in sectors that help others, and it is this wish to help those in need, and personal reasons too, that motivate Caroline to obtain a psychology degree in order to achieve a career within the counselling sector.</p> <p>Caroline's personal traits are highly conducive to her chosen career path. A good listener, she often helps others to overcome emotional difficulties, offering non-judgemental advice and support.</p> <p>Caroline is eager to learn and relishes the new theories and challenges that a degree in psychology will bring. Initial explorations of psychology have helped Caroline to strengthen her critical thinking skills, and she is looking forward to further developing her abilities through study at the University.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: She, her, hers</p>	L3 Diploma	UK	BSc Psy
<p>Charles <i>Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Charles is 40 years old and lives in the northeast of England. It was during a career break that Charles took the time to find himself and consider what he wanted from life - to do something positive and constructive. A period of study with the Open University and part-time work with a Legal Aid not-for-profit advice agency fuelled his passion for consumer credit law, and the desire to study for a law degree was born.</p> <p>Charles continues to provide advice and assistance on legal issues and enjoys reading law journals in his spare time. It is the complexity of consumer credit law that really appeals to him.</p>	HE Cert	UK	LLB

	<p>Charles would like to obtain a law degree with the University so that he can broaden his knowledge of legal principles, and in particular, strengthen his ability to dissect judgements. Charles wants to learn everything necessary to accommodate a career within consumer credit law – and more.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: He, him, his</p>			
<p>Karl <i>Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Karl is 34 years old and lives in Scandinavia. They are currently working within the hospitality/tourism industry, Karl has also spent the last 8 years as a volunteer nurse for the Red Cross. Life experience has driven Karl to decide to study for a psychology degree. They are particularly interested in forensic psychology, with an emphasis on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder and Dissociative Amnesia, and their effect upon behaviours.</p> <p>They are currently developing their own research into these disorders, and was particularly attracted to the psychology course because it is very research-orientated and will allow them to focus upon their own research subject. They would also like to gain a broader knowledge of all aspects of psychology, which the University course will provide.</p> <p>Karl has chosen to study for a degree with the University because it allows them the opportunity to study online, and it is a reputable UK educational institution.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: They, them, their</p>	<p>UG Degree (NARIC equivalent)</p>	<p>Overseas</p>	<p>BSc Psy</p>
<p>Rhiannon <i>Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Rhiannon is 40 years old and lives in the south of England. Her career to date has focussed upon the health sector, and she is currently working as a Healthcare Assistant in an Operating Theatre. However, she dreams of a career as a psychologist in the clinical/forensic sector.</p> <p>It was whilst studying for her NVQ 3 in Health and Social Care recently that Rhiannon realised that she wanted to keep improving herself, and this new-found confidence led her to apply for the psychology degree with the University.</p> <p>Psychology is a subject that has always fascinated Rhiannon. If she had gone to university straight from school, she would have chosen a psychology degree. Her career in the hospital environment has also given her a good basic understanding of human psychology – how people cope in difficult circumstances - and she wants to learn more.</p>	<p>NVQ L3 Diploma</p>	<p>UK</p>	<p>BSc Psy</p>

	<p>The University course in particular appeals to Rhiannon because she is able to study via distance learning, allowing her to continue working whilst studying. She hopes to use her psychology degree as a springboard to postgraduate study and then onto career success.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: She, her, hers</p>			
<p>Phil <i>Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Phil is 29 years old and lives in the northwest of England. He has always held a fascination with psychology, but it was whilst studying for the Sport Psychology module of his PE A-Level that his interest was piqued further.</p> <p>His career path following A-Levels took a different route, and Phil has enjoyed working in the hospitality/catering sector for ten years. His experience in the service industry has enhanced his fascination with human behaviour and enabled him to observe and experience human psychology close at hand.</p> <p>Phil feels that he has more to offer and is ready for a career change. He would like to further develop his interest in psychology, particularly the relation between psychology and criminal behaviour, and turn it into a career. His long-term goal is to work within the NCA (National Crime Agency). A psychology degree with the University will help him to achieve this goal.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: He, him, his</p>	A Level	UK	BSc Psy
<p>Naoki <i>Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Naoki is 48 and lives overseas. He enjoys a successful career as a Systems Engineer leading the Technical Solutions and Innovations team at a major leisure company. His particular areas of interest within his work are the Internship Program that he created, and an AI/Machine Learning based chat service.</p> <p>It was during his work on the chat service that Naoki realised how psychology can reinforce the latest technology and a desire to study for a psychology degree was awakened.</p> <p>Naoki had to suspend his undergraduate studies for financial reasons, choosing to focus on his career to support his family. As a busy professional, and father of a 7-year-old daughter, Naoki is unable to return to full-time study so has chosen to study with the University because it affords him the accessibility and opportunity to work and study at the same time, and to study holistically and systematically.</p> <p>Naoki recognises that studying online whilst juggling work and home life will be a challenge, but a worthwhile challenge, as the psychology degree will benefit his career and</p>	A Level (NARIC equivalent)	Overseas	BSc Psy

	<p>deepen his skill set. He hopes to use his degree to progress to postgraduate study, and to achieve his ultimate dream of studying at the Jung Institute in Switzerland.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: He, him, his</p>			
<p>Josie <i>Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Josie is 38 years old and lives in the southeast of England. She has worked in the education sector for many years, specialising in Early Years education and training. This invaluable experience has motivated her to pursue a career change. Her ultimate goal is to run her own counselling practice, and Josie wishes to obtain a psychology degree to help her to achieve this.</p> <p>It was whilst working as a personal tutor that Josie's interest in counselling was born. She realised that she enjoyed coaching and counselling the students through difficult times, helping to make a difference to their lives.</p> <p>Psychology has always fascinated Josie and it has played an important part in her career, either when teaching psychology to students as part of a health and social care module, or understanding and applying the tenets of developmental psychology to her work within Early Years education. As a result, Josie has a thorough working knowledge and theoretical understanding of psychology, which will provide a good base for the University psychology course.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: She, her, hers</p>	HE Diploma	UK	BSc Psy
<p>Lara <i>Online Reflective Journal</i></p>	<p>Lara is 45 years old and lives in the northwest of England. Since childhood, Lara has always been intrigued by the law, but it was during her career dealing with the family court system that inspired her to read The Children's Act 1989/2004 – and she had an epiphany: this is where she saw her future.</p> <p>Lara has always sought to better herself, broadening her knowledge whilst pursuing a successful career. She taught herself Fire Design and passed the Advanced Fire Design exam with a 97% rate.</p> <p>Lara feels that her work experience has provided her with invaluable qualities to prepare her for her law degree. She has strong problem-solving skills, good interpersonal and critical thinking skills, is adept at negotiation and writing persuasive arguments, and has a good eye for detail.</p> <p>Lara recognises that she has taken her time to embark upon a law degree, but appreciates the value that life experience can give to her studies. She is a much more motivated and</p>	GCSE (with relevant work experience)	UK	LLB

	<p>confident person than the 18-year-old who might have begun a law degree straight from school. She is more than ready for the challenge.</p> <p>Preferred pronouns: She, her, hers</p>			
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## Appendix 8 – Copyright Permission for Figure 1

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## Appendix 9 – Declaration of Third Party Proofreading

*I, Kara Johnson, have had this thesis professionally proofread by Katherine Dixson of Way Beyond Words. This work was undertaken in line with the University of Wolverhampton guidance as set out in the Policy for Maintaining Academic Integrity (June 2015) and the thesis remains a true reflection of my own work.*

Kara Johnson

22<sup>nd</sup> April 2021