MATURE-AGE STUDENT COPING STRATEGIES AND THEIR
EFFECT ON ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE UNIVERSITY STUDY

A Thesis submitted by

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Abstract

Abstract

This thesis identifies the approach taken by mature-age students in adapting and employing coping strategies in the online environment and investigates what impact those approaches have on student engagement. In establishing the necessary background for this study, the existing research within the literature was reviewed and used to identify that the tendency to focus on quantitative research methodologies represents a gap in the research approach taken to investigate student coping strategies and engagement. In addressing this gap, this thesis used semi-structured interviews of mature-age students participating online in their first year of study at the University of Southern Queensland as part of a descriptive phenomenology approach. This process allowed the students to describe their individual experiences of engagement and coping with online study. These pure descriptions, presented from an insider viewpoint, provide an alternative perspective to the existing literature and contribute to advancing the theoretical understanding of the relationship between using and modifying coping strategies and how this may impact engagement.

In analysing the participants' attitudes and feelings towards online study as described within the participant's responses, the following five themes were identified: the individual's characteristics, accommodating external factors, facilitating learning, engagement and success, and the value of discourse. These themes highlight that while all students face challenges in undertaking study, the challenges faced by mature-age students in the online environment represent a different set of issues and concerns, particularly concerning family, work and financial commitments. In response to the challenge of online study as a mature-age student, the participants demonstrated a high degree of coping flexibility but were not proactive in their coping behaviours. Instead, the participants were often resistant or slow to adapt their coping approach, relying more on a practice of perseverance in the face of potential failure. Consequently, the participants' employment of coping strategies often represented a mechanism to facilitate progress rather than enhance their study. It was also evident that, for the most part, the participants' engagement derived more from personal motivations than from inspiration derived from the presentation or nature of the course content.

Certification of Thesis

This thesis is entirely the work of Desmond Pettit except where otherwise acknowledged. The work is original and has not previously been submitted for any other award, except where acknowledged.

Principal Supervisor: Petrea Redmond PhD

Associate Supervisor: Marita Basson PhD

Student and supervisors' signatures of endorsement are held at the university.

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In undertaking this research, I have to thank the study participants; the open sharing of their unique experiences was essential and a privilege. I hope that this study's findings can be taken forward and make a difference to future mature-age students and all students in the online setting.

I am grateful for the ongoing support and encouragement that my supervision team Associate Professor Petrea Redmond, Professor Lindy-Anne Abawi and Associate Professor Marita Basson, have shown me throughout my study, particularly their constructive criticism and practical advice which was gratefully received. I am also grateful for their wealth of knowledge in the inner workings of the University of Southern Queensland system and the phenomenology research methodology, both of which have certainly made the progression of my research so much easier. I am particularly indebted to Associate Professor Petrea Redmond for keeping me on track more often than I can remember, but more importantly, for having the initial courage to let me do things in my own way.

Finally, I have to thank my wife Renata; otherwise, she would never forgive me.

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1. Introduction

1.0 Introduction to Chapter 1

This chapter outlines a study of the impact of mature-age student coping strategies on engagement in the online environment. The study followed a descriptive phenomenology approach and presents the students' descriptions of how mature-age students cope with online learning and to what extent these students adapt their strategies due to the experience gained from their engagement with their studies. In addition to providing an overview of this study, this chapter presents a conceptual model to introduce the intersecting relationship between coping strategy, mature-age, and online study with engagement. In addition to outlining the study's structure, the chapter identifies the two research questions adopted by this study. The chapter also describes the research outcomes sought across the domains of student perceptions of online learning, mature-age coping strategies, their influence on the engagement process, and course delivery's engagement effects.

1.1 Overview

As online education becomes more feasible technologically, economically and operationally, there are significant incentives for universities to offer online programs (Palvia, et al., 2018), which fuels an increase in online student numbers (Millar, MacLaren, & Xu, 2020; Stone, 2019). However, the actual estimates of online student participation are inconsistent. For example, in the United States of America, students undertaking at least one unit of online study is just over 30% of the student cohort (Palvia, et al., 2018), which is the same percentage suggested by Allen and Seaman (2010) but much lower than the 43% identified by Snyder, de Brey and Dillow (2019). In an Australian context, online enrolment figures are slightly higher. For example, Curtin University (2019) report that enrolments in the fully online or distance education format for 2018 accounted for just over 36% of their student cohort, which is only slightly less than the national average of 38% for commencing students reported for the same period (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019). However, for institutions such as the University of Southern Queensland, which

offers a significantly large portion of its courses in the online format, the online participation figure can be in the order of 75% (USQ, 2020).

Regardless of the actual figure, participation in post-schooling education in general and online programs, in particular, is increasing, with many universities and colleges expanding their online course offerings as a result of the dramatic rise in demand and predicted continued growth (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). However, while online delivery opens up new study options and reduces many of the barriers associated with attending university, there is limited higher education research focusing on student satisfaction, persistence, and academic success in an online environment (O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015). In addition to these concerns, Vizoso, Rodríguez and Arias-Gundín (2018) contend that little research directly addresses engagement and coping. This limitation is also noted by Cushman (2016), who suggests that further research is needed to explore why some students facing a multitude of conflicting demands seem able to cope while others, seemingly under less pressure, cannot cope. One suggestion made by Cushman (2016) is a need to determine the coping strategies that successful students adopt and use this information to advantage in planning appropriate orientation and course delivery experiences. However, in reviewing the literature, it appears that to a large extent, research concerning the relationship between online engagement and coping strategies remains limited despite the continued increase in online learning.

The reasoning for such a consideration is evident in the "revolution of massification" which Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley (2009, p. 5) contend is the core reality behind the expansion of the higher education sector not only in the current era but also over the last half of the 20th century. This revolution is responsible for several critical transformations over the past several decades, including the conversion from elite to mass access. Caruth (2014) provides an example of this transformation, arguing that while America's higher education institutions' initial purpose was to educate the privileged youth, they have begun to educate more mature-age students with less privileged backgrounds. However, while almost half of today's overall student body consists of adult learners, many facets of higher education are still not designed with adult learners in mind (Chung, Turnbull, & Chur-Hansen, 2017).

This undesirable situation may, in part, be due to the pressures on higher education institutions to operate more efficiently in a commercial environment. Typical responses to these pressures will include attempts to control expenditure associated with student learning by enrolling more students and improving retention and graduation rates while at the same time controlling delivery costs such as the construction of new buildings. Meyer (2014) contends that to achieve these controls, many institutions have adopted online learning. However, historically, online education is associated with high drop-out rates, which may be attributable to the isolation of distance contributing to a loss of motivation to learn (Bolliger, Supanakorn, & Boggs, 2010). Motivation in this context is significant because it provides the impetus for purposeful, directed action and is an essential factor in determining the quality of work produced, the level of engagement, whether a learner persists in a course or not, and the level of achievement attained (Hartnett, 2015). Unfortunately, actively engaging students in any formal educational environment is a perennial problem (Park, 2015). However, the various forms of distance learning may present students with more significant barriers or challenges that exacerbate the problem (Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh, & Althunibat, 2020; Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, & Thompson, 2012; Gillett-Swan, 2017).

1.2 Influence of Coping, Mature-Age and Online Study on Engagement

In recognising these arguments, this study's research focus was on considering mature-aged students' coping strategies employed during online study and their potential impact on academic engagement. The influential nature of the intersecting relationship between coping strategy, mature-age, and study in the online environment is outlined in Figure 1.1 and formed the basis of this study. As indicated in Figure 1.1, there is the potential for students to have a level of control regarding their choice of coping strategy and the choice of study environment. However, the potential for control that a student has over their coping strategies and selection of study environment may often be restricted by several factors, including the responsibilities and challenges of being a mature-age student. These factors are considered as part of the thesis discussion.

MATURE
AGE

COPING
STRATEGY

ONLINE
ENVIRONMENT

ENGAGEMENT

*Areas of potential
perceived control*
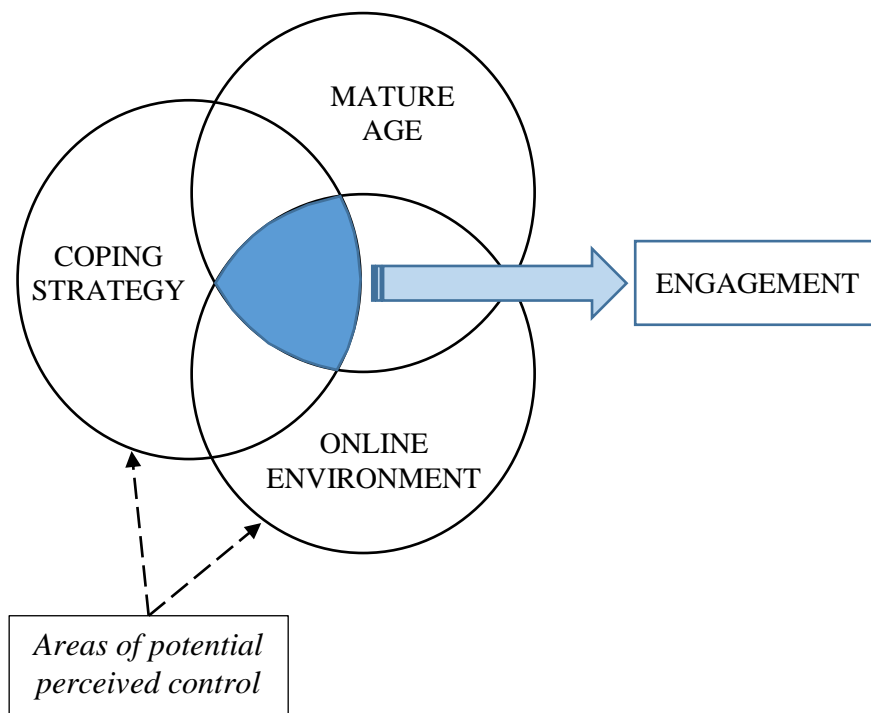
Figure 1.1. Influence of Coping, Mature-Age and Online Study on Engagement

However, in contrast to previous studies considering coping strategies and student engagement, the focus here was not on quantifying relationship characteristics such as student demographics, institutional environment, or, as noted by Yoo and Huang (2013), the participation of active citizenship. While the previous studies are essential in identifying the overlying nature of coping and student engagement, particularly concerning their relationship with student learning outcomes, they are limited in their ability to reflect student significance on an individual basis. Therefore by way of an alternative, this study undertook a more individualised research approach into the complexity and heterogeneity of the online environment (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Nguyen, 2015).

In part, adopting this approach reflected a concern that institutional practices may no longer align with how students engage with or approach university study (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Nguyen, et al., 2017). As pointed out by Axelson and Flick (2011), if engagement equates to the time a student spends in effective educational practices, then we should do all we can to engage students. Fortunately, universities not only recognise that well-supported and well-engaged students achieve the best possible

academic outcomes, but they are also increasingly investing in improving all aspects of the student experience, including educational and student welfare areas (Coates, Kelly, & Naylor, 2016). However, ensuring engagement becomes more complicated when students are undertaking their study through a remote approach such as online learning, particularly as adapting to the online environment can be challenging for both facilitators and students (Kirkwood & Price, 2014). Consequently, while online courses are growing in popularity, there is a need to find ways to engage students in online classes to increase retention rates in those courses (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; McLawhon & Cutright, 2012).

1.3 Research Questions

Qualitative research is often perceived as exploratory research designed to provide insight into a problem or to assist in developing ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research (Bradshaw, Atkinson, & Doody, 2017; Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). However, a more precise aim for qualitative research, certainly in the area of social science, is seeking to discern the underlying reasons, trends, opinions, and motivations associated with human behaviour, emotion, attitudes, and experiences (Tong, Flemming, McInnes, Oliver, & Craig, 2012). Morse and Richards (2007) argue that the qualitative approach is a suitable way of addressing research questions by learning directly from the respondents what their experience of a particular event or situation is and what meaning and interpretation they place on that experience. Qualitative research can achieve this deep insight by generating data in the form of words rather than numbers. In gathering these words, qualitative approaches aim to answer questions about the 'what', 'how' or 'why' of a phenomenon rather than answer the more quantitative questions of 'how many' or 'how much'. This point is highlighted by Giorgi (2009) who comments that while such information might present itself in the data, the quantitative researcher is not primarily interested in knowing how many or how often someone has had a particular experience.

Several qualitative approaches could be employed to gather what Van Manen (2017) considers to be the *eidos* or unique meaning of what a lived experience reveals. However, the ability of phenomenological methods to bring deep issues to the surface and allow voices to be heard resonate with this study's aims. Phenomenology is a

qualitative research approach that focuses on lived experiences within the world (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). This focus allows the perceptions of those experiences to be brought to the fore from the individual's perspective. Accordingly, this study adopts a phenomenological methodology to provide insight into the lived realities of being an online learner via what O'Shea, Stone and Delahunty (2015) consider to be a detailed snapshot of the learner's experience in response to the affective and relational domains of the online environment. As part of this methodology, van Manen's (2017) recommendation for adopting a phenomenologically generic form of research question is adopted. In taking this approach, the following two open-ended and exploratory research questions are developed to discover what Englander (2012) outlines as a phenomenon's meaning.

1. How do mature-age students employ and adapt <u>coping strategies</u> in response to the experiences encountered in an online study environment?
2. What impact does the approach to coping have on <u>engagement</u> for those students?

In identifying research questions, several criteria needed to be satisfied to ensure the manageability and appropriateness of the data sought and collected. In proposing the two research questions for this study, consideration was given to ensuring appropriate qualification and delineation, and ensuring that the questions were phenomenologically based. In particular, the phrasing of the questions was essential to identify the phenomenon under investigation and to support the contention that a phenomenological design represents the most appropriate approach for this study. The question phrasing was also essential in ensuring that the enquiry could get below simple perceptions and discover, qualify and share the essence of experience at an individual level.

1.4 Research Outcomes

There is a gap in the research literature related to mature-age students' coping strategies in the online setting and the resulting impact of these coping strategies on student engagement as viewed from the individual student's perspective. To gather the data necessary to consider the nature of this phenomenon and to contribute to a greater

understanding of the university student experience a descriptive phenomenological study to capture the individual perspectives of mature-age students participating in online university study was developed. In particular, the study investigated how mature-age students manage their university studies in the online environment to inform theoretical knowledge and practice around the design, implementation and evaluation of online courses. The research assists in recognising some of the challenges faced by mature-age students in the online study environment within higher education. Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to extend knowledge in three domains:

First, contribute to the knowledge and understanding of how mature-age students perceive online learning in terms of the challenges and advantages of studying in the online environment.

Secondly, contribute to the knowledge of mature-age coping strategies and their influence on the engagement process. In particular, whether students enact coping strategies based on an understanding of the suitability of alternative strategies or whether they merely rely on their default strategy.

Thirdly, contribute to knowledge about the consequences of course delivery through the communicated experiences of those undertaking those programs. The findings may be of significance to those interested in increasing student engagement in online programs by providing additional insight into student perceptions of the quality of delivery presentation.

1.5 Structure of the Study

This thesis is divided into seven chapters, as represented in Figure 1.2. This introductory chapter; Chapter 1, provides an overview of the influential factors of coping strategies, mature-age and the online environment, and introduces the intention to describe these factors' impact on engagement. Chapter 2 discusses the literature relevant to online learning, student characteristics, engagement and coping, and focuses on two specific areas; defining the significant terms and identifying the study area. In Chapter 3, the research study is proposed and supported by a discussion

justifying the research. The chapter also discusses the theoretical framework and the proposed methodology to identify and collect the study's data. Chapter 4 discusses the approach taken in analysing the data from initial coding to theme identification. In the context of this study, the term theme means 'structurally similar pieces of data tied together around a main issue with a thread of underlying meanings which collectively allow access to and enable qualitative findings'[1]. Chapters 5 and 6 present the research findings and discuss those findings regarding the contribution to the broader knowledge of coping strategies and engagement in the online context for mature-age students. Finally, Chapter 7 presents the study's conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for further research.

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[1] This definition derives from a combination of the definitions proposed by Brink and Wood (1997), Streubert and Carpenter (2011) and Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2013).
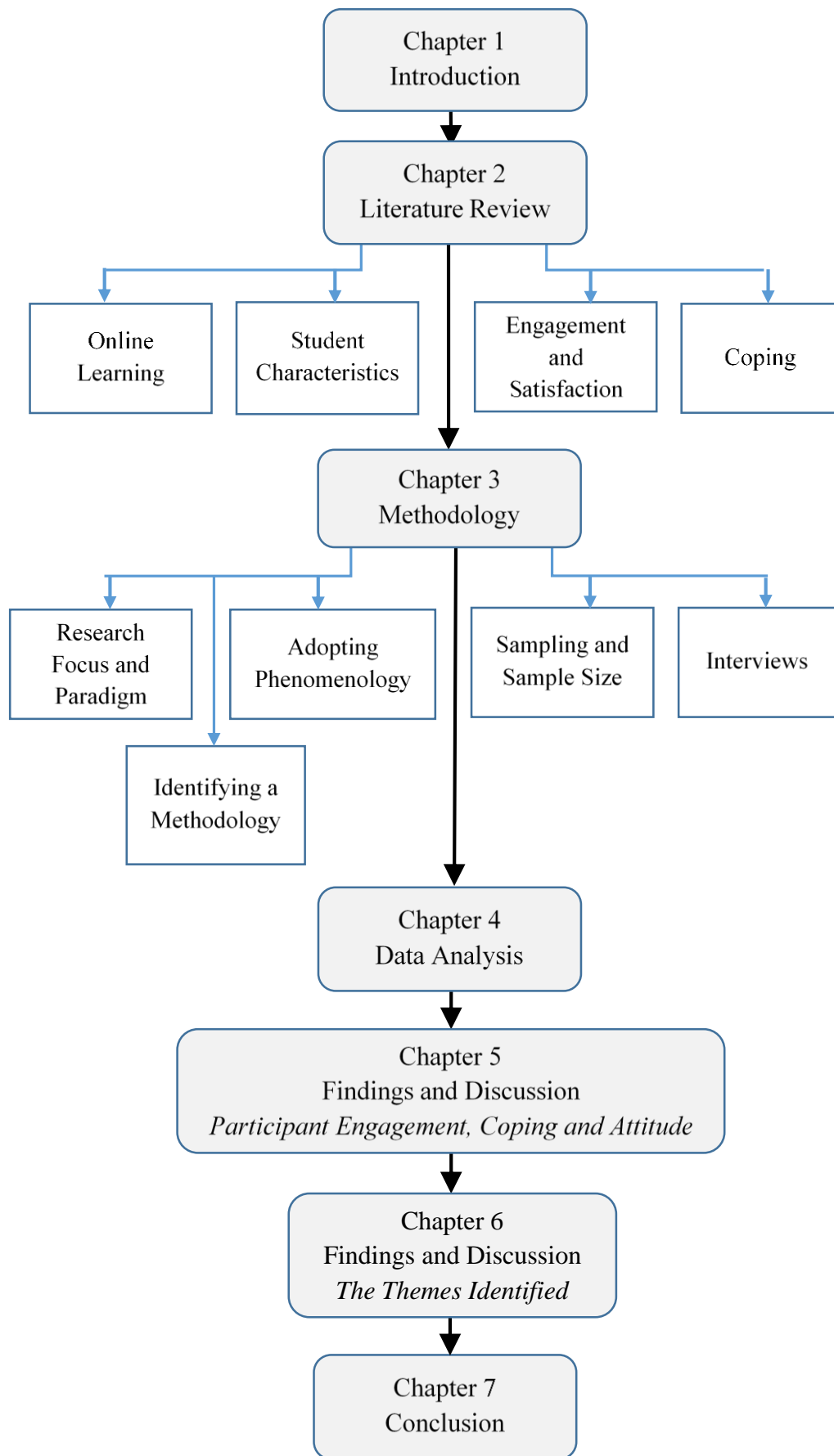
Figure 1.2. Structure of the Study

1.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the approach adopted in undertaking a descriptive investigation to depict the impact of mature-age student coping strategies in the online environment and its effect on student engagement. Included with this outline was a brief discussion regarding the general background of this phenomenon. Following the identification of a specific research area, the chapter also introduced the two research questions that this study sought to answer and outlined the study's contributions to the body of knowledge on engagement and student coping strategies in an online setting. Finally, the chapter outlined the general structure as presented in Figure 1.2 that this thesis adopted in undertaking and reporting this research. Next, Chapter 2 will provide a review of relevant contemporary literature.

2. Literature Review

2.0 Introduction to Chapter 2

In establishing the necessary background for this study, this chapter provides an outline of relevant research contained within the literature and discusses the general direction taken by researchers in developing the body of knowledge currently in place. The chapter also serves to identify a gap in the research, informing the approach taken to investigate the phenomenon of mature-age students coping and engaging with online study. The chapter is presented in four sections. The first section discusses the online environment and the changing nature of the research in the online context, particularly concerning its impact on delivery and engagement. The second section considers several student characteristics that are significant and essential to the general research area and establishes a definition for those characteristics considered by this study. The third section discusses student engagement in the context of effective educational practices both generally, and more specifically, in the online environment. In doing so, the discussion considers the effect of engagement on beneficial educational practices such as more comprehensive learning outcomes. The final section reviews the concept of coping strategies discussing several areas where a student's coping approach may affect their response to and engagement with an academic activity or challenge.

2.1 Online Learning

In response to the growing interest in lifelong learning and to augment the accessibility of their programs of study, universities have made increasing use of the online learning environment (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017; Mpungose, 2020; Palvia, et al., 2018). In committing to the online approach, universities have provided students with opportunities that would not otherwise be available because of costs, time, or location constraints. However, an essential factor for universities in adopting online platforms has been that online learning potentially facilitates a reduction of cost through economies of scale and control over fixed and variable costs (Ortagus & Tanner, 2019). Unfortunately, while the online environment represents a significant revenue stream for institutions (Cheslock, Ortagus, Umbricht, & Wymore, 2016),

viewing online education as a cost-effective means of expanding course offerings may be a short-sighted and unrealistic prospect (Perry & Pilati, 2011). This perspective is shared by Zhang and Worthington (2017), who note that while we know little about the economies of scale and scope of online education, the general format of online education currently offered by Australian universities is less than efficient. Part of this inefficiency lies in low retention rates which Canty, et al., (2020) outline as a critical strategic issue in higher education affecting student experience, university funding, and reputation. It is also a long-time recognised reality[2] that given the costs to students, in both financial and participation terms, universities should provide adequate academic support and ensure that students achieve the most out of their degree experience and complete their study program.

Unfortunately, online designers have not always recognised that the online environment is not a physical classroom and that the traditional approaches for promoting student satisfaction and engagement in an in-class setting do not always translate to the online environment. A similar point is outlined by Roddy, et al., (2017), who maintain that developing online courses is more complicated than merely translating written materials to an online format, mainly because the online settings involve unique considerations and challenges (Pazzaglia, Clements, Lavigne, & Stafford, 2016). Consequently, merely maintaining existing teaching strategies and uploading existing teaching content has not produced the same educational experience (Fawns, Jones, & Aitken, 2020). A further complication has been the limited capacity of educational institutions to identify students at risk of disengagement and to provide targeted intervention where required (Chipchase, et al., 2017).

Regrettably, because of the relationship between disengagement and student retention (Flores & Graham Brown, 2019; Truta, Parv, & Topala, 2018), disengagement represents a significant ongoing challenge for universities (Beer, Clark, & Jones, 2010; Morison & Cowley, 2017). Although there is disagreement as to whether the retention rates for online programs are different from those of traditional in-class courses (Foster, 2018), online retention rates are usually reported as being lower than those for in-class courses (Kahn, Everington, Kelm, Reid, & Watkins, 2017; Radovan, 2019).

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[2] For example see Burrell and Kim (1998)

With any study program, there is a risk of dissatisfaction and academic failure if students are not sufficiently motivated or engaged in the learning process (Krause, 2005; Steinmayr, Weidinger, Schwinger, & Spinath, 2019). Unfortunately, in the online setting, there is an increased tendency to encounter what Reese (2015) refers to as a stagnant, closed system; one that does not foster a supportive learning environment. Consequently, there is a risk that for some students, the attractiveness of the online study format can be overcome by the reality of a potentially disengaging environment. In such instances, students can lose motivation, enthusiasm, and connection (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Haig & Weibeizahi, 2011).

King, et al., (2015) maintain that the extent to which a student feels a positive connection towards study plays a crucial role in academic success. Conversely, the more a student feels a negative connection towards study, as may occur in the online environment, the less likely they are to develop new learning skills or acquire new resources to overcome challenging or stressful situations (Divjak, Rupel, & Lesnik, 2018; Zhu, Zhang, Au, & Yates, 2020). Students facing high levels of stress may also meet restrictions in their ability to utilise executive functioning skills leading to a reduction in critical thinking strategies and goal-directed behaviour (Hj Ramli, Alavi, Mehrinezhad, & Ahmadi, 2018). Brubacher and Silinda (2019) raise similar concerns noting that student readiness to engage with academic tasks can be detrimentally affected by the general stress experienced when undertaking distance education.

Inevitably students will face obstacles, interferences and failures (Brdar, Rijavec, & Loncaric, 2006; Acee, et al., 2017). Consequently, if students are to succeed academically, then there is a requirement for students to cope with the challenges they face successfully. While the need for a successful coping response applies to any form of delivery, students in the online environment face a greater risk of setting themselves up for failure by taking courses in a format for which they are simply not prepared (Wilson & Allen, 2014). For example, while students may be very familiar with online social media and digital games, it "would be a mistake to overestimate technology readiness of our online students" (Clark-Ibáñez & Scott, 2007, p. 36) and assume that they are skilled academically to achieve in an online class. Dhawan (2020) reaffirms

this view noting that students are poorly prepared for several e-learning competencies and academic-type competencies.

Despite this pessimistic position, the increase in the online student population for postsecondary education has made many units and courses viable. In particular, the ability to provide online instruction without logistical, geographical or physical barriers has facilitated the expansion of online education (Perry & Pilati, 2011; Roddy, et al., 2017). However, with this expansion comes a responsibility for institutions to identify student characteristics and behaviours that enable success in an online learning environment (Colorado & Eberle, 2010).

Defining these characteristics allows institutions to make informed decisions about various matters, including course offerings, student support services and technology infrastructure. Appropriate consideration of such issues is essential because online learning differs significantly from traditional face-to-face learning (Arias, Swinton, & Anderson, 2018; Croxton, 2014). In particular, areas related to the lack of student-instructor interactivity can lead to student dissatisfaction. Since students in online learning settings do not physically present themselves in a classroom, they have less opportunity to directly interact with their instructors and peers. This lack of direct interaction means that online students have to be far more self-regulated in their learning (Pedrotti & Nistor, 2019; Wandler & Imbriale, 2017). As part of this regulation, students are required to act autonomously and proactively (Zoltowski & Teixeira, 2020), and decide the timing and extent of their interactions with learning materials, peers and academics (Lock, Eaton, & Kessy, 2017; Seufert, 2018).

2.1.1 Clarifying the Online Environment

For much of the twentieth century, it was the conventional practice to distinguish between those forms of higher education on-campus and those considered external or distance; however, over time, this distinction has blurred both in theory and practice (Coates, 2007; Loeckx, 2016). Consequently, the term distance education is now often used to refer to academic instruction delivered at a distance from the campus through various delivery methods, including print-based, video/audio conferencing, and internet-based. Instead of assembling students from dispersed locations in one place,

distance education reaches out to students wherever they live or wish to study. By its very definition, distance education identifies the physical separation of the learner from the instructor, either by space or time (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005; Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020).

However, while it is possible to make such a generalised delineation, there is no consistent definition for learning undertaken away from the physical classroom, with several forms and different definitions adopted over time (Saykılı, 2018). In fact, due to the ease of access to the internet, the term online learning is often now taken to encompass a range of format variations, including both distance learning and e-learning. In noting the difficulties associated with the variation in terminology Means, Bakia, and Murphy (2014) suggest that the tremendous range and variety in online learning make the field challenging to encapsulate. This point is reiterated by Singh and Thurman (2019), who maintain that the term online learning has a range of meanings attached to it and has been used to mean very distinct, if not contradictory concepts. To further complicate matters, there are arguments as to the exact nature of the online concept. For example, while Moore, Dickson-Deane, and Galyen (2011) consider online learning to constitute a more recent version of distance learning, Means, Bakia, and Murphy (2014) believe that distance learning is a broader concept, which encompasses online learning.

Although online learning has become a significant component of education globally, there still remains "debate, frustration, and confusion surrounding even the basic idea of defining online learning" (Singh & Thurman, 2019, p. 290). Because of the diversity in use, authors may often default to using an expression that they are most familiar with, leading to studies using different definitions, even though they refer to similar instructional structures. In contemplating a definition of online learning for this study, the sources identified in Table 2.1 were used as a reference, and by combining elements of these definitions, the following definition of online learning was adopted:

> *A program of study designed for flexible delivery through the internet to students separated by time or distance using web-based materials and activities accessed through a learning management system.*

Table 2.1. Definitions of Online Learning

Definitions of Online Learning

Definition	Author(s)
Any setting that uses the Internet to deliver some form of instruction to learners separated by time, distance or both	Dempsey and Van Eck (2002)
Delivery and support through the Internet as opposed to e-learning which is supported and delivered through the use of information and communications technology	Clarke (2004)
A form of distributed learning enabled by the Internet	Olsen (2005)
A learner's meaningful interaction with content, people of pedagogical tools via the Internet for the purpose of learning	Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland (2005)
A fully online course that has been designed to be offered over the Internet and uses web-based materials and activities (grading, discussions) made possible by various course management systems or other software packages	Meyer (2014)
A format used in learning when learners do not need to be in bricks-and-mortar classrooms	Sun and Chen (2016)
Learning experienced through the Internet in an asynchronous environment where students engage with instructors and fellow students at a time of their convenience and do not need to be co-present online or in a physical space	Sing and Thurman (2019)
A tool to make the teaching–learning process more student-centred, more innovative, and more flexible.	Dhawan (2020)

2.1.2 Rethinking Delivery Structures

Today there are many reasons reported why students find online study attractive, and seemingly just as many as to why students are unlikely to be successful in online study. However, online and blended education offer learning opportunities on an anytime-anywhere basis that fits well into modern lifestyles (Bawa, 2016; Dziuban, Graham, & Moskal, 2018; Perry & Pilati, 2011), particularly given the increased access to the internet. This flexibility is achievable because of the asynchronous nature of online courses allowing students to access course materials at times and places convenient to them. With the removal or reduction of other barriers associated with attending university, including those related to the financial burden (O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015), there are distinct opportunities to complete post-schooling study while managing work or family obligations. Consequently, a large part of a student's decision about study format appears to relate to their beliefs about the best conditions to support their learning (Bailey, Ifenthaler, Gosper, Kretzschmar, & Ware, 2015; O'Neill & Sai, 2014). Given the option of taking a more convenient online course at the same cost, in the same semester, for identical credit, O'Neill and Sai (2014) ask why digital native students would choose to attend lectures in person.

Unfortunately, online study is not for everyone, and fully online courses often place higher demands on students due to the primarily autonomous nature of online learning and the lack of ongoing interactive support or scaffolding that physically present instructors typically provide (Bol & Garner, 2011). Consequently, online students are required to be more self-disciplined and take more responsibility for their education (Clark-Ibáñez & Scott, 2007; Gelles, Lord, Hoople, Chen, & Mejia, 2020) and to be more proactive in the learning process (Biskupic & Lackovic, 2015; Roddy, et al., 2017). To meet these challenges, online students must utilise a different level of initiative and self-discipline (Stanford-Bowers, 2008) and master learning and information processing strategies to a greater degree than their on-campus peers (Barak, Hussein-Farraj, & Dori, 2016). Regrettably, without these qualities, and an appropriate support level, many online students may become isolated and fail to succeed (Reese, 2015).

Fortunately, education providers are becoming increasingly aware of learner diversity and offer a broad range of options to enhance student engagement (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Allied to this awareness has been the adoption of more flexible delivery modes to facilitate multiple pathways and opportunities for those seeking higher or further education. Consequently, students can access a variety of study options, including the traditional in-class delivery (internal), online (external), and mixed (blended) modes of enrolment to complete their study (Lynch & James, 2012). These multiple availabilities have led to what Stanford-Bowers (2008) argue is perhaps the most crucial issue for online teaching and learning; shifting the paradigm away from the traditional teacher centred approaches that have dominated instructional practices of the past. Although the lecturer may still represent the content expert, the expectation is that it will be the students in an online environment who assume responsibility for managing their own learning experiences (Khiat, 2015; Dikbas Torun, 2020).

Regrettably, even though students may be aware of these expectations and potentially know what they are getting into (Meyer, 2014), there are difficulties with translating this expectation into a successful outcome. For example, if students cannot adopt a proactive approach to time management and prioritise study deadlines, they risk increased stress levels and being overwhelmed (Roddy, et al., 2017). Online students also face several different challenges to students taking a face to face course, including impacts on their success and progress (Bettinger, Fox, Loeb, & Taylor, 2017; Hart, 2012; Lucey, 2018), and ultimately in achieving their educational goals (Kizilcec, et al., 2020).

However, persistence is a dynamic process, and while persistence is necessary for academic achievement, an achieving student may not persist (Roland, Frenay, & Boudrenghien, 2016). Roland, Frenay and Boudrenghien (2016) also highlight that among students who have at some point had a loss of interest in their studies, the presence of support and the feeling of being integrated were essential to persistence. Unfortunately, this particular aspect presents difficulties in the online delivery context, where the lack of availability of support and integration is often criticised. But this need not be the case. As argued by Driscoll, et al., (2012) "online education can be an equally effective teaching format when the online course design uses appropriate

pedagogy" (p. 323) to draw out the best from the available teaching tools and focuses on guaranteeing the achievement of course goals and student learning outcomes. Therefore, as discussed by Bainbridge, et al., (2015) interest in this context, means that there is not just a need for participation but also for the authenticity of engagement. In ensuring this outcome, there is a requirement for the appropriate care and attention to be given to the recognition that suitable online classes cannot be built by merely converting existing face-to-face units (Clark-Ibáñez & Scott, 2007), and there is a real opportunity to rethink the content delivery and the use of available technologies (Dhawan, 2020; Fawns, Jones, & Aitken, 2020).

As universities react and increasingly move towards more fully online and blended teaching modes, Gillett-Swan (2017) suggests that there has been much discussion about what this means for pedagogy. It is already evident that there is a need for a pedagogical shift to better align 21st-century learners with the skills and competencies that they need to decipher and utilise information more quickly and efficiently (Reese, 2015). In part, this shift reflects a recognition or an acceptance that the usual pedagogical methods are no longer adequate and a different or distinctive way of instruction is required for educating today's adult learners who lead more complex and complicated lives (Branham, 2018; Caruth, 2014). It is perhaps in this aspect that online instruction provides the mechanism for institutional resources to align better with student needs, or as outlined by Perry and Pilati (2011), to remove the confines of the "clock and the classroom" (p.98).

Ultimately, even though enrollment interest in online courses remains high, the completion rates for online courses are often perceived to be less than those for traditional, face to face courses (Hamann, Glazier, Wilson, & Pollock, 2020; Kizilcec, et al., 2020; Levy, 2007). One way of addressing this deficiency is by finding ways to engage students to increase retention (Canty, et al., 2020). However, to effectively engage students, online instructors must understand and accommodate what students expect from an online environment. Unfortunately, achieving the required change in the lecturer's role has been one of the most significant challenges for online education (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017). Unfortunately, many higher education online learning environments remain stagnant, closed systems (Reese, 2015). Without

the ability to engage and motivate students, there is a higher risk of dissatisfaction and ultimately, failure. Achieving student engagement in online courses may be more critical than in on-campus courses because online students have fewer ways to engage with the institution and higher demands on their time and attention (Meyer, 2014). One way to enhance the correlation between what universities offer and what the student is by seeking is to understand student characteristics better.

2.2 Student Characteristics

Considering the literature, it is evident that various definitions of a concept or term will occur in line with the particular use of that concept or term. Frequently this leads to multiple words meaning the same thing, or similar words used for numerous things. Therefore, to ensure clarity, it is necessary to examine and establish a definition for terms considered essential in describing the research area's nature. As noted by Moore, Dickson-Deane and Galyen (2011), terminology presents a problem when the specific context is not defined in sufficient detail or when its identification is not prominent in the discussion provided within the paper. Additionally, the lack of consistency in terminology affects both researchers building on previous findings and designers creating similar environments. In addition to discussing online learning, it is necessary to examine the terms non-traditional student and mature-age student.

2.2.1 Traditional and Non-Traditional Students

The concept of a traditional student is based on a student who matriculates into a degree program shortly after high school graduation, is generally younger than 25 years of age, attends higher education on a continuous, full-time basis, and is financially dependent on others (Arjomandi, Seufert, O'Brien, & Anwar, 2018; McNeil, Ohland, & Long, 2016; Turner, 2019). While often considered a consequence of current enrolment practices and trends, the use of the term non-traditional student is not new, having been in use since the early 1960s (Ross-Gordon, 2011). There is no precise definition for non-traditional students in higher education (Hixon, Barcyk, Ralston-Berg, & Buckenmeyer, 2016). However, there are several characteristics commonly used to identify individuals and student cohorts as non-traditional, including age, first-in-family, rural and remote, working full-time, veteran, parents, single caregivers, financially independent, non-school leavers (Iloh, 2017;

MacDonald, 2018; Turner, 2019). Consequently, there is considerable variation as to where traditional becomes non-traditional (Chung, Turnbull, & Chur-Hansen, 2014).

Often non-traditional students are considered re-entry adults who, due to their background, look for a degree or certificate program that offers flexibility in time and location for course completion. Because of the heavy investment mature-age students place in returning to study they may often seek access to essential student services because of the pressures they place on themselves or have placed on them (Kenny, Kidd, Nankervis, & Connell, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 2011). As a consequence, the separation of the older student from the traditional school leaver student has often centred on the argument that adult learners may need additional time and support to prevent them from being overwhelmed by the new learning environments, expectations, and lifestyle (Betz, 2016; Yoo & Huang, 2013).

Another separator frequently used is the context of attendance, where students who study in-class are identified as traditional students. In contrast, those studying in an alternative environment such as online are non-traditional. Closely associated with the attendance separator are other criteria, such as employment status or enrolment pattern. For example, a younger student may be characterised as studying full time with a part-time job, while an older student may be considered a student studying part-time while in full-time employment[3]. Similarly, traditional can represent a course presenting content entirely through speech and text where there is no use of online technology (Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014).

Consequently, because of the increasing complexities in student lifestyles, and the subsequent blurring of transitions between life stages, many postsecondary environments contain a mix of students who could be termed traditional or non-traditional (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). In practice, differentiating between traditional and non-traditional may be redundant, given that there is no identifiable group that represents non-traditional (Daiva, 2017) and its inconsistent use (Chung, Turnbull, & Chur-Hansen, 2017). In the context of this study differentiating between

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[3] For example see the discussion provided by McInnis and Hartley (2002)

the terms traditional and non-traditional is considered to represent limited value, as there is no intent to generalise findings to a broader population.

2.2.2 Defining Mature-age Student

The definition of a mature-age student often varies, both in research terms and between institutions (Panacci, 2015; Stone & O'Shea, 2019a). In part, this variance occurs because mature-age student is often merely a general term to refer to adults who return to study; that is, they are not fresh out of high school, and they may or may not have completed Year 12. It may also be the case that the rationale may simply relate to a determination of eligibility to mature-age entry programs where age and experience form part of the application for tertiary study (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). The classification of mature-age has changed over time and varies between Australian states ranging from 21 to 35 years of age (Heagney & Benson, 2017). Because of this age variation, thirty academic sources were referenced to develop Table 2.2 and establish a functional classification of mature-age.

Table 2.2.

Classified Age for Mature Age Student

Classified Age	Author(s)
aged 26 or over	Kevern and Webb (2004)
	Staddon (2020)
aged 25 or over	Scott, Burns and Cooney (1996)
	Western, McMillan and Durrington (1998)
	Ballantyne, Madden and Todd (2009)
	Caruth (2014)
	Markle (2015)
	Xuereb (2015)
	Van Rhijn, Lero, Bridge and Fritz (2016)
	Simi and Matusitz (2016)
	Erb and Drysdale (2017)
	Heagney and Benson (2017)
	Stone and O'Shea (2019)
	Baglow and Gair (2019)
	Muir, et al., (2019)
	Ambrósio, Araújo e Sá and Simões (2019)
aged 24 or over	Forbus, Newbold and Mehta (2011)
	Kahu, Stephens, Leach and Zepke (2015)
	Bourdeaux and Schoenack (2016)
aged 23 or over	Devlin (1996)
	Fragoso, et al., (2013)
	Dawborn-Gundlach and Margetts (2018)
aged 21 or over	Richardson (1994)
	Bowl (2001)
	Cullity (2006)
	Drury, Francis and Chapman (2008)
	Kenny, Kidd, Nankervis and Connell (2011)
	Mallman and Lee (2014)
	Waters and Lemon (2019)
	Daddler and Sundin (2020)

In establishing a suitable divide, the arguments that there is a significant difference in life circumstances for those students aged over 25 years (Cullity, 2006) and that students over 25 years of age have higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Rothes, Lemos, & Gonçalves, 2016) were persuasive. Consequently, while the sample in Table 2.2 identifies a reasonably similar number of sources nominating an age under 25 years of age as for over 25 years of age, mature-age student for this study is taken to be students aged 25 years or over.

2.2.3 Justifying Mature-Age Students for this Project

The separation of students by age is in part a recognition that older students in postsecondary study face unique barriers and challenges (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018a; Mallman & Lee, 2016; Van Rhijn, Lero, Bridge, & Fritz, 2016). While all students will experience a range of barriers in the form of stressors, the relative importance of these barriers may be experienced differently by mature-age students (Van Rhijn, Lero, Bridge, & Fritz, 2016). Despite extensive research on the transition of school-leaver students entering first-year university courses in Australia and overseas, there is little known about the actual experiences and factors that affect the positive transition of mature-age students to University (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018a). According to O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007), adult student status in higher education may represent minority classification, based on the student having little recent formal education experience and the additional life pressures faced outside of the university.

Consequently, mature-age students are potentially more vulnerable to difficulties in managing the transition into higher education (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Ross-Gordon, 2011) and may require greater access to key student services. This level of complexity can be further affected when mature-aged students undertake their study in the online environment. In the online context, removing or reducing many of the barriers associated with attending university provides distinct opportunities for post-schooling study (O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015). However, this flexibility comes at a price, and while endeavouring to accommodate work, family and other commitments (Baum & McPherson, 2019; Perry & Pilati, 2011) mature-age students lead what Cushman (2016) refers to as imbalanced lives. Because of a lack of recent involvement in formal

learning, mature-age students can have a high fear of failure (Mallman & Lee, 2016; Pearce, 2017), a concern that adds to the pressures already on the student (Heagney & Benson, 2017; Kenny, Kidd, Nankervis, & Connell, 2011). Students may also encounter problems in adjusting to the online learning environment (Lister, 2014), where the largely autonomous nature of online learning can place further demands on students (Quesada-Pallarès, Sánchez-Martí, Ciraso-Calí, & Pineda-Herrero, 2019; Sharp & Sharp, 2016).

Because of these demands, online students may feel a sense of loss of community in their online course environment leading to perceptions of themselves as second class citizens and invisible (Stone & O'Shea, 2019a) and ultimately lead to a reduced likelihood of persistence (Croxton, 2014). Consequently, it is imperative to endeavour to identify and accommodate mature-age student requirements regarding their different learning modes, diverse social identities and life pathways (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018a; Gale & Parker, 2014). As Waters and Lemon (2019) maintain "it is incumbent on universities to make provisions, in policy and practice, both academically and in pastoral care" (p. 8) to enable mature-age students to progress in their studies. However, despite the awareness of this population, mature-age students do often remain overlooked (Chen, 2017; Simi and Matusitz, 2016; Van Rhijn, Lero, Bridge and Fritz, 2016). In seeking to address such deficiency and to assist mature-age students in integrating and developing their studies in the higher education context, Ambrósio, Araújo e Sá and Simões (2019) argue that institutions need be led to hear the voices of the mature-age student.

2.3 Engagement

One of education's most important objectives is to achieve effective learning (Gunuc, 2014). In pursuing this objective, students must be actively engaged, not only to mediate the link from student interest to student outcomes, but because student engagement is also highly influential on the level of motivation students have to learn and to progress in their education (Kahu, Nelson, & Picton, 2017; Nayir, 2017). Engagement with the learning process is a concern as old as teaching itself, and the disengaged student daydreaming in the back row has always been a challenge for teachers (Bowen, 2005). However, as the various forms of online delivery increase,

maintaining oversight of engagement becomes more difficult, leaving an increased expectation that students will be proactive and take responsibility for their learning. Ultimately, effective learning is contingent upon the extent to which students are engaged in learning activities (Havik & Westergard, 2020). Unfortunately, students may not always fully engage with the learning process because the perceptions of the learning activity held by the students may not align with those delivering or designing the activity (Lawton & Taylor, 2020). For example, although lecturing is by far the most used didactic instrument in teaching students in higher education, they tend to be based on the information transmission fallacy that students will retain what is taught (Schmidt, Wagener, Smeets, Keemink, & Van der Molen, 2015). However, because engagement is crucial to student learning and satisfaction (Martin & Bolliger, 2018), it is essential to understand the features that encourage rather than hinder engagement (Dart, Cunningham-Nelson, & Dawes, 2020). To facilitate this, it is necessary first to clarify what is meant by engagement and student engagement.

2.3.1 Defining Student Engagement

Engagement is a complex construct (Ben-Eliyahu, Moore, Dorph, & Schunn, 2018; Zepke, 2019), and the term has been subject to somewhat of a "mixed bag" of understanding (Trowler, 2010, p. 9) making the identification of a generic definition difficult (Harden, 2018). However, Kuh (2009a) suggests that the engagement premise is straightforward and easily understood in that the more students study a subject, the more they know about it. The more students practice and get feedback on their writing and collaborative problem solving, the deeper they come to understand what they are learning. Although the significance of engagement is well recognised and considered to be essential (Kahu, 2013) and fundamental (Senior, et al., 2018), the term engagement is one of the most widely misused and overgeneralised constructs found in the educational, learning, instructional, and psychological sciences (Azevedo, 2015). Strati, Schmidt and Maier (2017) provide insight into this misuse and suggest that student engagement in academic activities not only fluctuates from moment to moment but is also multidimensional, drawing in factors such as the academic setting and the student's family or community interactions. Consequently, even though the construct of student engagement is considered essential, its exact nature is not yet clearly understood (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Bond, Buntins, Bedenlier, Zawacki-

Richter, & Kerres, 2020). In part, this is potentially because of a lack of distinction between what Kahu (2013) perceives as the state of engagement, its antecedents and its consequences.

As a generic definition does not exist, there is a requirement to establish one to facilitate the analysis and discussion of the data obtained within this study. Several simple definitions present themselves. For example, Lei, Cui and Zhou (2018) suggest that student engagement represents students being actively involved in their learning tasks and activities, while Elliott and Healy (2001) consider it a short-term attitude resulting from a student's evaluation of their experience with education. Frequently definitions of engagement will expand beyond the educational environment and include interactions with the broader community or include references to the institution encouraging and enabling the student, or references to success in social aspects associated with the education experience[4]. While such more general definitions are no less valid, Balwant's (2018) definition of student engagement was deemed sufficiently appropriate for this study. Therefore, engagement represents:

> *A student's involvement in the academic aspects of their studies and may*
> *refer to any academic-oriented outcome associated with affect, behaviour*
> *and cognition.*

2.3.2 Forms of Engagement

Even though engagement is relatively diverse in its coverage and has a certain "vagueness" in its definition (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015, p. 343) researchers have reached a consensus that the construct encompasses various aspects and is multidimensional (Alrashidi, Phan, & Ngu, 2016). However, there is no consensus about the number of components or forms within the multifaceted framework of engagement. For example, Alrashidi, Phan and Ngu (2016) identify two components; behavioural and psychological, Ghasemi, Moonaghi and Heydari (2020) refer to four dimensions; behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and motivational, and Redmond, Heffernan, Abawi, Brown and Henderson (2018) suggest five; behavioural, emotional, cognitive, social and collaborative. Although there is no consensus, Mandernach

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[4] For example see Trowler (2010), or Anderson, et al., (2004).

(2015) indicates that the range of definitions for student engagement converges to emphasise the three interrelated aspects: cognitive, behavioural, and emotional/affective as proposed by Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris' (2004) theoretical model. Indeed, these three dimensions appear to be the most widely accepted (Bond, Buntins, Bedenlier, Zawacki-Richter, & Kerres, 2020; Pérez-López, et al., 2020; Ben-Eliyahu, Moore, Dorph, & Schunn, 2018) and the combination adopted by most authors (Ciric & Jovanovic, 2016):

- behavioural engagement draws on the idea of participation such as involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities;
- emotional engagement encompasses positive and negative reactions to the education context, i.e. the teachers, classmates, scholarly work and even the institution itself, creating ties and influencing the willingness to do the work; and
- cognitive engagement draws on the idea of and the desire to invest and exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex concepts and master difficult skills.

Although the forms of behaviour have been traditionally identified as three separate and disparate components (Ciric & Jovanovic, 2016), this view has changed to one where the components are interrelated more dynamically within individuals (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Unfortunately, the lack of consensus on the number of subtypes and the numerous definitions of student engagement prevalent in the literature has hindered the study of engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). However, while there are disagreements about what components the engagement construct incorporates (Skinner, Pitzer, & Steele, 2016), it is apparent that without the desire or drive to learn associated with motivation, engagement will not occur (Ben-Eliyahu, Moore, Dorph, & Schunn, 2018).

2.3.3 Disengagement

As with engagement, disengagement is often distinguished using the three forms: cognitive, emotional and behavioural (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), and while a student may be disengaged in one form, they may still be engaged in another form or forms (Reichenberg, 2017). Trowler (2010) notes that in seeking to understand

what is meant by 'engagement', some authors have considered its antithesis – if a student is not engaged, then what are they? Two common antonyms for engagement are disaffection and disengagement. According to Skinner and Belmont (1993), the opposite of engagement is disaffection. Disaffected students are passive, do not try hard, and may give up easily in the face of challenges. They can be bored, depressed, anxious, or even angry about their presence in the classroom; they can withdraw from learning opportunities and may rebel against the teachers or other students. Similarly, Park and Choi (2009) identify that online learners easily lose motivation and feel less satisfaction if courses do not stimulate their active participation and interaction. Therefore while engaged students are more successful by many measures (Wang & Holcombe, 2010), dissatisfied students are more likely to be disengaged and are more likely to perform poorly and engage in problem behaviours such as dropping out.

For Chipchase, et al., (2017), the antonym of engagement is disengagement. However, disengagement involves more than the mere absence of engagement behaviours (Salmela-Aro, Upadyaya, Hakkarainen, Lonka, & Alho, 2017; Wang, Fredricks, Ye, Hofkens, & Linn, 2019) or the ends of an engagement continuum from engaged to not engaged. This point is echoed by (Schnitzler, Holzberger and Seidel (2020), who note that individual students can show diverse engagement patterns involving consistent and inconsistent combinations of student participation and engagement behaviours. Notably, the research suggests that disengagement may be related to different kinds of triggering situations, such as distractions, poorly designed learning activities, or insufficient resources (Bergdahl, Fors, Hernwall, & Knutsson, 2018).

Disengagement refers to a wide range of student withdrawal behaviours (Balwant, 2018) and not all withdrawal behaviours are undertaken lightly or with flawed reasoning. As outlined by Flores and Graham Brown (2019), students often exercise autonomy in evaluating their decision to withdraw, particularly the impact of their decision to complete their study. It is also recognised that withdrawing effort and commitment from an unattainable goal may represent a positive and adaptive facet of effective self-regulation (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003). Consequently, when taken in context, withdrawal may be the appropriate response. However, disengagement is often viewed as a character fault inherent in disengaged

students (Chipchase, et al., 2017). When considered in this light, withdrawals within education are generally perceived negatively because of the impact on student attrition, especially as most withdrawing students do not return to study (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). Consequently, as argued by Bond, Buntins, Bedenlier, Zawacki-Richter and Kerres (2020), the conceptualisation and measurement of student engagement continue to receive increasing attention.

2.3.4 Engaging Students

The role of student engagement as an essential factor in determining student learning and personal development in post-school education has been considered for decades (Casuso-Holgado, et al., 2013; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). In that time, most of the literature on student engagement has reported directly or indirectly on improving student learning (Trowler, 2010). The findings have provided significant insights into the influence of engagement on student performance, progression and retention (Casuso-Holgado, et al., 2013) to the point where the value of engagement is no longer questioned (Kahu, 2013). In particular, there is an argument that deeper engagement can lead students to beneficial educational practices, thus leading to comprehensive learning (Hodge, Wright, & Bennett, 2017). However, the reasons why engagement is considered so relevant and significant are far more wide-ranging (Pittaway & Moss, 2014). Senior, et al., (2018) suggest that these benefits can be quite diverse and include increased employability skills, higher earning levels, lower levels of criminal activity, and increased positive civic behaviours.

Further insight into the benefits of engaging students can be drawn from Skinner and Pitzer (2012), who suggest that engagement represents an energetic resource that helps students cope more adaptively with daily stressors, challenges, and setbacks in school. As such, engagement can be considered a significant element in developing a student's intellectual assets and everyday academic resilience or a learners' ability to cope and thrive through adversity (Dohaney, de Róiste, Salmon, & Sutherland, 2020). Without academic resilience, students may find it challenging to adapt to changing circumstances or events, or to cope with adversity that threatens the student's educational processes (Martin & Marsh, 2006).

Another benefit of student engagement is that in broad terms, engaged students take the initiative, apply effort, and generally display positive emotions about the learning experience (Flores & Sprake, 2013). By being engaged, students become involved in their work, they will persist despite challenges and obstacles, and they will take visible delight in accomplishing their work (Geocaris, 1996). Conversely, disengaged students do not produce their best work. They may often display passive behaviours such as boredom, anger, and anxiety (Flores & Sprake, 2013), which potentially leads to a failure to succeed academically. In considering the significance of engagement Mega, Ronconi and De Beni (2014) contend that one of the most critical concerns in educational psychology is attempting to understand why some students stop trying when faced with academic difficulties, whereas others will rise to the occasion. Investigations in this area suggest that engagement represents an important determinant of academic persistence (Philips, 2015; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Taylor & Parsons, 2011) and student success (Ghasemi, Moonaghi, & Heydari, 2020; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2011). There is also a recognition that deeper engagement can lead students to beneficial educational practices, such as a capability for independent learning (Rajabalee, Santally, & Rennie, 2019) and comprehensive learning (Hodge, Wright, & Bennett, 2017).

Unfortunately, while engagement may be assumed to be causally related to learning (Axelson & Flick, 2011), and play a critical role in achievement and learning (Trowler & Trowler, 2010; Wara, Aloka, & Odongo, 2018), the actual relationship between engagement and learning is far from clear and remains ambiguous (Lei, Cui, & Zhou, 2018). For instance, Bowen (2005) provides a perspective where the engaged student evolves the content they have learned to develop more complex understandings. By way of contrast, Axelson and Flick (2011) suggest that it is also possible that engagement may simply be the byproduct of a learning environment that suits the student. This point is particularly relevant given that students are complex beings with many aspects to their personalities (Meyer, 2014), and it is these aspects that add to the uncertainty of what the students' academic and social outcomes will be. However, as outlined by Bowers and Kumar (2015), such complexities can make it possible for learning online to act as a catalyst for feelings of disconnectedness, alienation, and loss, which impact student engagement, motivation, perceived learning and retention.

Sadly, overcoming these complexities and effectively transferring from the face-to-face classroom to the online environment continues to be a problem (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020; Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017) and a significant challenge in ensuring that online learners are engaged (Bodily, Graham, & Bush, 2017).

2.3.5 Engagement in the Online Environment

In the traditional classroom setting, the provision of high-quality instruction is recognised as an empirically validated method to foster student engagement which allows more opportunities for students to expand their knowledge and understanding of concepts through increased involvement and enthusiasm for the material and the instruction (Allen, Witt, & Wheeless, 2006; Harbour, Evanovich, Sweigart, & Hughes, 2015). One way of facilitating high-quality education is through teacher presence. Zilka, Cohen and Rahim (2018) define teacher presence as meaningful communication for shaping, assisting, and directing cognitive and social processes. In this perspective, teachers acting as the agents of instruction are critical to increasing student engagement, and the immediacy of teacher presence is identifiable with student satisfaction, motivation, engagement and learning (Ai & Giang, 2018; Peneva & Keremedchiev, 2016; Stilwell, 2018). The concept of teacher presence is nothing new (Scott, 2016). In practice, teacher presence is relatively straightforward; students identify value and benefit in the instructor's involvement in the process of teaching, rather than merely its outcome (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020; Schiavio, Biasutti, Van der Schyff, & Parncutt, 2018). Encompassed within teacher presence is a link between the learner and the instructor. This link serves as a foundation for developing authentic relationships (Orcutt & Dringus, 2017). These relationships positively impact learners' constructive and interactive engagement behaviours (Zhang, Lin, Zhan, & Ren, 2016).

In the online context, the importance of teacher presence is perhaps even more significant than in the traditional face to face environment (Stone & Springer, 2019). In particular, teacher presence can help reduce the physical, psychological and transactional gaps that frequently exist between teachers and students in the online setting (Sozer, 2019; Wendt & Courduff, 2018; Zilka, Cohen, & Rahimi, 2018). However, despite the concerns regarding the loss of immediacy for teacher presence

or visibility in the online context (Moulds, 2020), this loss may not be fatal for student engagement. Part of this view's reasoning lies in the optimism that online interactions can deliver effective learning experiences because time and distance are no longer barriers to engagement (Baum & McPherson, 2019; McAleer & Bangert, 2011). While the online forum may be less lecturer-centric than in-class interaction, online learning does offer participants the opportunities to explore information rather than asking them to accept what the teacher determines should be learnt (Salmon, 2011). However, given that social interaction is strongly related to online learning effectiveness (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Redmond, Heffernan, Abawi, Brown, & Henderson, 2018), improving social interaction in online learning can lead to a more effective and enjoyable educational experience, which in turn can foster student engagement. As noted by Lierse (2016), to be successful at what they do, university lecturers have to "have the capability and the initiative to transform and make a difference" (p.9). Embedded within this capability is a requirement for lecturers to integrate their skills, knowledge, and attitudes to instil their students with both a desire for and commitment to academic engagement.

While academic engagement is important in any learning context (Kim, Hong, & Song, 2019), overcoming the online environment's challenges and empowering students in their academic experience presents a singularly challenging task for lecturers and institutions. In part, this difficulty lies in the change of focus outlined by Banna, Lin, Stewart and Fialkowski (2015); while content played a central focus in the past, it is engagement that plays the essential role in stimulating online learning today. This argument's significance is apparent in Martin and Bollinger's (2018) assertion that institutions need to design and deliver engaging learning experiences for students to succeed in online education. Of course, academic engagement requires student participation. Without the appropriate effort and academic investment necessary to engage academically and create their knowledge, students impede their cognitive development and academic success level (Bowden, Tickle, & Naumann, 2019; Britt, 2015).

Nevertheless, student engagement in an online setting can improve as students become comfortable with the online format and learn how to navigate online technologies and

approaches. Also, while not definitively confirmed (Asikainen & Gijbels, 2017), students can potentially change their learning strategies from surface to deep strategies (Desierto, Maio, O'Rourke, & Sharp, 2018; Hattie & Donoghue, 2016; Meyer, 2014), which may reflect a more intrinsic interest in learning. By doing so, students learn to take responsibility for their learning by developing skills in learning to learn. These attributes can assist the student with engagement practices and feelings of isolation and disconnection (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). However, as demonstrated by the range of course delivery options, higher education providers have become responsive to learner diversity. Gillett-Swan (2017) note that increasingly flexible delivery modes are becoming available for university students and provide multiple pathways and opportunities for those seeking further education.

2.4 Coping

Evans, Martin and Ivcevic (2018) identify coping as being characterized in terms of a process encompassing the experience of stress, its appraisal, and the ensuing cognitive and behavioural responses. In this regard coping may be considered as the efforts used to manage internal and external demands perceived as harmful to or exceeding an individual's resources. In an academic context coping reflects the personal preferences, strategies, thoughts and behaviours that students utilize or adopt when faced with an academic task, particularly one of a negative or stressful nature such as academic failure, to handle such situations (Subasi & Tas, 2016). The choice of approach to coping with academic difficulties may facilitate or hinder a student's learning and performance. Gonçalves, Lemos and Canário (2019) in considering this point, suggest that the ability to cope adaptively supports students' continued participation in learning activities and provides opportunities to acquire knowledge while avoiding challenging academic material deprives students of optimal learning opportunities. Therefore a critically important aspect of the coping process is the adoption of coping approaches and behaviours which Evans, et al., (2018) suggest may hold considerable implications for academic achievement. Unfortunately, university students are a very illustrative example of a population with high levels of stress (Pascoe, Hetrick, & Parker, 2020; Jayasankera Reddy, Menon, & Thattil, 2018) and also high levels of non-constructive or unhealthy ways of coping (Boke, Mills, Mettler, & Heath, 2019).

For a long time[5], there has been a recognition that adverse events can elicit a complex set of cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses depending on a person's perceived capacity to deal with those events. Until recently, academic study was not perceived as stressful (Jayasankera Reddy, Menon, & Thattil, 2018). However, academic-related stress is now recognised as impacting student mental and physical health, resulting in various academic problems (Pascoe, Hetrick, & Parker, 2020; Portoghese, et al., 2019). As discussed by Vogel (2016), difficult academic situations can challenge or exceed the student's available coping resources and threaten their homoeostasis, or inner balance, leading to a feeling of stress. Similarly, Struthers, Perry and Menec (2000) identify that when students feel unable to improve their future performance, they are likely to experience stress resulting in motivational deficits and attenuated performance.

However, such experience with adverse events does not mean that students will invariably feel that future goals are unattainable. Many students believe that they can cope successfully with such events and as a result, become motivated to achieve their goals. So when a student encounters a situation that threatens or harms essential goals, they will initiate coping responses (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2016). If the encounter has a successful resolution, positive emotions will predominate; however, if a resolution is unclear or unfavourable, negative feelings will prevail. If in facing a negative academic experience a student can successfully withstand any harmful consequences then the student becomes more resilient and is better placed to overcome minor setbacks and will potentially view further challenging adverse events as surmountable (Amsrud, Lyberg, & Severinsson, 2019; Jones, 2020; Lin, Lin, Lin, & Chen, 2019).

Unfortunately, academic life is demanding, and stress is a realistic experience for university students (Xuereb, 2015). If this stress is not controlled, it can lead to distress and potentially manifest in adverse emotional and cognitive reactions (Kauser, 2010; Yaribeygi, Panahi, Sahraei, Johnston, & Sahebkar, 2017). In response to the difficulties and stressors that they encounter, students will adopt various coping strategies (Abouammoh, Irfan, & AlFaris, 2020; Amponsah, Adasi, Mohammed,

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[5] For example see Lazarus (1966)

Ampadu, & Okrah, 2020). These strategies are an essential factor in a student's ability to deal with stress and are enacted based on the student's approach to handle an adverse or stressful event (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). However, not all strategies effectively address the problems that hamper a student's progress and success. Even the best strategies will only be effective if the student is motivated to use them correctly (Dunlosky, 2013).

Because coping strategies are so influential in a student's approach and adjustment to higher education study (Doron, Stephan, Boiche, & Le Scanff, 2009) they are central in the academic setting, especially concerning the potential for academic success or failure. Arguably, coping influences educational performance and outcomes because the level of effort students will invest to reach a particular result depends on how they deal with the negative emotions and obstacles (Devonport & Lane, 2006; Mas & Si, 2018). Taking a similar view Hsieh, Sullivan, Sass and Gurra (2012) suggest that level of effort applied and how well students cope with stress is influenced by the student's belief in their capability and how much control they have over the outcome. However, the nature of coping strategies is very dynamic, and a student's appraisal of a source of stress and their subsequent responses to this perception can vary dramatically (Thomas, Cassady, & Heller, 2017). Based on their belief and level of control over the challenge, students, when responding to stress, will typically default to one of two coping approaches. According to Lazarus (2006), these approaches have two primary functions. The first function, emotion-focused coping, regulates stressful emotions by avoiding thinking about the threat or reappraising the threat's level of consequence. However, in this approach, the realities of the stressful situation are not changed. The second function, problem-focused coping, is employed to alter the circumstances causing the distress through strategies such as increased effort or planning to obtain information about what to do and mobilising the resources to change the reality.

2.4.1 Coping Strategies

Daily academic life exposes students to various potentially stressful situations that could negatively affect their academic achievement and health (Freire, et al., 2020). In response to these stressful situations, students mobilise their thoughts and behaviours in coping strategies employed to navigate and manage the challenges presented by

those stressors. Over the years, authors have identified various coping strategies. However, the classification of these strategies into a broader architecture has not yet been agreed upon (Brigati, England, & Schussler, 2020; Stanisławski, 2019). This lack of classification in part lies in the differences in the conceptualization of coping, leading to several ways of classifying coping strategies (Kauser, 2010), as highlighted in the delineation within even the primary coping dimensions. For example, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) organise primary coping strategies into the two higher-order categories of problem-focused and emotion-focused. However, Tobin, Holroyd, Reynolds and Wignal (1989) outline alternate pairs of higher-order categories including approach and avoidance, and adaptive and maladaptive.

To a large degree, this inconsistent view reflects the position noted by Pearlin and Schooler (1978), who made the call for coping to undergo a more detailed specification process because of the bewildering richness of relevant behaviour encompassed by the term. The need for standardisation is highlighted by Skinner, Edge, Altman and Sherwood (2003) who, in search of the structure of coping, identified more than 100 category systems of coping with no two of them containing the same set of categories. Similarly, Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), maintain that the challenge for those researching coping is to find a standard terminology for the diverse coping strategies to facilitate the meaningful discussion of findings across studies. The need for such standardisation is also outlined by Litt and Tennen (2015) who maintain that the taxonomy of strategies seems bounded only by the imaginations of the various researchers involved.

Given this position, a detailed consideration of coping strategies is, therefore, beyond the scope of this discussion. However, it is possible to provide a relevant overview by considering two broad sets of coping strategies; each constructed around three major categories. The first classification encompasses active coping, passive coping, and avoidance as outlined by authors such as Sahler and Carr (2009), and Madhyastha, Latha and Kamath (2014). The second is appraisal-focused[6], problem-focused, and

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[6] It is recognised that the appraisal strategy draws heavily from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Cognitive Stress Theory which posits that stress involves the three main processes of primary appraisal, secondary appraisal and coping. Following the use of coping efforts, individuals would then reappraise the situation

emotion-focused as outlined by authors such as Weiten and Lloyd (2008), Ali and Askari (2011), and Zarei, Hashemi, Sadipoor, Delavar and Khoshnevisan (2016). Unfortunately, even these classifications are often interchangeable. For example, Lee, et al., (2017) consider problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance, and Daisuke and Ayumi (2016) consider approach and avoidance, problem and emotion-focused, and behavioural and cognitive. It is also of note that Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) original classification of two basic coping categories has been criticized over the years because it represents an over-simple conception of the way coping works (Stanisławski, 2019).

1. Active Coping Strategy.

Active coping refers to utilising psychological or behavioural coping efforts as part of acknowledging and confronting stressors using one's own resources to deal with that stressor (Clift & Maratos, 2020; Zeidner & Endler, 1996). Dealing with the problem involves an awareness of the cause of particular stress and a subsequent conscious attempt to either eliminate the source or at least reduce the impact from the stress. As noted by (Clarke, 2006), the use of active coping efforts is about achieving a degree of personal control and include strategies such as direct problem-solving, seeking understanding, cognitive decision-making, and cognitive restructuring. The strategies adopted are either behavioural or psychological responses (Wu, Chen, & Ng, 2020) designed to either change the nature of the stressor to decrease the questionable quality of that situation, or to modify how one thinks and feels about that situation to change one's reactions to it. As such, the active coping strategy is typically associated with more adaptive adjustments (Wood & Bhatnagar, 2015; Madhyastha, Latha, & Kamath, 2014) and characterized by efforts to solve or reframe the meanings of problems, seek information, social support or professional help (Li, 2006). Active problem solving requires engagement and ownership of solutions, which helps the person cope better with similar future issues (Kaiseler, Polman, & Nicholls, 2012). Generally speaking, active coping strategies, whether behavioural or emotional, are thought to be better ways to deal with stressful events (Livneh, 2019).

2. Passive Coping Strategy.

Passive coping is an avoid-and-escape approach to coping, which includes behaviours such as negatively interpreting a stressful event or failing to engage with a stressful event (Iyore, 2018). In contrast to a positive appraisal of a stressor which reflects reduced performance anxiety, increased academic performance, and healthier physiological stress responses (Laferton, Fischer, Ebert, Stenzel, & Zimmermann, 2020), a negative appraisal may lead to hedonic disengagement and feelings of helplessness in being able to deal with the stressor (Stanisławski, 2019). In such situations, individuals may default to passive coping responses if they perceive that because the underlying circumstances are unalterable, then the situation needs to be accepted as it is or passed to someone else to resolve (Blalock & Joiner, 2000; Choi, Hegel, Sirrianni, Marinucci, & Bruce, 2012). Passive coping is often considered similar to emotion-focused coping. However, by adopting passive coping a person absolves themselves of responsibility for managing a stressor and instead relinquishes control over its resolution to external resources, such as other people and environmental factors (Vandenbos, 2015). This form of coping strategy is generally considered maladaptive (Wood & Bhatnagar, 2015) because it often exacerbates stress without providing help to deal with the stressor (Dijkstra & Homan, 2016).

3. Avoidance Coping Strategy.

Avoidance involves cognitive and behavioural efforts directed toward minimizing, avoiding or moving away from threats or adverse outcomes (Wiebe, 2020) in the hope that the problem will disappear on its own (Lee, et al., 2017). Procrastination is a common avoidance strategy where the commitment to taking an intended course of action is delayed despite the recognition of adverse consequences (Codina, Valenzuela, Pestana, & Gonzalez-Conde, 2018). By distancing themselves from the stressor, the person essentially decides that there is no stressor. Consequently, the person believes that there is no need to change their behaviour, perception, or emotional response to that situation. Because of this response, avoidance frequently represents denial (Hofmann & Hay, 2018; Sahler & Carr, 2009). Avoidance strategies may constitute a temporary respite where an individual's resources are insufficient to cope (Jensen, Forlini, Partridge, & Hall, 2016; Wu, Chen, & Ng, 2020), or when the stress is so acute that to acknowledge it immediately would be too overwhelming

(Sahler & Carr, 2009). However, avoidance is often employed where a person perceives that a stressful situation is hopeless (Stanisławski, 2019; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), or unchangeable (Gustems-Carnicer & Calderon, 2016). Avoidant coping strategies appear to be indicators of poor adaptation (Livneh, 2019) and are associated with adverse outcomes including anxiety and depression (Abouammoh, Irfan, & AlFaris, 2020; Chou, Hsiao, Cheng, & Yen, 2017) and poor academic achievement (Boyraz, Zhu, & Waits, 2019). Consequently, although avoidance-oriented coping may offer an initial positive effect, it is generally associated with more inadequate adjustment and the potential to promote or support the establishment of new stressors.

4. Appraisal-Focused Coping Strategy.

Appraisal-focused strategies attempt to modify thought processes associated with stress by changing how a problem is approached or perceived (Zarei, Hashemi, Sadipoor, Delavar, & Khoshnevisan, 2016). These strategies can be appropriate when there is no straightforward solution to a problem available. However, Zarei, et al., (2016) suggest that the approach used may frequently involve merely modifying how the situation is considered instead of changing the cause. As part of the appraisal process, a student may evaluate their assessment, course or program of study and calculate the degree of risks and stress they would have to bear in progressing (Co, 2018). In undertaking this evaluation, appraisal-focused strategies challenge the person's assumptions about a situation by evaluating the potential personal relevance and significance of the impact on the person's valued personal goals and values (Ntoumanis, Edmunds, & Duda, 2009). This process is known as primary appraisal. Primary appraisals are not considered primary because they occur first, but because they involve determining whether the stressor poses a threat or potential harm (Jamieson, Hangen, Lee, & Yeager, 2018; Walinga & Stangor, 2014). A benign perception of a source of stress may lead to the perception that no further appraisal or action is required. However, when the impression of a stressor is relevant and significant an individual will seek to evaluate the stressor's controllability (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and their available resources and options (Walinga & Stangor, 2014). By using this approach, different stress appraisals can lead to different coping responses. However, Xuereb (2015) notes that following the use of coping efforts,

individuals will then reappraise the situation and assess whether the situation has changed or whether they now perceive it differently.

5. Problem-Focused Coping Strategy.

Problem-focused approaches are adopted to alter or eliminate sources of stress (Afshar, et al., 2015; Schoenmakers, Van Tilburg, & Fokkema, 2015; Shirazi, Khan, & Khan, 2011). A problem-focused strategy involves the individual facing their problem head-on (Lee, et al., 2017) and taking steps or direct action to solve, manage or change the problem (Adhani, Ridfah, & Ahmad, 2018; Afshar, et al., 2015; Maghan, 2017). As part of the process of taking direct action the individual may seek information relevant to a solution through a process of refocusing on the issue (Hirokawa, Yagi, & Miyata, 2002) or seek to increase personal resources (Pourmohamadreza-Tajrishi, Azadfallah, Hemmati Garakani, & Bakhshi, 2015). As noted by (Tesfaye, 2018) problem-focused strategies encompass efforts to "define the problem, generate alternative solutions, weigh the costs and benefits of various actions, take actions to change what is modifiable, and, if necessary, learn new skills" (p. 1).

By taking these active actions, problem-focused coping mechanisms may allow an individual greater perceived control over their problem. If a stressor is perceived to be controllable, then problem-focused coping can be more effective or preferable (Doron, Stephan, Boiche, & Le Scanff, 2009; Lavoie, 2013; Tsaur, Ku, & Luoh, 2015). However, for stressors perceived as uncontrollable, problem-focused mechanisms may be less effective (Zaman & Ali, 2019). As the nature of problem-focused coping is adaptive (Cong, Ling, & Aun, 2019), the strategy has a positive correlation with coping resilience (Somaiya, Faye, Kamath, & Kolpakwar, 2015) and with academic performance (Gustems-Carnicer & Calderon, 2016). Similarly, because problem-focused coping strategies moderate stressors directly, the result is generally better long-term management of that stressor (Jensen, Forlini, Partridge, & Hall, 2016).

6. Emotion-Focused Coping Strategy.

If an individual believes that they cannot respond to a challenge or they feel that they don't have control over the problem faced, then that individual is more likely to turn

to an emotion-focused coping response (Lavoie, 2013; Walinga & Stangor, 2014). Emotion-focused coping aims to reduce or manage the emotions and feelings of distress associated with the stressor through such mechanisms as constructive efforts to regulate affective responses to a stressor (Jensen, Forlini, Partridge, & Hall, 2016; Madhyastha, Latha, & Kamath, 2014). The application of such measures often entails the person endeavouring to change their emotional reaction to a stressor through responses involving the release of pent-up emotions, personal distraction, managing hostile feelings, meditating, or using systematic relaxation procedures (Zarei, Hashemi, Sadipoor, Delavar, & Khoshnevisan, 2016). However, this coping style does not alleviate the negative effect but rather exacerbates it by prolonging distress (Lee, et al., 2017).

Emotion-focused coping generally predominates in situations where appraisal results in the perception that there is nothing available to prevent or overcome a negative consequence or achieve a positive outcome. In contrast to problem-focused coping, which involves using specific activities to accomplish a task, emotion-focused coping involves using activities to feel better about the task without changing the problem itself or its perception (Baqutayan, 2015). Consequently, while emotion-focused coping may reflect certain adaptive traits, the prevailing view is that it is a maladaptive approach (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007; Yasui-Furukori, et al., 2019), particularly given the tendency to avoid dealing with the source of the stress.

2.4.2 Adaptive and Maladaptive Coping

As outlined earlier, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identify two dichotomous groupings of coping dimensions: problem-focused and emotion-focused[7]. The research literature highlights a similar dichotomous relationship between the use of adaptive and maladaptive coping responses[8]. Adaptive coping strategies usually involve an awareness of the problematic event and the conscious effort to lessen the impact on the individual. To achieve this, adaptive coping may require the ability to use coping strategies that are at least relatively positive in nature (Heffer & Willoughby,

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[7] It is noted that while there are a number of other classifications (such as avoidance) Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) problem-focused and emotion-focused categorisation remains a widely used conceptualisation within the literature.

[8] For example see Tran and Lumley (2019); Gonçalves, Lemos and Canário (2019); Vanstone and Hicks (2019)

2017). Typical adaptive coping methods include strategizing, help-seeking, comfort-seeking, self-encouragement, and commitment (Gonçalves, Lemos, & Canário, 2019). In contrast, maladaptive coping often results in a problem being avoided or ignored. Typically maladaptive coping may result in an individual denying or disengaging from a challenge (Doron, Stephan, Boiche, & Le Scanff, 2009) and may manifest as confusion, escape, concealment, self-pity or, rumination (Gonçalves, Lemos, & Canário, 2019).

While the adoption of maladaptive responses may temporarily resolve an issue, it is more likely to exacerbate the situation. Students who tend to use more maladaptive coping strategies may fail to effectively manage their academic stress (Metzger, et al., 2017). So while adaptive strategies engender positive long-term traits, including task persistence and intrinsic interest, maladaptive coping responses have negative long-term consequences, including helpless responses to failure and low academic performance (Vizoso, Rodríguez, & Arias-Gundín, 2018; Xuereb, 2015). Maladaptive coping also represents an obstacle when dealing with academic stressors (Vizoso, Arias-Gundín, & Rodríguez, 2019) and is strongly associated with the risk of heightened emotional distress (Wongtongkam, 2019). Of particular concern is the strong correlation between maladaptive coping and student burnout (Luo, Wang, Zhang, Chen, & Quan, 2015; Maroco, et al., 2020)

However, Vizoso, Rodríguez and Arias-Gundín (2018) point out that while coping incompetence can negatively affect academic performance, maladaptive coping does not necessarily inhibit intellectual engagement or necessarily reduce academic engagement. Consequently, while a student may be disengaged, either due to adopting a maladaptive coping strategy or a simple lack of interest/motivation, it does not mean that the student will not sufficiently achieve their desired academic outcome[9]. As noted by Chipchase, et al., (2017) the significance of the nature of disengagement may extend beyond being merely the absence of engagement behaviours or the neutral to negative pole of an engagement continuum but a far more complex concept. In line with this argument, Fredricks, Filsecker and Lawson (2016) suggest that researchers

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[9] This point is highlighted within in Figure 2.1 by a dashed line

are beginning to subscribe to engagement and disengagement as separate and distinct constructs associated with different learning outcomes.

2.5 Conceptual Framework - Coping Strategy and Engagement

To draw together and outline the relationship between student coping strategies and engagement, the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 2.1 was developed[10]. The framework indicates the influence that student characteristics have concerning their perceived control over their academic outcome and achievement. In particular, the framework highlights Dijkstra and Homan's (2016) argument that the degree to which coping strategies engage or disengage people from a situation is related to their perceived academic control and ability to use their characteristics and experiences to deal with the situation. Respondek, Seufert, Stupnisky and Nett (2017) identify perceived academic control as "a person's belief in his or her influence over the success or failure of achievement outcomes" (p. 3). If, when faced with a problem or challenge, a student holds a positive perception of the level of control that they have over that event, then they are likely to adopt more adaptive, active and positive learning behaviours which maximise academic achievement (Respondek, Seufert, Stupnisky, & Nett, 2017; You, Hong, & Ho, 2011). However, negative perceptions may lead students to adopt a maladaptive strategy because they believe that their behaviours do not impact their grades (Stupinsky, Perry, Hall, & Guay, 2012).

[10] Within the conceptual framework no distinction is made between engagements in the online or on-campus mode of study.
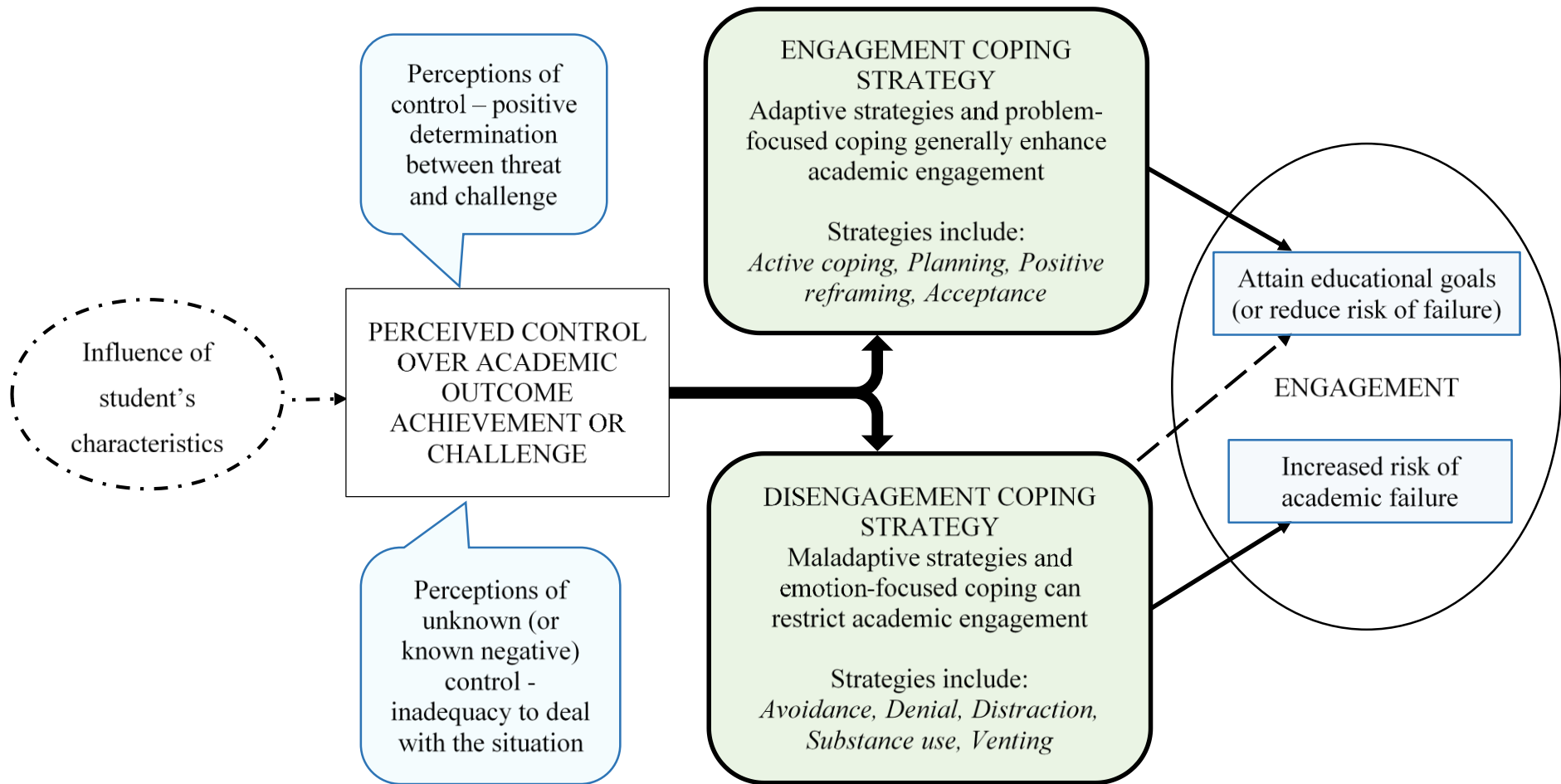
Figure 2.1. The Influence of Coping Strategy on Engagement

2.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter used the existing research literature to provide justification and support for undertaking this research project. Specifically, four areas of academic investigation considered to be influential on and encompassed by this research project were outlined: online learning, student characteristics, coping, and student engagement. In contemplating these areas, the central theme of the mature-aged student formed the focus for the discussion. The review and unpacking of these areas allowed their interrelationship depicted in Figure 1.1 to be developed and worked to establish the model described in Figure 2.1. The lack of a generic definition within the research literature for 'mature-age student' was addressed by consulting thirty reference sources. These sources were used to justify classifying mature-age students for this study as a student over 25 years of age. Similarly, as there is no accepted generic definition of engagement within the research literature, the chapter provides the reasoning for considering the participants' perception of the meaning of engagement and coping to facilitate the analysis and discussion of the data obtained through this study. The next chapter outlines the selection and adoption of the methodology adopted for the study and discusses the approach taken to data collection and analysis.

3. Methodology

3.0 Introduction to Chapter 3

This chapter outlines the methodology adopted in undertaking this study on the engagement practices and approaches that mature-age students enrolled in online higher education adopt to achieve their desired academic outcomes. For this study, methodology does not represent 'method' which constitutes the specific technique or techniques employed to implement a research approach (Andiappan & Wan, 2020; Langdridge, 2007; Mills, 2014). Instead, methodology represents the general strategy adopted to research and solve a problem and involves various research processes, principles, and procedures (Andiappan & Wan, 2020; Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Mills, 2014). Therefore, the chapter provides the rationale for selecting and applying the specific procedures and techniques employed to identify, collect, process, and analyse the data necessary for understanding the phenomenon. In particular, a discussion is provided on the research focus, research paradigm, participant sampling and data collection to provide a suitably detailed account of the rationale and justification for adopting the chosen methodology.

3.1 Research Focus and Paradigm

In contrast to the majority of previous studies undertaken in the area of student engagement and coping strategies, the focus of the research design for this study was not on quantifying relationship characteristics such as student demographics, institutional environment, or the participation of active citizenship (Yoo & Huang, 2013; Zepke, 2019). While very important in identifying the overlying nature of student engagement and coping, particularly concerning their relationship with student learning outcomes, such previous studies do not fully capture or reflect students' significance on an individual basis. This opinion does not suggest that the previous research approaches have been ill-suited or inappropriate for the investigation. Instead, it is a recognition that different research methods are appropriate for addressing specific research questions. Consequently, research methods should not be placed and adopted in a hierarchy of excellence (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015; Opoku, Ahmed, & Akotia, 2016).

Consequently, when seeking to find new and practical answers to unresolved problems, Haynes, Sackett and Tugwell (2007) suggest that there is a requirement to know precisely where the boundary between current knowledge and ignorance lies. Having identified a gap, it is then pertinent to expand the existing research by adopting an alternative approach or research focus. Given the extensive quantitative research already completed regarding student engagement, coping and online study, there is considerable value in adopting a more qualitative approach. As argued by Muilenburg and Berge (2005) researching individual differences facilitates a better understanding of which students will face what barriers. By taking account of the individual's perspective, individuals will be assisted in their learning and overcome their own particular obstacles. Korstjens and Moser (2017) reiterate a similar point in that qualitative research considers the natural contexts in which individuals or groups function. In line with these arguments, this study focuses on unpacking mature-age students' experiences with the online environment and the coping strategies utilized in response to those experiences. To effectively portray those experiences, there was a need to ensure that the research design was appropriate and functional to draw out the evidence as rich data from the study participants. To achieve this functionality, consideration was given to identifying a suitable research paradigm.

Kuhn (1962) states that a research paradigm is the set of shared common beliefs and agreements about how problems should be understood and addressed. In this view, a paradigm represents an individual's worldview. It defines the nature of the world and the individual's place in it and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts. In this way, paradigms outline the scope and nature of legitimate academic inquiry limits and encompass three fundamental interconnected aspects; ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Hansen, 2010)[11]. Ontology and epistemology provide insight into the researcher's world view based on "the nature of truth, the nature of the world, and ways of being in that world" (Berryman, 2019, p. 272). Consequently, ontology represents the nature of reality, while epistemology the nature of knowledge (Al-Ababneh, 2020).

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[11] It is noted that Scotland (2012) considers that a paradigm in addition to the components: ontology, epistemology, methodology, also includes methods.

Framing the ontological and epistemological position allows researchers to rationalise the philosophical position from which they will conduct their research (Poucher, Tamminen, Caron, & Sweet, 2020). Similarly, by clearly setting out the interrelationship between what we think can be researched (the ontological position), what we can know about it (the epistemological position), and how to go about acquiring it (the methodological approach), it is then possible to make a supporting link to the methods employed by the investigation, and subsequently, the data sources sought (Al-Saadi, 2014). This relationship is briefly discussed in the following sections and outlined in Figure 3.1 within Section 3.3 *Research Philosophy – Adopting Phenomenology*. It is worth mentioning that adopting a particular philosophy takes in practical considerations, including personal views of the relationship between knowledge and its development (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2019).

Therefore, to reconcile this study's aims with the research approach taken, it is necessary to briefly outline the ontological, epistemological, and methodological tenets that underpin the choice of the research methodology. In doing so, it is worth mentioning that several practical considerations influence the adoption of a research philosophy, not least of which is the researcher's view of the relationship between knowledge and the processes used in its development (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2019). For example, a researcher concerned with facts and trends is likely to have a very different view on conducting research to that held by a researcher concerned with the feelings and attitudes of those participants connected with those facts or trends.

3.1.1 Ontology

Ontology is the science or study of 'being' (Blaike & Priest, 2019; Crotty, 1998; Daniel & Harland, 2018) and is concerned with 'what is'. From this perspective, ontology represents the image of social reality that forms the basis for theory; it is how we imagine the social world to be. Therefore, ontology considers whether there is a real world out there that exists independently from our knowledge of it (Marsh & Furlong, 2010). Searle (1998) explains this concept using the example of a mountain which can exist without being experienced; and pain that has to be experienced to exist. Extending this reasoning further, ontology considers what kinds of things exist,

why they exist, and the nature of the relationships between these things. In terms of the research methodology adopted for a study, ontology is crucial because it is the ontological question that leads a researcher to inquire what kind of reality exists (Rehman & Altharthi, 2016). The traditionally accepted perspective of ontology involves the consideration of objective or subjective perceptions (Erez, Zhitomirsky-Geffet, & Bar-Ilan, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 2000), and these two perceptions represent different ways of approaching real phenomena.

1. Objectivism.

Objectivism asserts that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of and external to social actors (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) to the point where the phenomena and meanings have an almost tangible reality of their own (Bryman, 2016). In this way, objectivism is geared towards the external aspects of human understanding (Huizing, 2007), a perspective holding that the world is full of facts, and each fact relates to itself regardless of what any person's experiences with that fact is; a mountain is a mountain. Therefore, objectivism's motivating concern is to provide people with law-like, rational knowledge to help them function successfully in the external world (Huizing, 2007). Objectivism seeks to get behind the individuality of experience and identify knowledge and understanding from a universality perspective (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). In obtaining this universality, the knowledge sought must be authentic and factual, as only knowledge gained through rigorous scientific methods can be considered trustworthy (Dudovskiy, 2018). It is this perception of knowledge that establishes the connection between objectivism and positivism. Objectivism perceives the world as being full of facts, and positivism is the influence free way of collecting those facts. Consequently, the positivistic approach is identifiable with the exploration of the "natural" (Chipangura, Van Niekerk, & Van Der Waldt, 2016, p. 263) or "good" (Slootman, 2018, p. 43) sciences.

2. Subjectivism.

Subjectivism in the social sciences generally refers to individual experience, perception, and interpretation of the world and the material conditions and social relations that mould a person's vision (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). While

objectivism focuses on the structure, subjectivism focuses on the subject (Fuza, 2017). Therefore, from a subjectivist standpoint, the social actors' perceptions and actions in relation to their existence create social phenomena (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2019). In this view, *truth* resides only in the mind and is based on the individual's perspective as influenced by that individual's subjective processing, mental choices or emotions. As noted by Richardson and Bowden (1983), our own mental activity is the only unquestionable fact of our experience. However, with multiple interpretations of experience come multiple realities, and there are as many different realities as there are people (Levers, 2013). Put simpler, subjectivism holds that what one person sees isn't necessarily the same thing that another person sees.

As may be seen from this brief account, subjectivists seek to explain all social phenomena in terms of what Ritzer and Gindoff (1992) refer to as "the mental processes of individuals" (p.130). However, subjectivism does not claim that reality does not exist or that everything is an illusion; merely that the nature of reality is dependent on the consciousness of the individual. From this perspective, we understand the world through our senses and rationality in connection with our own life experience and how we reduce that understanding and report it (Pereira & Reddy, 2016). This perspective aligns closely with the constructivist contention that reality is more in the knower's mind and is actively construed (Giliberto, 2014). In this way, it is the knower who constructs a reality or at least interprets it based upon his or her perceptual experiences of the external world and what is occurring (Jonassen, 1991; Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

3. Adopting an Ontological Position.

Ontology considers what reality is. Consequently, a researcher's ontological position will affect how the researcher undertakes research. For example, if the *what is reality* question is asked from a positivist perspective, then the answer would be that there is one single reality or truth because there is a clear distinction between science and personal experience and between fact and value judgement (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001; Irshaidat, 2019). If the *what is reality* question is asked from a constructivist perspective, the answer would be that there is no single reality or truth

(Bada, 2015; Zyphur & Pierides, 2019) because individuals construct their reality based on their perceptions of their prior experiences.

Given that this study's purpose was to describe individual experiences of engagement and coping with online study as presented from an insider viewpoint, this does not align with objectivism's focus on the structure rather than the subject (Fuza, 2017). Consequently, in adopting an ontological position, it was evident that a subjectivist ontology would be suited to investigating human thoughts, interpretations, meanings and feelings. Following the establishment of an ontological belief system, the next step is to outline the relevant epistemological position (Rehman & Altharthi, 2016).

3.1.2 Epistemology.

If an ontological position reflects the researcher's view about the nature of the world, then the epistemological position reflects the researcher's view of what we can know about the world (Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2017). Epistemology is concerned with the nature, theory and form of knowledge[12], particularly regarding questions such *as how do we know?* and what is *meaningful knowledge?* Epistemology involves gaining knowledge of social reality and considers the methods that can be engaged to gather and subsequently validate this understanding. Consequently, epistemological assumptions are concerned with how knowledge can be created, acquired and communicated as part of what it means to know (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Scotland, 2012). In seeking this insight, epistemology essentially asks, "What is the nature of the relationship between the would-be knower and what can be known?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). However, to ensure that the answers received represent reality, epistemology is primarily focused on what is genuinely true, with where possible, little consideration given to assumptions. As can be expected, there can be difficulty in comprehending or knowing what represents the truth, particularly given the variation possible in the collection, interpretation and presentation of data. As noted by Grix (2002), the choice of ontological and epistemological position influences the adoption of a particular methodology which potentially results in different views of the same social phenomena. However, before adopting a specific research methodology for this

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[12] For example see Feldman (2002); Grix (2002); Scotland (2012)

study, it is essential to recognise the influence that positivism and interpretivism have on epistemology.

1. Positivism.

Positivism derives from an objectivist position (Hiller, 2016). It is an epistemology that considers reality as existing separate and external to the researcher (Howell, 2013) and consisting of what is available to the senses. Positivistic researchers prefer precise quantitative data from the investigation of observable phenomena using scientific inquiry rather than philosophical speculation. Such scientific enquiry occurs through a process of scientific observation, measurement and interpretation (Pulla & Carter, 2018). Positivist researchers believe that there are facts that can be proven, that reality is the same for each person, i.e. weight is the same regardless of who measured it, and the process of observation and measurement can explain what that reality is (Ryan, 2018). By dealing with facts and not with values, and by seeking objectivity through the use of consistently rational and logical approaches to research, positivistic researchers can focus on causality and establishing law-like generalizations (Dowding, 2016) drawn from reducing phenomena to their simplest elements. Irshaidat (2019) outlines that methodologically, the positivistic researcher considers respondents as objects of inquiry. In line with this view, the researcher uses a fixed mode of inquiry and seeks to reduce bias probabilities by remaining detached and not personally or emotionally involved in the process of inquiry.

Perhaps one of the more significant criticisms of positivism is its position regarding reality and the claim to certainty (Crotty, 1998; Zyphur & Pierides, 2019). This failing derives from several inherent difficulties, including that certain conclusions are unthinkable (Marsh, Ercan, & Furlong, 2017) and the associated difficulty in dealing with observations that do not fit existing theories (Hollis & Smith, 1990; Major, 2017). Typically such observations are discarded as incorrect until there is a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962), and the observation can be encompassed within the boundaries of the new paradigm. The value and relevance of positivism have also received criticism from the more social science areas of research such as healthcare, where researchers are favouring other paradigms which they believe better incorporate the experiences, needs and aspirations of human subjects (Corry, Porter, & McKenna, 2019). As

outlined by Howell (2013), because positivism is extreme in its interpretation of ontology and epistemology, it is challenging to deal with in the social sciences. A similar point is made by Rehman and Altharthi (2016), who maintain that while objective and scientific methods are appropriate for studying natural objects, they are not as successful for social phenomena.

2. Interpretivism.

While not dichotomous to positivist approaches (Dean, 2018), interpretivism derives from a relativist position. However, interpretivism rejects the notion that a single, verifiable reality exists independent of our senses and accepts the construct of socially constructed multiple realities where truth and reality are created, not discovered (Rehman & Altharthi, 2016). As part of this rejection, interpretivism recognizes the difference between researching people and researching objects. Interpretivism asserts that investigating natural reality (which includes the laws of science and social reality) requires different approaches because reality is only knowable through socially constructed meanings (Goldkuhl, 2012). The interpretivist researcher's goals are to understand and interpret the meanings in human behaviour rather than generalize or merely look for the presence or absence of a causal relationship (Irshaidat, 2019; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Following this approach, researchers look for subjective meanings and social phenomena and focus on the details of the situation, the reality behind those details, and motivating actions. In seeking these meanings, it is important to recognize that the motives, meanings, reasons and other subjective experiences are time and context-bound, with life experiences and the environment subject to continual alteration and variation (Pulla & Carter, 2018).

Consequently, the same observations undertaken at a different time or under other circumstances would not necessarily produce the same results. Because of this subjective nature, a participant's perceptions of norms, understanding, social reality and definitions of the situation profoundly impact the participant's view and values of reality (Hendriks, Van den Putte, & De Bruijn, 2015; Krauss, 2005), making the primary data generated challenging to generalise. Generalisability may also prove difficult given the subjective nature of interpretivism and the potential influence on

observation and interpretation. Ultimately the reliability and representativeness of data can be undermined by the effect of personal viewpoint.

3. Adopting an Epistemological Position.

Given that the purpose of this study is to describe individual experiences of engagement and coping with online study as presented from an insider viewpoint, this did not align with positivism's focus on knowledge being objective and value-free. Consequently, in adopting an epistemological position, it was evident that there was a closer affinity between the study's purpose and interpretivism tenets. In particular, Mack's (2010) argument that research cannot be objectively observed from the outside; instead, it must be observed from inside through the direct experiences of the people involved was persuasive.

3.1.3 Moving from Ontology and Epistemology to Methodology

Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill and Bristow (2019) reiterate that there are many different ways of interpreting the world and undertaking research, and no single point of view can ever give the entire picture because of the multiple potential realities. To facilitate the investigation of a particular reality, the choice of methodology becomes an important consideration. As this study intended to place the participant's voice central in the discovery, there was a requirement to get into the mind of the individual student experiencing the phenomenon. It was also essential to ensure that the rich insights into the phenomenon were maintained, and the complexity of the encounters was not reduced to a series of law-like generalisations. In considering these intentions, it was apparent that the interpretivist approach would facilitate the discovery and description of the unique nature of those being investigated and to capture the participants' social constructions of a phenomenon (Broido and Manning, 2002; Chowdhury, 2014; Zhao, 2020).

As depicted in Figure 3.1, following the identification of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings, the next task is to determine an appropriate research method to acquire the relevant knowledge. O'Sullivan, Rassel and Berner (2007) define research method as the steps researchers use to collect and analyse data. However, this definition was considered insufficient to provide suitable justification

for identifying a particular method for this study. Therefore, the adaption of the descriptions offered by Patel and Patel (2019) and Schwandt (2001) enabled a broader definition of methodology. Consequently, methodology represents the systematic theoretical analysis of the methods, assumptions, principles, and procedures applied to a particular approach of inquiry. Importantly, the appropriate choice of research methodology ensures that the data obtained enables the research findings to be as unambiguous as possible (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) Arguably the most critical methodological choice facing researchers falls on the distinction between qualitative and quantitative data.

3.2 Identifying a Methodology

The research approach can generally be categorized into two main paradigms; quantitative and qualitative (Antwi & Kasim, 2015; Bryman, 2016). Although the approaches differ in their perspectives (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016), both approaches seek to explain a particular experience of a phenomenon. In justifying a specific approach for this study, consideration was given to both approaches' appropriateness against the desired research focus and outcomes.

3.2.1 The Quantitative Perspective

A quantitative investigation aims to seek the truth of a reality outside of the researcher (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). This reality is a single reality made up of discoverable facts that are separable from the feelings or biases of those involved (Eyisi, 2016; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Huyun, 2012). In searching for this reality, quantitative research follows a deductive path, moving from a hypothesis formulated from an existing theory to testing that hypothesis by collecting and reducing data to numerical values to enable statistical analysis (Apuke, 2017; Farghaly, 2018; Yilmaz, 2013). Unfortunately, the focus on numbers can portray the quantitative approach as merely a way of classifying and counting features to construct statistical models to explain what was observed (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015).

However, simplifying complex variables operationally and representing large amounts of complex data in terms of central tendencies makes quantitative methods a more reductionist form of inquiry than qualitative approaches (Apuke, 2017; Miller,

Worthington, Muzurovic, Tipping, & Goldman, 2002). By reducing the nature of the data collected, quantitative methods are open to the criticism that they are limited in their capacity to capture the full richness and complexity of multidimensional phenomena. This point is outlined by Petty, Thomson, and Stew (2012), who argue that while making a significant contribution to the understanding of a phenomenon, the exclusive use of quantitative approaches can result in a narrow interpretation of such phenomenon where more qualitative research approaches can assist in the generation of a different sort of knowledge, knowledge which is complementary to quantitative methods.

3.2.2 The Qualitative Perspective

Qualitative research seeks answers to the *what, how* and *why* questions regarding quality and depth rather than quantity and frequency (Rahman M. S., 2016; Yilmaz, 2013). In this regard, qualitative research is primarily subjective in approach, seeking to understand human behaviour and the reasons that govern such behaviour by considering experience, meaning and perspective, which are usually not amenable to counting or measuring (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016). As noted by Gephardt (2004), qualitative research starts from and returns to words, talk, and texts as meaningful representations of concepts. It is these textual accounts of the individual's lifeworld, which reflect the diversity of their lived experiences (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013), and allow the interpretation of the meaning of the attitudes and values held by individuals (Aspers & Corte, 2019). In this way, qualitative research offers a way of understanding a particular situation's complex reality by gathering and interpreting data on the ambiguity of an individual's behaviours, emotions, beliefs, opinions (Almeida, Faria, & Queirós, 2017; Austin & Sutton, 2014). Notably, qualitative research's objective is not the accumulation of information per se but the growth of knowledge about the phenomena of concern (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Sandelowski, 2012).

In endeavouring to draw out the individual's perspective on the phenomenon, qualitative research instruments are more flexible, allowing greater spontaneity and adaptation of the interaction between the researcher and the study participant. Typically, this flexibility occurs through the use of mostly open-ended questions, the

wording of which may not necessarily be the same for each participant. The use of open-ended questions allows participants to respond in their own words and with more depth than merely *yes or no,* or *numerical* responses.

3.2.3 Qualitative or Quantitative?

Quantitative and qualitative methodologies have different underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions about the generation of knowledge and reality. However, the approaches can be considered complementary rather than contradictory (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014), as they share commonalities regarding examining social phenomena (Park & Park, 2016). House (2018) in considering the basic function of the two approaches, suggests that quantitative research seeks to explain human behaviour whereas qualitative research seeks to understand human behaviour. While both perspectives can be considered equally valid ways to evaluate a particular phenomenon, in the context of this study, there was an intention to adopt a methodology that would facilitate exploring the meaning ascribed to a particular experience. In seeking this understanding, there was no intention to determine cause and effect or to predict or describe the distribution of particular attributes. The intention was to identify data in the form of rich and thick descriptions of student feelings and experiences. Given this intention, adopting a qualitative approach represented the most appropriate choice.

3.2.4 Selecting the Qualitative Method

Having settled on a qualitative methodology as representing the most appropriate way to give meaning to the thoughts and action of those encountering the phenomenon, the next question was which qualitative method would be most appropriate? To select an appropriate method within which to work Teherani, et al., (2015) contend that there must be an alignment between the belief system underpinning the research approach, the research question, and the research approach itself to achieve rigorous qualitative research. To identify the most appropriate qualitative method for this study, five qualitative methods were reviewed: Grounded theory, Ethnography, Case Study, Narrative and Phenomenology.

This study's aim was to investigate mature-age student coping strategies concerning engagement in the online environment. An essential aspect of this investigation was the detailing of the individual student's perceptions and experiences of the online environment. In reviewing the qualitative approaches that could be employed, it was evident that phenomenology most clearly resonated with the intent of the proposed study. Consequently, this study adopted a phenomenological approach.

3.3 Research Philosophy - Adopting Phenomenology

A discussed in Sections *3.1 Research Focus and Paradigm* and *Identifying a Methodology*, selecting a suitable research approach involves considering how to obtain the appropriate data to answer the research questions. An influential part of this process is the researcher's perception of reality which affects how they gain knowledge from that reality (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2019). Therefore, it is essential that the researcher clearly outline the research philosophy to ensure that the research outcomes' interpretation is appropriate and meaningful. The research philosophy in adopting phenomenology is represented in Figure 3.1.
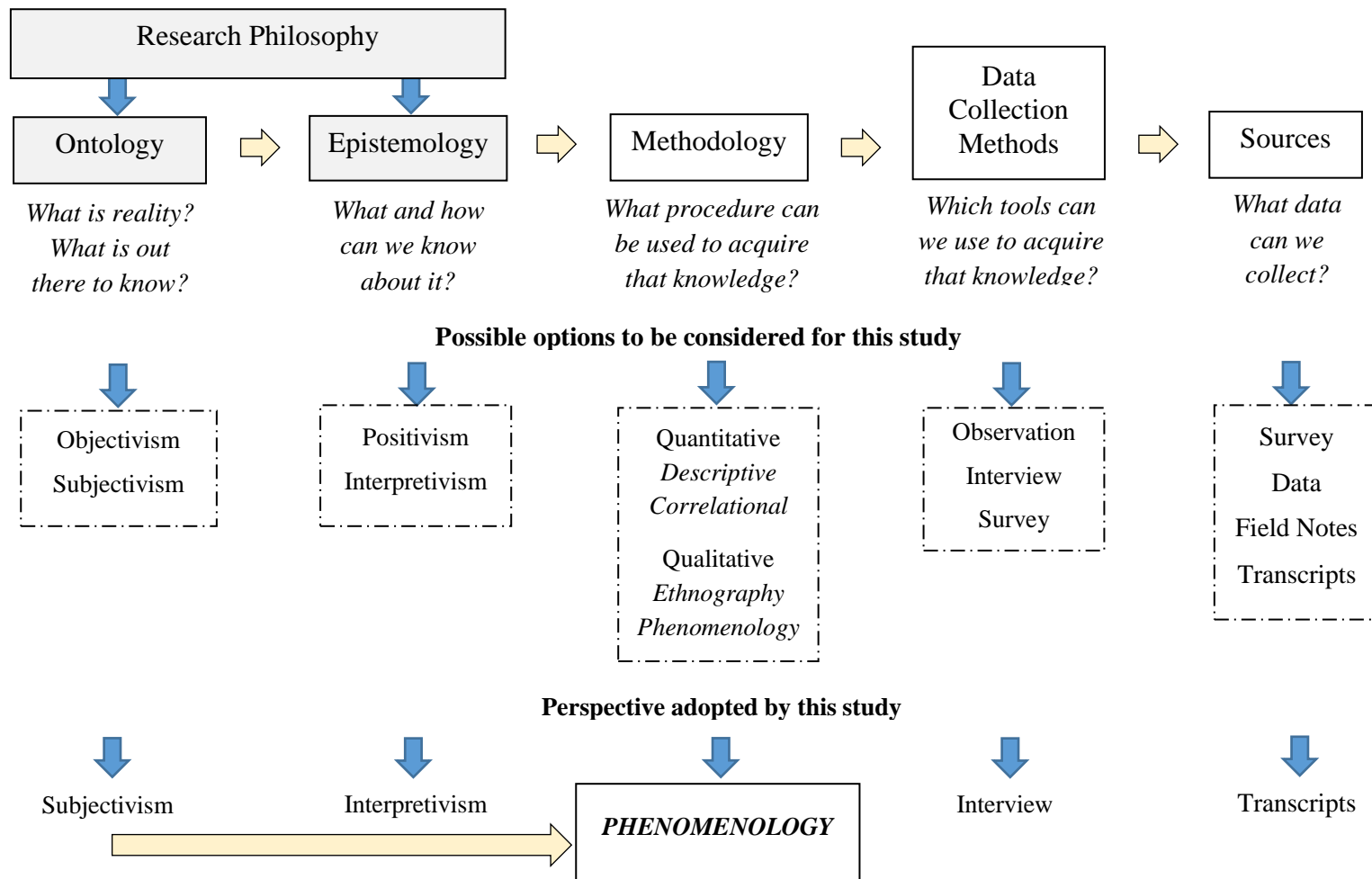
Figure 3.1. The Interrelationship between the Aspects of Research.
Adapted from *Political Analysis. A Critical Introduction* by C. Hay, 2002, Basingstoke: Palgrave. Copyright by Palgrave.

3.3.1 Phenomenology

Husserl (1970) defines phenomenology as being the science of the essence of consciousness, as reflected in the individual's concept of intentionality and the meaning of the lived experience. This particular focus is an essential tenet of the descriptive approach as it suggests that the purpose of lived experiences can only be unravelled through one-to-one transactions between the researcher and the research participants (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). These transactions must involve attentive listening, interaction, and observation to represent the reality and meaning of a concept or a phenomenon for several individuals (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). The use of thick description and close analysis of lived experience allows for clarifying the meanings of phenomena from lived experiences rather than explaining or discovering causes (Jackson, Vaughan, & Brown, 2018; Penner & McClement, 2008).

While Husserl (1970)developed the philosophical traditions of phenomenology based on a descriptive perspective of qualitative research (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019), Heidegger, a student of Husserl, sought to answer the question of the meaning of being (Smith, 2018). In contrast to Husserl, Heidegger (1962), in his publication *Being and Time,*[13] considers phenomenology from an interpretive perspective, believing that humans are hermeneutic beings capable of finding significance and meaning in their own lives. In reviewing the difference between the Husserl and Heidegger views, Wojnar and Swanson (2007) note that a crucial difference between the phenomenologies was that for Husserl, context was of peripheral importance, while for Heidegger, it was the context that was the central concern. Ultimately the selection of the most appropriate phenomenological approach[14] for a particular study comes down to a matter of judgement, based not only on which is best suited to the research problem but also to the researcher (Gill, 2020; Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, & Palmér, 2019; Willis, Sullivan-Bolyai, Knafl, & Cohen, 2016). In preparing to undertake this study, both Husserl's descriptive or eidetic approach and Heidegger's interpretive or hermeneutic approach were taken into consideration and reviewed.

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[13] Being and Time was originally published in 1927 in German. Heidegger (1962) provides an English translation version.
[14] While descriptive and interpretive are generally considered to be the two main 'schools' of phenomenology, there are others – such as the Dutch or Utrecht school (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010), which combines the characteristics of descriptive and interpretive phenomenology.

3.3.2 Descriptive Phenomenology

Jackson, Vaughan and Brown (2018) maintain that the originality of a descriptive phenomenological approach offers new insight into a phenomenon. Part of this insight includes what Sloan and Bowe (2014) maintain is the ability of descriptive phenomenology to permit the observer to transcend the phenomena and meanings under investigation and take a global view of the essences discovered. This approach allows for structuring generic descriptions of the phenomena without moving to a more detailed picture. This perspective establishes what Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) describe as an objectification of the meanings of human experiences. For Husserl (1970), phenomenology suspends all suppositions, is related to consciousness and is based on the meaning of the individual's experience. Essential to the awareness or consciousness of an object or event was the participant's experience of perception, thought, memory, imagination, and emotion, which leads to "intentionality" (Reiners, 2012, p. 1). Thus, the critical question within descriptive phenomenology relates to what do we know as persons? In seeking to identify what we know, descriptive phenomenology focuses on "the correlation between the noema of experience (the 'what') and the noesis (the 'how it is experienced')" (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 1299). Once the phenomenon has been described, descriptive phenomenology considers that its work is complete, and anything more will be a departure from the descriptive approach (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

This argument is reminiscent of the view taken by Welman and Kruger (1999) in that phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved. In order to achieve this level of understanding, it is essential to refrain from any pre-set framework, remain true to the facts, and accurately describe the phenomenon. Consequently, the operative word in descriptive phenomenology is *describe*. By maintaining the goal of describing the experience of the phenomenon, Husserl's phenomenology emphasizes a way of coming to know through the experience of a phenomenon (Derico, 2017). It is through this experiential epistemology that the individuals exploring a phenomenon can establish a sense of empathy and connectedness.

3.3.3 Interpretive Phenomenology

In contrast to Husserl's (1970) view of phenomenology, Heidegger's (1962) theory of phenomenology focused on the meaning of being. As part of this being, humans experience and interpret the world they live in (Polifroni & Welch, 1999). So while Husserl's aim for phenomenology was to capture experience in its primordial origin or essence, without any interpretation, explanation, or theorizing, Heidegger considered that experiences require more than a description, they must first be understood before they can be interpreted and shared (Derico, 2017). Consequently, Heidegger rejected the epistemological theory of knowledge and adopted ontology (Burns & Peacock, 2019; Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, 2016), the science of being; being in the world rather than knowing the world. Interpretive phenomenology, therefore, seeks to move beyond the description or core concepts of the experience and seeks to draw out the meanings embedded in everyday occurrences (Alase, 2017; Reiners, 2012). Within the Heideggerian view, the critical question considered is what is being? (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, 2016; Iwuagwu, 2017)

Ultimately, interpretive phenomenology focuses on understanding the meaning of experience by searching for themes and engaging with the data to interpret the meanings found regarding the phenomena (Scotland, 2012). But in engaging with the data, the observer cannot be removed from the process because the researcher exists with the phenomena and the observer's past experiences and knowledge become valuable guides to the inquiry (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Consequently, from the interpretive viewpoint, investigations of "things in their appearing" (Langdridge, 2008, p. 1127) cannot be undertaken while remaining neutral or detached from those things.

3.3.4 Descriptive or Interpretive?

Reiners (2012) contends that the choice of an appropriate phenomenological research method will depend on whether the researcher is asking for a description or an interpretation of the phenomenon. From the interpretive perspective, the focus is on the meaning of being a human in the world rather than on the phenomenon itself; conversely, descriptive phenomenology seeks to gain a clear understanding of the true meaning of the phenomenon by describing the experience (Flood, 2010; Sundler,

Lindberg, Nilsson, & Palmér, 2019). Maintaining the pure descriptions and universal essences ensures that the knowledge generated reflects the participant's first-hand experience of the phenomenon (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

In both the interpretive and descriptive methods, the researcher hears the descriptions of the participants' lived experience (Penner & McClement, 2008; Qutoshi, 2018). However, in the interpretive method, the researcher uses their prior knowledge and insights to interpret and uncover hidden meanings within those descriptions (Burns & Peacock, 2019; Kleiman, 2004). Consequently, as this study looks to distil down and describe without influence the participants' individual experiences, descriptive phenomenology was considered more appropriate and adopted. To ensure that the researcher's subjectivity does not inform the participant's descriptions, descriptive phenomenology requires that the researcher completes a process of bracketing (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

3.3.5 Bracketing

By adopting a descriptive phenomenology approach, there is a requirement to put aside any preconceived ideas regarding the interview subject before commencing data collection, in effect to *bracket* oneself (Husserl, 1970). Sorsa, Kiikkala, and Astedt-Kurki (2015) consider that the term bracket relates to a researcher disclosing their past as a tool for increasing awareness and making scientifically argued choices. By putting aside prior understanding or preconceptions about the phenomenon under investigation, a researcher attempts to achieve a state of transcendental subjectivity or neutrality (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). In this way, the researcher can better describe the phenomenon because the researcher's biases (Reiners, 2012) and preconceptions (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019) are contained and do not influence the research process or its findings (Finlay, 2008).

As Yilmaz (2013) outline, the failure to make orientation, predispositions and biases explicit can have significant consequences given that qualitative findings are highly context and case dependent. Consequently, ensuring that the respondent's voice is the

source of truth in the data[15] will establish rigour and validity and serve to legitimise the research (Bednall, 2006; Bradshaw, Atkinson, & Doody, 2017). The adoption of bracketing also facilitates a balanced consideration of all data and reduces the risk of consciously or unconsciously, leaving some areas unexamined (Patton, 2015). This aspect has particular relevance during the coding phase of the analysis, where the formulated meanings must stay true to the participants' narrative. The bracketing process for this study is detailed in Appendix A and referenced throughout the record of the steps involved in the process of data analysis outlined in Appendix G.

3.4 Sampling and Sample size

In seeking to obtain the relevant data to provide adequate insight into the phenomenon, consideration was given to collecting the data and, in particular, to the source of this data. Emmel (2013) argues that any research project's shape depends on the resources available and the purpose of the research. It is these factors that represent the reasons for sampling. As is well understood, it is not necessary to collect data from everyone in a community to get valid findings for research purposes. Generally, this would be both impractical and uneconomical (Bowling, 2002; Ponto, 2015). Therefore relevant data is often obtained by sampling a portion of a fully defined population. In a qualitative inquiry, the adequacy of the sample pertains to the appropriateness of the sample composition and size (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018), which is a contextual decision and partially dependent upon the scientific paradigm under which investigation is taking place (Boddy, 2016). For example, while a sample of one may be considered suitable for a case study or a narrative inquiry, it would be inadequate for many other qualitative approaches such as grounded theory or ethnography (Creswell, 2018; Morse & Richards, 2007).

3.4.1 The Number of Participants

Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nyström (2008) suggest that while the number of participants is an essential question in research involving statistical calculation, in lifeworld research, the selection of informants is different. Consequently, while the quantitative

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[15] It should be recognised that overly focusing on the participants' accounts at the expense of other data sources, may lead researchers to potentially overburden the voices of participants with too much evidentiary weight (White & Drew, 2011).

research paradigm emphasizes the importance of generalisability, it has less significance as a criterion for evaluating the quality of a qualitative study (Polit & Beck, 2010). However, while qualitative findings lack an agreed-upon significance level[16], some researchers view in-depth qualitative research as well-suited for generalization through extrapolation[17]. Therefore, as outlined by Englander (2012), it is merely a common misconception that a large sample size is a prerequisite for generalising the results to the broader population. Indeed, as Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) suggest, the data from only a few individuals sharing a lived experience may hold more relevance or meaning from which to distil down the essence of a phenomenon than a large, diverse sample does. Perhaps because of this detailed focus on the accounts of participants with experience of a specific phenomenon, sample size has reduced as the phenomenological and the qualitative approach in general, have evolved (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Morse (2000) in considering the number of data sources required for the qualitative research paradigm, points out that there is an inverse relationship between the amount of useable data obtained from each participant and the number of participants. In particular, the higher the amount of useable data collected from each person, the fewer the number of participants are required (Dworkin, 2012; Morse, 2000). This argument also links the number of participants with the research method used. For example, because semi-structured interviews draw out relatively shallow data per interview question, there is a need for a more significant number of participants to obtain the richness of data required for qualitative analysis. However, where participants are interviewed several times for a study, then fewer participants are necessary because of the amount of data obtained from each participant. For qualitative research, this means that there is no 'magic number' of interviews or observations that are required. To a large degree, participant numbers in a qualitative research study depend on the questions a researcher seeks to answer and the nature of the data sought (Pratt, 2009; Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018). This point is reiterated by Vagle (2018), who contends that it is a judgement call whether it makes sense to spend a lot of time with one or two participants or a relatively short time with a large number of

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[16] Traditionally, quantitative researchers have used either the 0.05 level (which refers to a 95% confidence level) or the more conservative 0.01 level (which refers to a 99% confidence level).
[17] For example see Misco (2007).

participants. Arguably, it is likely to be the data quality and the number of interviews per participant that determines the amount of useable data obtained and determine when sufficient saturation has occurred. However, as pointed out by Dworkin, (2012), saturation depends on many factors, and not all of them are under the researcher's control.

3.4.2 Data Saturation.

The term saturation is often used in reference to decisions about sample size in qualitative research. Although initially developed for grounded theory studies, it has since become applicable wherever interviews form the primary data source for qualitative research. In application, saturation represents the point at which no additional data are found, and the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Given, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Urquhart, 2013). In line with this view, saturation entails continually bringing new participants into a study until the data set is complete as indicated by data replication or redundancy (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013).

This typical broad description of data saturation indicates that saturation operates at the dataset level as a whole, such as when the researcher begins to hear the same comments repeatedly (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2019). Extending this perspective further, Polit and Beck (2017) suggest that data saturation occurs when a sense of closure is attained in the qualitative data because new data only yields redundant information. However, narrower views of saturation affect a more individual-oriented perspective regarding the data obtained (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, & Bristow, 2019). In this way, saturation can be considered against the individual participant at a particular point within a specific interview.

In comparing the broader and narrower views, it is apparent that the defining factor between the two is that the broader view considers saturation in terms of the fuller process of data analysis. In contrast, the narrower view is located principally at the level of data collection. However, while these views are distinct, they are not necessarily contradictory or inconsistent, particularly as an individual interviewee's personal experience will vary the data set, and not every interview will replicate the

same data. Therefore while saturation can occur within a single interview, such as where a participant is not generating new data (even with prompts), saturation at the study level may only happen when the interviews collectively do not create new insight. Consequently, whether saturation has occurred or whether further interviews will turn over something new is a particular point of contention; after all, the next interviewee may have a completely different perspective on the phenomenon, and so on. So, where is the finish line? In considering this point, Saunders, et al., (2018) provide the following guidance suggesting that the question is not has saturation occurred, but rather how much saturation is enough? In answering this question, it is essential to consider the adequacy of the sample size.

3.4.3 Confirming Sample Size

The adequacy or appropriateness of a sample relates to composition and size (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018). Unfortunately, because sample size differs across research paradigms (Boddy, 2016) and individual studies (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), there is an inconclusive position regarding sample size. This point is raised by Baker and Edwards (2012), who suggest justification may often be simply a matter of considering what would constitute sufficient data to make a persuasive case to the "most ardent critics" (p. 6) in the field. However, such an approach is hardly a proper guideline as, without adequate justification, the implication is that sample size is arbitrary and thus inconsequential (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Sim, Saunders, Waterfield, & Kingstone, 2018). Such an indication of indifference to rigour would be unacceptable in quantitative research and, therefore, be unacceptable in qualitative research. To overcome the vague nature of sample size guidelines concerning qualitative research Marshall, et al., (2013) outline three approaches to justify an appropriate sample size:

1. Determination by qualitative methodologist. Marshall, et al. (2013) suggest that it is significant that they were unable to identify any studies citing the use of a qualitative methodologist to determine appropriate sample size. The authors suggest that while most qualitative methodologists openly recognize the lack of set standards, very few methodologists have established a particular position on sample size.

2. Determination by precedent. Researchers can estimate and justify sample size by citing sample sizes used in previous studies with similar research problems and designs. However, in their research Marshall, et al. (2013) only identify one out of the 83 studies reviewed that cited prior qualitative work as the basis for sample size.

3. Determination by statistical demonstration of saturation within a dataset. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) in considering theoretical saturation in phenomenological studies, showed that within 12 interviews, the acceptable Cronbach's alpha of 0.7[18] was reached and concluded that most of the data saturation had occurred by 12 interviews.

For this study, the sample size was determined by adopting two approaches; first, by considering sample size in previous phenomenological studies, and second by incorporating a methodology for verifying saturation.

1. Approach 1 - Sample Size Precedents.

In establishing a sample size precedent, fifty-two descriptive and interpretive phenomenological research sources were consulted. The sources were identified using the following two approaches:

1. As part of the literature review, methodology and analysis reading; and

2. Through an open-dated online database enquiry relating to 'phenomenological study'.

It is worth noting that the number of participants presented in Appendix B represents the participants who participated in a particular study or are the numbers suggested by the author as part of a theoretical discussion of saturation. Two other points of interest were identifiable from the data in Appendix B; firstly, there is no discernible change in the figures from 1987 through to 2020. Secondly, the statistics reflect Fridlund and Hildingh's (2000) contention that it is common for qualitative studies to engage between 1 and 30 informants.

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[18] Cronbach's alpha is a measure of internal consistency. A return of 0.7 and above while not an excellent result is generally considered to be good.

In analysing the data within Appendix B, where a source provided a range for the number of participants, then the higher number was adopted. The resulting distribution of participant numbers, as shown in Table 3.1, support the general assertion that there is no specific participant sample size adopted by phenomenological studies. However, a value of '10' was identifiable as a representative mean, mode and median average.

Table 3.1.

Distribution of Participant Sample Size in Phenomenological Studies

Distribution of Participant Sample Size as drawn from Appendix B																		
1	2	3	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	20	32	33
		3		6	7	8		10	11	12	13							
		3		6	7			10	11		13							
		3		6	7			10	11									
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2. Approach 2 - Verifying Saturation.

The review of studies presented in Appendix B suggests a participant sample size of 10. However, the research aim was to gather sufficient depth of information to adequately describe the phenomenon, rather than acquire a fixed number of

participants as part of a mechanistic rule (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Van Rijnsoever, 2017). Consequently, the second approach adopted to justify sample size involved incorporating a methodology for verifying saturation. The verification of saturation is a matter of degree because there is always the potential for identifying new units of meaning or themes the longer that the data are examined and analysed (Saunders, et al., 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Given that there is no agreed-on method of establishing data saturation, this study adopts Francis, et al.,'s (2010) proposed four principles for analysing and reporting data saturation. The first two principles apply to the analysis process relating specifically to determining saturation in theory-based interview studies; "the initial analysis sample" and "the stopping criterion" (p. 1234). The initial analysis sample requires the researcher to specify *a priori* for the minimum sample size for the initial analysis. The specific number required will depend on several factors, including the complexity of the research questions and the sample's diversity. The stopping criterion establishes the required number of additional interviews to confirm that no new ideas are emerging.

Therefore, considering the findings outlined in Appendix B, this study specified that a priori of ten participants representing the initial analysis sample would be interviewed (interviews 1 to 10). The stopping criterion involves interviewing a further two participants (interviews 11 to 12) to identify whether anything is being added to the phenomenon's overall description. If the data available did not support a sufficient theoretical account after reaching the stopping criteria, interviews 13 and 14 were available to retest the stopping criteria.

3.4.4 Identifying the Participant Sample

Following the establishment of the guidelines to confirm data saturation, the next step was to ensure the data sources' suitability. The selection of an appropriate sample of participants is fundamental to research, whether quantitative or qualitative (Martinez-Mesa, González-Chica, Duquia, Bonamigo, & Bastos, 2016; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Saunders & Townsend, 2018). Because researchers are interested in obtaining information from a population of interest, it is necessary to define a sampling frame representing the population of interest from which to draw the sample (Shapiro, 2011; Taherdoost, 2016). Therefore, the sampling frame is a means for choosing the

particular members from the target population to interview as part of the survey. The sampling frame may be identical to the population, or it may be only part of it and is, therefore, a subset of the population. Obtaining a sample from a given population requires the establishment of a sample design. The sample design represents a definite plan, technique, or procedure for selecting participants for the sample. There are different types of sample designs based on two factors (Etikan, 2017; Kothari, 2004); the representation basis (probabilistic and non-probabilistic sampling) and the element selection technique (unrestricted or restricted). Probabilistic sampling involves random selection, whereas non-probabilistic sampling is non-random and involves some form of researcher influence such as judgement or convenience. An unrestricted sample involves drawing each sample element individually from the population at large; all other forms of sampling fall under the term restricted sampling. Table 3.2 provides an outline of this arrangement.

Table 3.2.

Sample Design - Element Selection Technique and Representation Basis

Basic Sampling Designs

Element selection technique	Representation basis	
	Probability sampling	*Non-probability sampling*
Unrestricted sampling	Simple random sampling	Haphazard sampling or convenience sampling
Restricted sampling	Complex random sampling (such as cluster sampling, systematic sampling, stratified sampling etc.)	Purposive sampling (such as quota sampling, judgement sampling)

Note. Basic Sampling Designs. Adapted from Research Methodology; Methods and techniques (2 ed.) by C. R. Kothari, 2004, New Dehli: New Age International. Copyright 2004 New Age International. Adapted with permission.

1. Probabilistic Sampling.

Probabilistic samples have several advantages over other methods of selecting subsamples (Allen, 2017), and according to Gama and Martins (2017), they represent the preferred approach in scientifically rigorous research endeavours. In the context of probabilistic (or random) sampling, all units of the target population have a nonzero probability of taking part in the study (Martinez-Mesa, González-Chica, Duquia, Bonamigo, & Bastos, 2016). Nonzero means that all participants have an equal chance (Turner, 2020; Wisniowski, Sakshaug, Perez Ruiz, & Blom, 2020) to be selected in the study because they all have characteristics that are representative of the wider society, albeit in smaller numbers. Key advantages of probability sampling strategies are that when carried out properly, they should yield an unbiased sample (Jager, Putnick, & Bornstein, 2017), along with a measurable sampling error (Wisniowski, Sakshaug, Perez Ruiz, & Blom, 2020). By minimizing the potential for selection bias and controlling the potential influence of known and unknown confounders, it is possible to ensure the generalizability of findings to the larger population (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Haneuse, 2016). Generally, this form of sampling is employed when data are collected using quantitative methods.

2. Non-Probabilistic Sampling.

In the context of non-probabilistic sampling, the likelihood of selecting some individuals from the target population is null (Martinez-Mesa, González-Chica, Duquia, Bonamigo, & Bastos, 2016). Sampling under this approach relies on the researcher's ability to select members rather than adopting a fixed selection process. Consequently, it is more difficult for all population elements to have equal opportunities to be included in a sample because of this more' targeted' selection process. Consequently, this type of sampling does not render a representative sample, and because the observations may lead to skewed results, they are usually not generalizable to the target population. The approach is commonly applied when data are collected using qualitative methods and where there is less desire to generalize the results (Kelley, Clark, Brown, & Sitzia, 2003; Rivera, 2018). Three main non-probabilistic techniques are:

1. Purposive sampling, where only members of a specific population are identified and included in the survey;

2. Convenience sampling, the sample is made up of the individuals who are the easiest to recruit; and

3. Snowball sampling, where, as the survey progresses, further participants for the sample are identified by the individuals already being surveyed.

In considering non-probabilistic sampling approaches, purposive sampling holds a greater alignment with the nature and intent of this study. In arriving at this determination, two arguments were deemed persuasive. First, it is the phenomenon that dictates the method and even the type of participants (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Hycner, 1999). Second purposive sampling is better attuned to identifying primary participants who align with the research's aims and objectives (Campbell, et al., 2020; Welman & Kruger, 1999).

3. Purposive Sampling.

Purposeful sampling is not a comprehensive approach (Benoot, Hannes, & Bilsen, 2016). Purposive sampling by taking a more restrictive approach facilitates the identification of participants who share common characteristics (Modesto, 2018) such as having specific knowledge and experience of the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2015). This approach facilitates an understanding of the lived experience (Mapp, 2008) because the individuals selected can speak to the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this respect, purposive sampling is predefined and iterative rather than being informed by emerging theory (O'Halloran, Littlewood, Richardson, Tod, & Nesti, 2016; Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018).

However, such an approach is not without its challenges, particularly given that the range of variation in a population used to obtain a purposive sample is often not known at the outset of a study (Palinkas, et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is often considered to be subjective and judgemental in that the researcher's judgement plays a significant role in the selection of specific subjects or elements to include in the study (Ames, Glenton, & Lewin, 2019; Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Sharma, 2017). Consequently, it can be challenging to defend purposive sampling against arguments regarding a failure to contain the researcher's biases (Benoot, Hannes, & Bilsen, 2016)

(Dhivyadeepa, 2015; Mujere, 2016), particularly when compared with the design of probability sampling techniques which reduces such biases. However, this is only a significant disadvantage when such judgements are ill-conceived or poorly considered and do not follow clear criteria (Dhivyadeepa, 2015). One way to overcome potential issues in adopting purposeful sampling is by selecting a form of purposeful sampling that best suits the study's aims.

Patton (2015) identified that there are about 16 different types of purposeful sampling, including typical case sampling, theory-guided sampling and critical case sampling. In considering which type of sampling to adopt for this study, Martinez-Mesa, et al.,'s (2016) argument for ensuring that the selected sample frame fits the study objectives or hypotheses was influential. In line with the aims outlined for this study, criterion sampling was considered the most appropriate fit in that it involves searching for cases or individuals likely to be information-rich based on specific criteria (Patton, 2015). However, to obtain individuals who meet the study's requirements, it was necessary to establish selection criteria.

Establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria for study participants is a required and critical practice when designing high-quality research protocols because of the potential impact on the external validity of the results of the study (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). Martinez-Mesa, et al., (2016) share this view arguing that researchers should specify the sampling strategy in advance to ensure methodological rigour and avoid the sampling method affecting the sample size estimation. In particular, there must be a recognition that without a rigorous sampling plan, the estimates derived for a study may be subject to selection bias. To gain an in-depth level of knowledge about the phenomenon, the question that needs asking of potential participants is: "Do you have the experience that I am looking for?" (Englander, 2012, p. 19). In seeking a suitable response to this question, it is essential to identify a target population from which to draw an appropriate sample frame.

3.4.5 The Target Population and the Selected Sample Frame

Establishing a suitable sample frame requires the identification of the target population. This process involves the generation of a list of inclusion and exclusion

criteria for potential study subjects. Inclusion criteria define the type of subjects that fulfil the needs of the researcher for the study. In contrast, exclusion criteria define the features of potential study participants, who, while meeting the inclusion criteria, present with additional characteristics that could interfere with the study's success or increase the risk of an unfavourable outcome (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). Exclusion criteria are as critical as inclusion criteria because they help predict and eliminate potential study problems. It should be recognized that with each additional inclusion or exclusion criterion, the sample population changes, creating increasingly controlled conditions and adding restrictions to the study design. The criteria adopted for this study are outlined in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Potential Study Subjects

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria
Inclusion Criteria
Imminent exposure with study in the online environment
Currently enrolled at the University of Southern Queensland
Over 25 Years of age
Speak English well enough to clearly articulate experience with the phenomena
Exclusion Criteria
Completion of more than three units of university study in the online environment
Completion of more than four units of their degree program (i.e. 0.5 of a full time equivalent study load)

The following potential criteria were considered but not accepted as inclusion or exclusion criteria for this study;

- Location – Student location was not considered because the focus of the research was on online learning, and the target population could include students classified as local, national or international.
- Gender – Bonneville-Roussy, et al., (2017) contend that previous research offers a reasonably reliable portrait of gender differences in the use of coping.

In particular, women tend to emotional focused coping strategies while men problem-focused coping strategies (Azale, Fekadu, & Medhin, 2018; Martinez, Meneghel, & Peñalver, 2019; Sinha & Latha, 2018). However, as there was no intention to infer any relationship regarding gender from the results, gender was in itself not considered to be a factor for inclusion or exclusion. Still, given the gender diversity in university study, it was deemed logical to seek a reflective balance in establishing the sample frame.[19]

- Ethnicity – As with gender, ethnicity in itself was not a factor for inclusion or exclusion as there was no intention to infer any relationship with ethnicity from the results. However, while the prevailing research is not conclusive, cross-cultural differences can impact the choice and application of coping strategies in response to stress (Li, Eschenauer, & Persaud, 2018; Rasul, 2020).

- Learning style – The adoption of a particular learning style provides students with options in meeting the challenges of online study in various ways such as motivation and attitude (Miller, 2018; Robinson, 2018). Consequently, the influence of learning style may reflect in the data obtained. However, given the individual perspective sought by this study, learning style was not adopted as a criterion for inclusion or exclusion.

- Ethics – Ethical constraints can often dictate specific exclusion criteria (McCall, Hadjistavropoulos, & Loutzenhise, 2019; Rahman, 2016). Given the nature of this study, ethics did not constitute a criterion for inclusion or exclusion. However, ethics was taken into account in line with the research ethics approval received for this study.

Consequently, the defined sample frame for this study was:

University of Southern Queensland students over the age of 25 years, currently enrolled in their first year of study in any discipline who have not completed more than four units of their program or more than three units of their program in the online learning environment.

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[19] On completion of the survey questionnaires the gender balance was female (70%) and male (30%). On completion the interviews the balance was female (75%) and male (25%). Although available, no respondents chose to select 'other identification'.

3.4.6 Recruiting the Selected Sample Frame

Following ethics approval from the University of Southern Queensland (H20REA011), the identification of students who were interested in participating in the study involved:

1. University of Southern Queensland Student Communications:
   a. A short advertisement was placed on the University of Southern Queensland's student portal, 'UConnect', linked to a project information statement and the survey questionnaire.
   b. A short advertisement placed in the University of Southern Queensland student e-newsletter, containing the link to the project information statement and the survey questionnaire (Appendix C).
2. A research project poster (Appendix D) developed and placed on noticeboards within the University of Southern Queensland campuses. The poster provided a brief overview of the project and the link to the project information statement and the survey questionnaire.

The questionnaire's purpose was to ensure that prospective respondents belong to the target population in line with the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 3.3. In line with the recommendation to ensure that survey questions are short and concise (Aerny-Perreten, Domínguez-Berjón, Esteban-Vasallo, & García-Riolobos, 2015; Van Mol, 2017), the questionnaire's structure enabled completion in under ten minutes. Taking this approach helped maximise response rates by ensuring that potential students were not initially put off by having to complete a more detailed and lengthy survey (Salah & Bista, 2017). A participant information statement preceded the questionnaire. In addition to outlining the study's purpose, the statement informed interested students that students would be identified for interview following the completion of the survey questionnaire. To progress to the survey questions, respondents were required to complete a tick box consent.

The participant information statement also informed respondents that if selected for an interview, the interview session's duration would be approximately 60 minutes in length, with a brief follow-up contact not exceeding 10 minutes of their time. The

estimation of interview duration was guided by the average of the times indicated by the authors in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4.

Interview Duration

Duration of Interview	Author(s)
30 to 120 minutes	Berg and Dahlberg (1998)
60 to 90 minutes	Lundqvist, Nilstun, and Dykes (2002)
45 to 90 minutes	Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2013)
39 to 67 minutes	Saddler and Sundin (2020)
45 to 60 minutes	Schuemann (2014)
30 to 60 minutes	Crust, Keegan, Piggott, and Swann (2011)
28 to 45 minutes	Kelly (2005)
60 minutes	Webster, et al. (2016)
45 minutes	Jones, Benbow, and Gidman (2014)
40 Minutes	Gani, et al. (2020);

3.4.7 The Participants

There was a strong response to the survey with 219 students commencing but not necessarily completing the questionnaire. Although the survey information provided details of the recruitment criteria, many completed questionnaires could not be considered because they did not fall within those criteria. Consequently, after reviewing the submissions, there were 41 students suitable for the interview stage. While there was no predetermined sample profile, it was logical to seek an interview cohort reflecting the student population as closely as possible. This approach ensured that students from low responding faculties such as Science or Engineering were as adequately represented within the interview sample as those from faculties with high response rates such as Education, Nursing, Law and Psychology. A random selection

process was used to determine which respondent(s) would be included from a particular faculty.

As outlined in the methodology section, the expectation was that 10 participants *(main)* would be required to achieve saturation. A further 2 participants *(additional 1)* were identified as a check to confirm that saturation had occurred. A further two participants *(additional 2)* were available to verify saturation if the data obtained from the first additional participants identified new nodes. Together with a pilot participant *(pilot)* randomly chosen from those selected for the interview, 15 participants were contacted and interviewed. Ultimately it was considered prudent to collect the data from participants in both additional groups simultaneously as the main group rather than leave it to the end of the analysis process when the additional participants may not have been available if required.[20]

Included within the participant information statement was a guarantee of participant anonymity. In line with this guarantee, all interview respondents were anonymised by randomly naming respondents with a first name alias not contained in the respondent sample and redacting anything considered to be a specific identifier. Although gender was not a particular consideration in the study, male and female names were maintained. Table 3.5 provides a profile of the interviewed participants.

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[20] At the time of data collection the onset of Covid-19 issues had only begun and the full impact on society and the education sector was not known.

Table 3.5.

Participant Profile

Group	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Degree	Previous Online Units
Pilot	Barbara	29	F	Bachelor of Arts	0
Main	Adam	30	M	Associate Degree of Business	1
	Anne	35	F	Bachelor of Business / Commerce	0
	Brian	53	M	Bachelor of Nursing	0
	Carol	49	F	Bachelor of Arts	0
	Diane	29	F	General Studies	0
	Emily	51	F	Bachelor of Science	0
	Fiona	53	F	Bachelor of Psychology	2
	Frank	55	M	Associate Degree of Engineering	1
	Hanna	36	F	Bachelor of Environemental Science	0
	Jane	45	F	Bachelor of Medical Science	0
Additional 1	Irene	37	F	Bachelor of Business / Commerce	0
	Gail	26	F	Bachelor of Nursing	0
Additional 2	Kate	34	F	Bachelor of Psychology	0
	Lucy	29	F	Bachelor of Paramedacine	0

3.5 Interviews

As previously discussed, purposeful sampling plays a crucial role in qualitative enquiry, particularly in identifying a small number of unique cases which can provide a wealth of detailed information regarding the phenomenon under investigation. To access, this information researchers frequently conduct interviews (Pessoa, Harper, Santos, & Gracino, 2019; Read, 2018). Much of the success of qualitative research interviews is attributable to their ability to support an in-depth exploration of matters unique to the interviewees' experiences (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2018). Although no research interview lacks structure (Mason, 1994), the degree of structure involved is a common way to classify the research interview (Jamshed, 2014; Rowley, 2012), for example, unstructured, structured and semi-structured interviews.

3.5.1 Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured interviews may have very little pre-set structure and simply involve a single opening question. However, frequently an unstructured interview will be based on a number (albeit a limited number) of topics or issues to encourage the respondent to talk around these topics with few prompts (Bryman, 2016). Because of the little pre-set structure, the interviewer responds and adapts to the responses generated. In this way, the interviews are more flexible and unrestricted, taking on more of a guided conversation format than is the case with a strict structured interview. Because the conversation has minimal guidance, unstructured interviews require a great deal of planning, skill and experience to conduct (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The requirement for expertise applies not only in conducting the interview but also in comparing and integrating the interview transcripts. However, even though unstructured interviews present difficulties in administration, they do allow respondents to express themselves in their own way because of the minimal restraints imposed by the questions asked during the interview process (Chauhan, 2019).

3.5.2 Structured Interviews

Although criticized for lack of richness and limited in-depth data, a structured approach helps keep the interview tightly focused on the target topic (Bryman, 2016) This focus can assist the researcher to get directly to data they are seeking rather than

skirting about the topic in the hope of drawing out that information (White, 2014). Another benefit of a structured interview is that it is possible to obtain data in a manner that makes one interview comparable with another (Alsaawi, 2014; Doll, 2018). Comparability in structured interviews involves a series of pre-established questions where all interviewees are asked the same questions in the same order taken as from a rigid script designed to elicit brief answers to those questions without any interpretation of those questions (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017; Qu & Dumay, 2011). Although respondents can respond differently, the fixed set of pre-determined questions limits how participants respond (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Young, et al., 2018).

3.5.3 Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews develop along the lines of a dialogue between researcher and participant, guided by a flexible interview protocol (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019) that enables reciprocity or mutual exchange between the interviewer and participant (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). This interchange allows the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on participant responses and individual verbal expressions. By taking this approach, a semi-structured interview enables the researcher to set an outline for the items to be covered but still let the interviewee's responses organically determine the interview's direction (Stuckey, 2013; Wishkoski, 2020). The interactive and flexible nature of the interview can produce unpredictable responses necessitating high-preparation and potentially high levels of analysis (Adams, 2015; Ok Jong & Kwan Jung, 2015). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews does raise issues of validity and reliability, which affect generalisability. However, as with qualitative research, in general, the focus is on understanding a specific subjective perspective rather than on generalising the understandings of large groups of people (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2018)

3.5.4 Adoption of Approach

In considering an appropriate interview approach, the recognition of the intention to seek depth and gain rich insight into elements of human experience beyond who, what, when and where, was significant. In particular, it was recognised that the adopted approach needed to reflect the lived experience and encompass Starks and Brown

Trinidad's (2007) preference for allowing the words to speak for themselves. There are many methods of gathering data to analyse the lived experience (Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, & Palmér, 2019; Van Manen, 1997; Wolff, Mahoney, Lohiniva, & Corkum, 2019). However, the methodological challenge is to find an approach that embraces rather than reduces the complexity of life-as experienced (Vandenbussche, Edelenbos, & Eshuis, 2019). A particularly appropriate manner that allows the researcher to understand the interviewee's subjective perspective of a phenomenon is by gathering reflective recollections through a deep and open interview process (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2018).

To capture the essential nature of a phenomenon in terms of a participant's experience of that phenomenon requires the choice and focus of interview questions to be carefully considered (Alirezaei & Latifnejad Roudsari, 2020; Langdridge, 2007). The type of interview format favoured for this study was semi-structured as it allowed the interviewee to talk from their perspective. Adopting a semi-structured approach also allowed the modification of subsequent questions in light of the participant's responses as part of a free-flowing dialogue. Allowing participants to use their frame of reference, and ideas and meanings that are familiar to them (Edwards & Holland, 2013), stimulates a more in-depth dialogue between the researcher and participant providing a richer first-person account of experience (Ataro, 2020; Smith, 2007).

In accepting this perspective, the open-ended, discursive, and descriptive character of an in-depth interview administered in a semi-structured manner was considered ideal for capturing the type and level of data required. In contrast to the predetermined classifications found in more deductive studies seeking "best fit" results (Booth & Carroll, 2015, p. 2), a free-flowing communication process leads to the generation of large amounts of qualitative data (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2018; Punch, 2014). This data enables the collection of the participant's story by providing insight and understanding of behaviour and explaining actions from the participant's perspective (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Mozersky, et al., 2020; Scotland, 2012). To achieve this level of knowledge, Cypress (2018) argues that the inquiry approach must permit the respondent to move back and forth in time to reconstruct the past, interpret the present, and predict the future. Consequently, while the highly standardized

procedure of a structured interview offers several research advantages, the advantages came at the expense of capturing the rich detail of the in-depth data sought by this study. Therefore a structured interview format was considered inappropriate for this study because of this deficiency.

3.5.5 Interview Questions

Although the semi-structured format does not require the development of an exhaustive or regimented list of questions, it is advantageous to prepare for the interviews by establishing an interview schedule. Having an interview schedule allows the researcher to control the responses obtained by steering the conversation so that the interviewee remains on topic and discusses relevant things. However, it is essential to recognize that the amount of control a researcher exercises through the structure and type of questions may result in interviewees being less forthcoming in their responses (Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Ok Jong & Kwan Jung, 2015; Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). The amount of control also influences the nature of the responses, with more control leading to more factual and restricted responses for example, consider the structure and intent of a closed question or a Likert scale.

To achieve a balance between control and dialogue, this study's interview schedule framework was designed to be flexible yet ensure the same application of thematic approach for all interviews undertaken. It was also essential for the schedule to include a brief introductory period of rapport building with the interviewee. Rapport has long been recognized as a central component of qualitative interviewing as a way of sharing common ground and common experiences and gaining perspectives and counter-perspectives on the issues under scrutiny (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2018; Pathak & Intratat, 2012; Prior, 2018). Following on from the rapport building, the interview schedule commenced with the introductory question *What is your experience of online study?* The purpose of this question was to make the interviewee feel comfortable and gently introduce the subject of the interview (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2018) and to facilitate a free-flowing dialogue.

The schedule structure also drew guidance in extracting more complete narratives from the interviewees through familiarity with Kvale's (1994) typology of interview questions[21]. In particular, the interview schedule made provision for exploratory questions[22] such as *Please tell me more about that […]* or *What do you mean when you say […]* when the response received involved an area of particular interest. However, as Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) note, exploratory questions are not sub-questions. Some exploratory questions were merely responsive to the situation because it is impossible to anticipate all exploratory questions ahead of time. Where this occurred attention was given to ensuring that the question used neutral language and asked only where it related to addressing the response provided (or not provided) and not merely out of curiosity. At times, exploratory encouragement was provided simply by acknowledging the interviewee's response or leaving time in anticipation of additional comment. During the interviews, care was taken to seek the respondent's individual experience with the phenomenon and not obtain confirmation of a perceived generalizable perspective. Consideration was also given to achieving an appropriate balance of data related to the individual and the phenomenon. This point in part reflects the argument offered by Englander (2012) that it is crucial to recognise that while a participant may have lived the phenomenon, it is not the person but the phenomenon itself that represents the object of investigation.

3.5.6 Pilot Testing

To prepare for the main study and to ensure that the interview approach would work in practice, a pilot interview was conducted with a student drawn from suitable respondents to the survey questionnaire. The pilot interview is an essential step in testing the questions, for gaining interviewing practice (Majid, Othman, & Yusof, 2017), strengthening interview protocols (Castillo-Montoya, 2016), and as a risk mitigation strategy (Fraser, Fahlman, Arscott, & Guillot, 2018) concerning the main interview round. While a pilot study plays an important part in designing a research study, by its very nature, the intention of a pilot study may not be to produce results (In, 2017; Kim, 2011; Malmqvist, Hellberg, Mollas, Rose, & Shevlin, 2019). In this instance, the interview data was not included within the primary study data or reported.

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[21] As adapted by Qu and Dumay (2011)
[22] Seidman (2006)) argues that the process should be called *exploring*, as 'probe' conveys a sense of a powerful interviewer treating the participant as an object.

In reaching this decision Van Teijlingen and Hundley's (2002) argument for the exclusion of pilot data was considered and accepted before undertaking the pilot interview.

Following the pilot interview and subsequent debrief with the pilot participant, several changes were made to the question framework, most notably the inclusion of a brief introductory set of questions covering online study, coping and engagement. These introductory questions were designed to allow the participants to gather and form their thoughts and perceptions ahead of the main discussion. The pilot interview was also helpful in confirming that the time allocated for the proposed interview was reasonable and for assessing the recording protocols, particularly concerning the quality achieved for transcription purposes.

3.5.7 Recording of Interviews

Due to the participants' geographical location, the interviews were conducted using the Zoom online conferencing app. A list of interview questions was developed as a bare frame to support the semi-structured format. However, as the interviews intended to obtain the participants' thoughts and experiences, the participants' accounts drove the interviews. This process resulted in the interviews' direction varying between participants, with not all participants being asked the same questions. Before arranging the interviews, all participants were sent a participant information statement (Appendix E) and reminded that the interview would be recorded and later transcribed for data analysis. Arrangements for the interview were made following receipt of the participant's signed consent form (Appendix F).

Although the interviews were recorded, it was, as noted by Deterding and Waters (2018), considered beneficial to make a note of thoughts occurring during a particular interview at the moment they occurred and later link these notes to the appropriate part of the transcript. However, taking notes or beginning a reflective process during an actual interview can be challenging (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Therefore, to maintain a good rapport with the participant and to ensure that key points were not missed note-taking was deliberately kept to a minimum, and any notes made considered to be secondary data (Groenewald, 2004). More detailed field notes were

recorded immediately after conducting the interview where this was deemed beneficial to the analysis of that interview or relevant in the broader context of interviews. However, by adopting a descriptive phenomenological rather than interpretive approach, it was not considered necessary to establish a detailed record of what was heard, seen or experienced from the researcher's perspective.

3.5.8 Transcription of Interviews

Transcription of the interviews occurred within NVivo's transcription facility with a transcription accuracy in the order of 95%. The inaccuracies that did occur were mainly due to what Kawahara (2007) identifies as variations in both acoustic and linguistic characteristics associated with pronunciation and recording sound quality. However, listening to the audio while following the draft transcript enabled the errors to be corrected. It is worth noting that the process of transcribing still required a considerable amount of interpretation and judgment regarding the appropriate use of commas and full stops to maintain coherence and contextual accuracy. Another factor considered in the transcribing process was the requirement for genuinely verbatim transcription. In completing a verbatim transcription, a full account is taken of utterances such as ums, ahs, laughter and pauses occurring throughout the conversation. Because verbatim transcription reflects the capture of every part of a conversation, there is a perception that word-for-word translation is central to the reliability, validity, veracity and accuracy of qualitative data collection (Clark, Birkhead, Fernandez, & Egger, 2017; Halcome & Davidson, 2006). However, in many instances, these filler words aren't necessary, and their omission does not affect the meaning of a conversation.

In resolving the issue of verbatim transcription, the insight into naturalized and denaturalized transcription provided by Oliver, Serovich and Mason (2005) proved highly beneficial. While both approaches seek to maintain a verbatim depiction of speech, naturalised transcription most often occurs in conversation analysis studies. In contrast, denaturalized transcription looks to accuracy concerns regarding the interview's substance concerning the meanings and perceptions created and shared during a conversation. In this respect, denaturalized transcription limits the depiction of accents or involuntary vocalizations. Ultimately, the decision as to the requirement

for verbatim translation depends on the research investigation's context and purpose. In many instances, a faithful transcription is not necessarily useful because of the lack of sentence and paragraph reference markers and the existence of disfluencies which are inevitable due to participant utterances made while thinking during interactions (Kawahara, 2007; Loubere, 2017). In other instances, these cues may need acknowledging in the transcription process (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2018).

Consequently, while cognisant of the arguments for endeavouring to capture precisely how people express themselves by transcribing verbatim, there was a requirement for some very light editing to sentence markers and the removal of utterances or unnecessary repetition of words. However, elements including slang and sentence wording were maintained, and where necessary, clarifiers were added within parentheses. The transcription of interviews occurred immediately after the interview was completed, and each transcript was reviewed as soon as practical. The field notes compiled during the interviews provided a complementary source of information during this process.

In reviewing the transcripts, the responses occurred in various lengths ranging from a few words to a paragraph. Such variation presented difficulties in identifying an appropriate unit of analysis for coding the interview transcripts. This point is discussed by Campbell, Quincy, Osserman and Pedersen (2013), who comment that the use of blocks of text may not accurately reflect the meaning as intended by the respondent while the identification of smaller units of meaning involves coder subjectivity as to where the boundary of any unit of meaning occurs. Ultimately, a unit of meaning was taken to represent the smallest unit of data containing insight into the phenomenon (Bengtsson, 2016) and which remained capable of being perceived as a meaningful conceptual break in the data (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013). The adoption of this approach meant that the length of coded units varied considerably.

3.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter considered the qualitative and quantitative divide and discussed the research philosophy underpinning the methodology adopted for this study. In particular, the intent to let the participants describe their experiences with the

phenomenon of mature-age online learning led to the adoption of a qualitative approach. The decision process involved the consideration of several qualitative approaches; however, based on its advantages and disadvantages, the research methodology adopted was descriptive phenomenology. Having clarified the research position, the chapter then discussed the identification of the participants and the number of participants required to obtain both appropriate and sufficient data to answer the research questions. As part of this process, the need for data saturation was discussed, and the procedures required to achieve this saturation were outlined. The chapter also described the selection of interviews as the primary data collection tool with the semi-structured interview format identified as the most appropriate format for the specific data sought to describe the phenomenon. The next chapter provides a detailed account of the data analysis undertaken to refine the coded units of meaning extracted from the interview transcripts through to themes.

4. Data Analysis

4.0 Introduction to Chapter 4

This chapter describes the process of analysis undertaken to present the participant's description of the impact of mature-age student coping strategies on engagement in the online environment. As part of this process, the structures outlined by Colaizzi (1978) and Groenewald (2004) were consulted to develop a record of the steps taken during the analysis. Included in the chapter are details of the mechanisms adopted to ensure the findings' trustworthiness and the process of bracketing required as part of the descriptive phenomenology approach. The chapter also describes the approach taken to data saturation and the use of the NVivo software and manual processes to complete the coding and analysis process. The chapter concludes with the presentation of 5 themes mapped against the two research questions that form this study's structure.

4.1 Data Analysis

In preparing for the analysis phase recognition was given to concerns regarding the researcher as the instrument in qualitative enquiry (Xu & Storr, 2012; Patton, 2015), with particular reference to the requirement for controlling the researcher influence during the analysis process. As noted by Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007), qualitative analysis is inherently subjective because it is the researcher that makes all the judgments about coding, categorizing, de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing the data. Therefore to provide the required level of control, a process outlining and documenting the procedural steps and phases associated with the research analysis (Appendix G) was developed by adapting the structures provided by Colaizzi (1978) and Groenewald (2004). However, to ensure a fluid approach to the analysis, the actual steps were progressively revised from what was to be done to what was done as the investigation progressed. A significant part of the rationale behind recording the procedural steps in Appendix G was to provide oversight of the analysis process concerning academic rigour and the findings' trustworthiness.

4.2 Strategies to Support Trustworthiness and Academic Rigour

As previously discussed, qualitative data differs from quantitative data in several areas including collection, interpretation, generalisability and evaluation. A significant area of difference lies in the terminology used to confirm or judge a research study's quality. For example, quantitative research will seek to demonstrate trustworthiness and academic rigour through concepts such as validity, objectivity, reliability, reliability and validity (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). However, these concepts are rejected by qualitative researchers in favour of concepts like dependability, confirmability, credibility, and transferability (McDonald, Schoenebeck, & Forte, 2019; Maher, Hadfield, & de Eyto, 2018). While there is no consensus as to which concepts are pertinent to qualitative and phenomenological research (Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, & Palmér, 2019), Table 4.1 provides a brief comparison of aspects of the quantitative and qualitative criteria used for judging a research study as outlined by Yilmaz (2013).

Table 4.1.

Comparison Criteria for Judging the Quality of a Research Study

Aspect	Quantitative terms	Qualitative terms
Truth value	Internal validity	Credibility
Applicability	External validity or generalizability	Transferability
Consistency	Reliability	Dependability
Neutrality	Objectivity	Confirmability

Therefore to demonstrate the trustworthiness and academic rigour of the research process, the recommendations put forward by Roberts (2013) and (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013) were adopted to form the following guidelines:

- the provision of examples of raw data in the form of interview quotes;
- the use of trustworthy data collection techniques, analytic procedures and interpretation;
- the provision of a table where the process from raw data to results is made transparent;

- the facilitation of an analysis process that exemplifies the results;
- the implementation of appropriate checks and balances to ensure the quality of the data and findings; and
- the establishment of clear documentation of the research focus, methods, data collection, analysis, and findings, to enable the reader to conclude the quality of a study's research process.

As part of these guidelines for trustworthiness, three validation strategies were adopted; the researcher's lens, the participant voice, and member checking. Additionally, as discussed previously, epoche or bracketing (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019; Tassone, 2017) was also undertaken (Appendix A) as part of the descriptive phenomenological approach.

4.2.1 Researcher's Lens

Creswell and Miller (2000) consider that the reference to the term lens means that the inquirer uses a particular viewpoint to establish validity in a study. Identifying this viewpoint is essential because it is the researcher who makes the decisions about the nature of the research, the methodological approach, the data collection techniques, the number of participants, and when saturation occurs. Johnstone, Wallis, Oprescu and Gray (2017) make a similar point suggesting that traditionally, phenomenologists have exercised methodological rigour through maintaining orientation to the phenomenon. Maintaining that orientation requires an existing mechanism or philosophy with which to view the world, and for a researcher, this mechanism is the theoretical framework (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Merriam, 2009). The connection to trustworthiness, credibility and validity can be made by considering Grant and Osanloo's (2014) argument that a conceptual framework derives from existing theory tested, validated and reported in the scholarly research literature. By extensively discussing the theoretical framework adopted for this study within Chapter 3, it informs every part of the study (Merriam, 2009) and establishes a basis for measuring trustworthiness. This point was discussed by Collins and Stockton (2018), who contend that theories make sense of complicated social interactions and phenomena, and articulating a theoretical framework helps the sense-making process to be more

explicit. As stated by Lester (2005), there are no data without a framework to make sense of those data.

4.2.2 Participant Voice

For data to contribute towards the "truth" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 51) of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, the focus needs to be on the insider perspective. Portraying the data in the form of multiple participant quotes illuminates this insider perspective (Creswell, 2018). The use of direct quotes in all final themes also ensures that interpretations remain accurate and credible. Consequently, direct quotes are an essential component of the final report (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). To ensure that the quotes used were the participants' actual responses, the transcript data were rechecked against the actual interview recordings. Ultimately, presenting the authentic participant voice allows for an accurate picture of the world as it exists to those encountering the phenomenon and provides an insight into understanding "the structure of the consciousness of the people who are in a particular situation" (Umanailo, 2019, p. 1).

4.2.3 Member Checking

Validation is a critical element of analysis that increases the credibility, rigour, and trustworthiness of research (McGaha & D'Urso, 2019). Consequently, following the establishment of the themes, respondent validation in the form of member feedback was sought by reflecting the themes to the participants for comment (Bengtsson, 2016; Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, & Neumann, 2011). However, there are concerns regarding the use of member checking, such as the risk of overly romanticizing the discourse of participant interpretations or experiencing a role reversal with the participant (McGaha & D'Urso, 2019). Thomas (2017) is also critical, suggesting that in reviewing the use of member checking, he failed to identify any evidence that routine member checks enhanced the credibility or trustworthiness of qualitative research. Birt, et al., (2016) have a different perspective and argue that the credibility of member checking is not in doing the procedure but in the reporting of the outcomes. This approach allows other people to make judgments as to whether the results are credible.

Typically member checking is a process where the researcher asks one or more study participants to verify the accuracy of the account of their narrative (Carlson, 2010; Creswell, 2012; Thomas, 2017). However, this is a relatively narrow description. There are broader perspectives; for example, Doyle (2007) suggests that member checking is a process that can take many forms and serve any number of purposes. It was this broader description that this study adopted. In part, the reasoning was adopted to clearly delineate between the intent to seek a participant's contribution as a validator of the themes' appropriateness as viewed from the participants' perspectives, rather than an intention to seek a participant's participation in the role of a co-researcher. The member checking established for this study involved the participants being contacted at the end of the semester and asked to complete two short tasks. The outcomes from this process form part of the discussion of the study findings provided in Chapter 6.

The first task required the participants to consider and rate how appropriate they felt each of the study's themes were using a simple Likert scale[23]. Nadler, Weston and Voyles (2015) suggest that simulation and empirical studies have found that 4 to 7 point scales return the most robust reliability and validity. Using this reference and the argument that five-point scales produced no substantial difference in the scales' psychometric properties than 4 or 6 point scales (Lee & Pael, 2014) a five-point scale was adopted. Given that the scale would contain five points, there was the potential for the midpoint to act as an opt-out or no opinion response. There were similar concerns regarding using more dichotomous scales such as the agree/disagree format where a neither agree nor disagree response typically serves as the midpoint. The establishment of a scale based on a rising set of responses ranging from not important to very important with the midpoint being moderately important, proved to be a simple way to address the midpoint issue.

To assist with the feedback process the participants received a short description of each theme developed in line with Javadi and Zarea's (2016) recommendation to

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[23] When the purpose of the member check is to explore whether results have resonance with the participants' experience Birt, et al., (2016) suggest undertaking member checking using analysed data from the whole sample. In this instance the themes themselves represent the analysed data from the whole sample.

provide a brief context of the theme for the participants. Limiting the description to two sentences meant that the responses received would be the participants' perception of the themes as presented rather than a commentary on the development rationale. This aspect was essential because the purpose of including a Likert scale was to explore whether the identified themes had a meaningful connection with the participants' experiences. The hypothesis was that if the themes were representative of the phenomenon, then the themes should resonate with the participants as appropriate descriptors for recounting the phenomenon. However, any theme scoring consistently poorly would be suggestive of a poor descriptor, and the theme would be revaluated.

For the second task, the participants were asked to provide short written responses to two questions. The questions were designed to provide a downstream context for the primary data by way of an extended description of the phenomenon:

- What was the one thing about online learning this semester that didn't work well for you?
- Did you make any change to how you expected to cope with your online studies this semester?

4.3 Adoption of NVivo

While a portion of the data analysis for this study used the Microsoft Excel program, most of the analysis involved NVivo[24]. The use of computer software for qualitative data analysis continues to increase (Cypress, 2019). This increase reflects the advantages provided by software in engaging in multiple data management and analysis activities efficiently and effectively (Paulus & Lester, 2020). This efficiency was previously noted by Zamawe (2015) who suggests that software has effectively made the manual coding process ineffective and inefficient. Elliott (2018) make a similar point suggesting that the efficiency of analysis software has taken it to the point where it is not only an essential part of qualitative research but possibly the default position for most people. In adopting NVivo for the analysis process, it is recognised that the package's primary function is not necessarily to analyse the data but instead

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[24] NVivo version 12 Pro

as an aid during the data analysis process as a data management package, particularly regarding the simplification of the coding process.

Coding within NVivo organises the data obtained within files or *nodes*, representing a collection of references about a specific theme or case. The nodes can be either arranged independently or in a hierarchical tree structure. Independent nodes have no clear, logical connection with other nodes. In contrast, hierarchical nodes move down from a general parent category to more specific child categories which have some logical connection to the parent category (Adu, 2019; Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). Nodes are often labelled using one or two words; however, as a node's purpose is to capture the essence of the data content, the wording should ideally be clear enough to convey their meaning (Elliott, 2018). Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017) in considering the coding and analysis process note that the researcher in collecting data through an interactive means; such as an unstructured interview, will come to the analysis with some prior knowledge of the data, and possibly some initial analytic interests or thoughts.

The relevance of this argument for this study is acknowledged. In particular, having participated in the interviews, listened to the interview recordings several times, and subsequently transcribed and read the transcripts, it was evident that main elements had begun to emerge, and broad unrefined concepts and theories were crystallising. However, by allowing the NVivo nodes to be identified inductively from the data and restricting their deductive development, it was possible to add a level of control over the influence of prior understanding and preconceptions about the phenomenon, which helped maintain the requirement for bracketing.

4.4 Coding

The core operation of coding involves examining data for the purposes of indexing or mapping that data as part of a decision-making process (Elliott, 2018). The actual codes represent the essence of a coherent portion of material or something of interest (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016), typically a word, a paragraph or even a page (Saldana, 2016; Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). However, although there are many ways to consider coding, one essential element remains the same, it is through

the process of coding that the researcher can begin to understand the phenomenon from the participant's perspective by capturing the essence of their narrative.

Consequently, the coding process involves recognizing an essential moment as something worth recording and encoding that moment before undertaking a process of interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). Various definitions of coding abound within the literature. For example, Sutton and Austin (2015) describe coding as identifying topics, issues, similarities, and differences within the participants' narratives interpreted by the researcher. In considering the meaning of a code Elliott (2018) depicts it as a way of tagging data relevant to a particular point, while both Skjott Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019) and Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen and Snelgrove (2016) relate coding to the reduction of the amount of raw qualitative data into more meaningful insights. While raw data can be very interesting to look at, they do not help the reader understand the social world under scrutiny or how the participants perceive it unless those data are systematically analysed (Basit, 2003).

Another problem associated with coding raw data is the influence of the data collection approach on content quantity. For example, the arrangement of questions, whether open or closed, structured or unstructured, will elicit different responses, particularly regarding the volume and quality of content provided (Connor Desai & Reimers, 2019; Weller, et al., 2018), and this will affect the application of codes. Although there are no absolute hard-and-fast rules or stepwise analysis process to coding (Elliott, 2018; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013; Faherty, 2010), there are two approaches that serve as opposite ends of a coding continuum:

- Open coding – where the codes are applied *posteriori* and derived from the text as emergent codes. The overall goal of open coding is to develop a wealth of codes to describe the data (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). The origin of open coding lies in grounded theory methodology, which allows the researcher to find the answers within the text by analytically breaking down the data (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019; Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019).
- Template coding – where the codes to be applied are defined by the researcher before examining the current data. This involves using *a priori* codes[25] drawn

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[25] It is noted that template codes can be developed a priori (before) or posteriori (after) data collection as additional codes or modifications to themes, for example see Sang and Sitko (2015).

from research, reading or theory (Blair, 2015). The use of a template requires the researcher to justify the inclusion of a code and clearly define how it should be used (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). However, the researcher faces making decisions about if and when a template is good enough for a particular project (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015).

Ultimately, the decision to adopt a more open coding process for this study in part reflects the view taken by Lazar, Feng, and Hochheiser (2017) that while existing codes and theories have the advantage of being somewhat simpler to use, they do so at a cost. In particular, there is the potential loss of the broader insight available from a far more open-ended analysis where the coding list is allowed to emerge as new concepts of interest from the source material. Because of the intent to let the data generate the necessary codes rather than have the codes categorise the data, there was no attempt made to create a strict code or category list for this study before the analysis. However, given the focus topic for this study, it was inevitable that several areas of data interest were already highlighted. It was unavoidable that these areas influenced the basic framework for the coding process to some extent. Examples of these highlighted areas included coping, engagement and mature-age student.

The coding process itself adopted Saldana's (2016) streamlined codes-to-theory model with amendments made to the model to reflect the NVivo terminology and the data analysis methodology as depicted in Figure 4.1. However, data collection processes, data analysis, and report writing do not always follow distinct linear steps as suggested by the model. Frequently the processes occur simultaneously and are interrelated throughout the research process (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). As recommended by Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson and Palmér (2019), the coding process was preceded by reading the interview transcripts several times to achieve open-minded familiarity with the data. This open-minded reading exercise aimed to illuminate new or novel information rather than confirm what was already known.
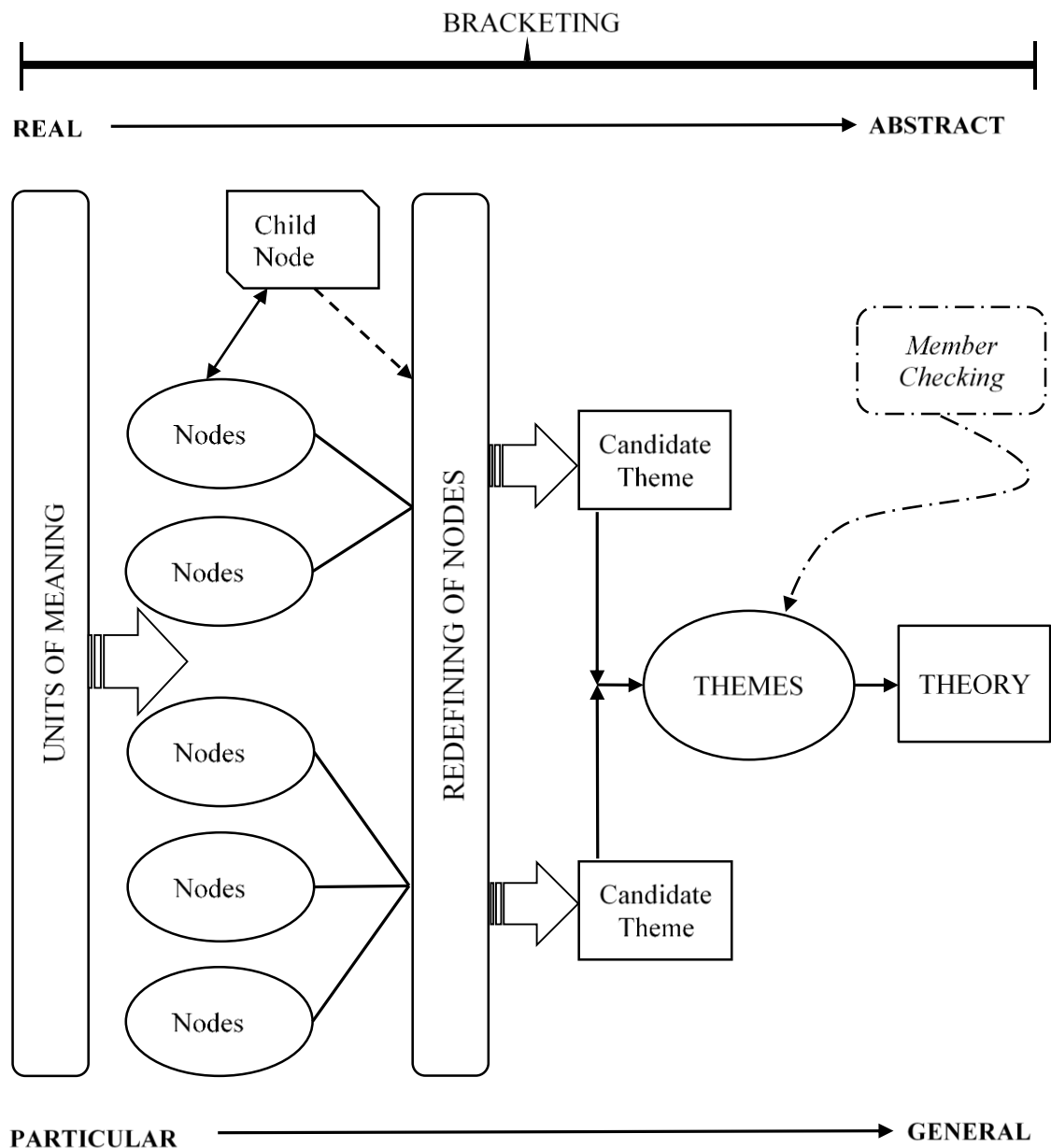
Figure 4.1. A Streamlined Codes-to-Theory Model for NVivo Analysis.
Adapted from *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, by J. Saldana, 2016, London, Sage. Copyright 2016 by Sage Publications.

4.5 Coding the Data

This study's coding process commenced with an initial coding activity that Bazeley and Richards (2019) refer to as broad-brush coding. During this activity, any comments identified as being exceptionally informative and which afforded particular insight into the phenomenon were individually identified and recorded in NVivo as memos to facilitate the easy retrieval of the data later on. While the broad-brush coding

was fast and relatively unsophisticated, it did enable an overview of what broad sections of the overall data looked like and added several nodes to the basic framework already established. At this point, the nodes were primarily independent, although suggestions of hierarchical connections were emerging.

Following the initial coding activity, a more detailed review of the transcripts was undertaken on a line by line basis to identify what was in the data and what was interesting or relevant about them (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Adopting a line by line analysis is beneficial when undertaking an inductive analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) and allows for an in-depth consideration of small sections of the data. At this point, similarities and differences between separate pieces of data become apparent, indicating what Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) consider to be areas of participant consensus in response to the research questions and areas of potential conflict. However, as noted by Groenewald (2004), the delineation of units of meaning is a critical phase of explicating the data and required a substantial judgement call as to what was worth extracting and what was not. In line with the view taken by Giorgi (2008) and as part of a conscious effort to bracket presuppositions, impoverished data were not rejected outright but were reconsidered to ensure that they did not contain any insight or commentary relevant to the phenomenon.

As the coding proceeded and more transcripts were absorbed, amendments were made to the existing nodes to accommodate merging and linking 'child nodes' to nodes that established themselves as parent nodes. For example, initially, units of meaning were allocated to the node *Planning*. However, as the coding progressed, it became apparent that the classification of *Planning* units of meaning may relate to the activities used to plan (such as having a schedule) or the actual allocation of time and resources (such as setting aside two hours in the evening). Where this type of sub-division occurred, the alternative nodes formed child nodes of the original node in NVivo. In some instances, the parent node retained some specific units of meaning, while in others, as was the case in *Planning*, the parent node contained no units of meaning.

Periodically during the coding process, new units of meaning were identified, requiring the establishment of additional nodes. The development of a new node

necessitated revisiting all of the previously coded transcripts to recheck the units of meaning against the newly created node. The addition of new nodes was allowed to be quite broad raging. This approach was in line with Ryan and Bernard's (2003) view that more is better because it allows for a greater appreciation and analysis of how the various nodes are related to each other and which nodes are most salient. However, to prevent the possibility of nodes increasing to a point where allocation parameters became difficult to remember or use (Richards, 2015), the growth of nodes was, to some extent, controlled. A suitable definition or description accompanied the establishment of each new node. This process facilitated the allocation of units of meaning to nodes with some degree of consistency. While NVivo makes provision for embedding such descriptions within a node's properties, it became evident that having a printed reference sheet was far more practical during the coding process. The addition of examples of the type of unit of meanings contained within each node established a coding reference guide (Appendix H), which served as a guide to the consistent allocation of units of meaning and providing a layer of trustworthiness in the coding process.

Opinions about whether a data piece, such as a phrase or a sentence, can be coded multiple times vary. For example, Van Rijnsoever (2017) suggests that because it is possible to interpret codes as unique bits of information, two different codes cannot represent the same information. To some degree, this approach reflects the position taken in a quantitative content analysis where the convention is to endeavour to ensure that categories are mutually exclusive because confounded variables would violate the assumptions of some statistical procedures (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). However, the number of times a piece of data may be coded will depend on the number of various aspects of the study that the data encompasses (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016; Richards, 2015).

The latter argument was adopted for this study, as it aligned better with the NVivo approach and its ability to code data multiple times. After coding all transcripts, more than 2200 units of meaning had been extracted from the data and allocated across a total of forty-four emergent nodes and child nodes (Appendix I). This figure broadly aligned with Creswell's (2015) recommendation that all data should be capable of

categorisation within 30 to 50 codes[26] regardless of volume. However, coding information is rarely perfect on the first cycle. Consequently, the allocation of units of meaning to each node was rechecked using the Coding Reference Guide. The purpose of the review was to identify any coding errors and ensure that the nodes represented an appropriate structure. Microsoft Excel was used to extract all units of meaning within the NVivo nodes and enable a line by line consideration of the data. Where there were questions regarding the inclusion of a unit of meaning within a node, then reference was made to the interview recording to establish the participant's intent for the statement. At times confirming the suitability of the allocation of a unit of meaning required the question leading to the participant's response and the additional content of the participant's response surrounding the particular unit of meaning to be considered. Although the review process was time-consuming, it was both an essential and beneficial exercise in that it:

- increased the immersion and improved the familiarity with the data;
- firmed up the intent of the nodes with the benefit of having a more holistic picture of the node contents following the completion of the initial line by line coding;
- provided insight into potential areas for node reduction and refinement;
- identified units of meaning which were reallocated or removed from a particular node due to the increased focus on the node's purpose;
- identified isolated units of meaning for which it was more appropriate to reunite it with an adjacent unit of meaning by merely extending the length of the unit of meaning; and
- facilitated categorising units of meaning within nodes and developing *descriptors* for each of the categories as identified in Appendix I.

The descriptors mentioned in the final point represent a collective term to begin the process of categorising and encompassing the units of meaning through the use of an overarching expression that was representative of the compilation. In essence a descriptor provides an illustration or general flavour of the data embodied by the corpus it represents. The descriptors were developed by "coding on" (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p. 13) the units of meaning using more specific descriptive labels

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[26] In this instance with the use of NVivo the term nodes replaces Creswell's use of the term codes

to break down the data within a node further. As coding on progressed, the labels were refined down to as few as made sense for the allocation of content. For example, after refining descriptors, the units of meaning within the *Content and Delivery* node were coded on against *Content*, *Delivery*, *Quality* and *Availability*. This process not only confirmed the unit of meaning's connection to the node but provided a more profound recognition of the formation of unit of meanings. The descriptors for the 44 nodes are included within Appendix I.

4.6 Achieving Saturation

As discussed in Section 3.4.3 *Confirming Sample Size* based on the data represented in Appendix B, a priori of ten participants represented an analysis sample sufficient to demonstrate saturation. In line with the proposed analysis structure, interviews 11 and 12 were coded to confirm the identification of all nodes. In undertaking this process, units of meaning within the data from interview 11 warranted establishing a new child node *Efforts to Develop Social Life* to the node *University Student Interaction*. Consequently, as saturation could not be confirmed, the data from interview 12 was then analysed. This analysis did not identify any new nodes or a recurrence of units of meaning concerning creating social friendships.

However, as discussed by Saunders, et al., (2018), saturation can be somewhat of an elastic notion, and an analysis does not suddenly become rich or insightful after an additional interview, but it may potentially become richer or more insightful. In line with this view O'Reilly and Parker (2013) reiterate that while saturation is a convincing concept, it is subject to the practical weakness that because each participant is unique, the number of emergent themes is potentially limitless. Consequently, the analysis for this study continued beyond the point of saturation, not in an attempt to further confirm saturation but to collect further examples of unusual or variant observations (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018) that may be present. Two other reasons supported this approach. First, as discussed in Section 3.4.7 *The Participants*, because of the potential disruption from Covid-19, the decision had already been made to complete all fourteen interviews. Second, having surveyed and collected data from participants, it was considered potentially unethical not to make full use of that data (Francis, et al., 2010).

4.7 Refinement of Nodes

Tesch (1990) states that category construction in qualitative inquiry is somewhat problematic given that data are at best located within fuzzy boundaries. With this in mind, the forty-four emergent nodes and child nodes represent an unpolished distribution of units of meaning that need to be refined not only for structural stability but also for rationalization given the holistic nature of both the nodes themselves and the content within each node. This refinement process is outlined in Figure 4.1 and follows Creswell's (2015) approach of refining the number of codes, or in this instance, nodes, to around twenty. In commencing the refinement process, two avenues presented themselves as ways forward. The first involved considering two areas; the node *Attitudes* (positive and negative) and a collection of other nodes loosely termed *obvious targets*. The second avenue was to revisit the remaining nodes and undertake what Creswell (2018) identifies as a process of pulling the data apart and endeavouring to put them back together in more meaningful ways.

4.7.1 Attitude

In seeking to refine and reduce the number of nodes, the first approach addressed the *Positive* and *Negative* nodes under the parent heading *Attitudes*. One of NVivo's features is the distinction between research nodes and contextual nodes. A research node contains the data used for analysis and will form the evidence to support a theme's development. While still containing data from the source material, a contextual node's sole purpose is to provide context to the data under investigation. As such, they are typically not considered essential themes in themselves. The parent node *Attitudes* is an example of this approach. To have positive and negative attitudes as child nodes under each research node would require the duplication of nodes which conflicts with NVivo's catalogue hierarchical structure of maintaining like with like. For example, coding a respondent's attitude to a particular coping strategy into a strategy node rather than into an attitude node fails to keep attitudes with attitudes. This process would result in attitude codes being distributed across multiple nodes and prevent running a query to investigate specific aspects of participant attitudes.

Consequently, to avoid duplication and maintain the correct logic for NVivo, the coding of all units of meaning relating to a positive or negative attitude raised by the

participants occurs in a specific node, *Attitudes*. This structure allows for analysing the attitudes toward any particular research by merely running a coding query combining the attitude node with any other research node. Given that the *Positive* and *Negative* nodes under *Attitudes* are contextual nodes, they did not form part of the search for themes. However, the actual content within the positive and negative nodes helped determine the participants' attitudes to various aspects of the phenomenon.

4.7.2 Obvious Targets for Refinement

The second approach was to review the nodes presenting as obvious targets for refinement. A node can be considered an obvious target for refinement because it contains a particularly limited number of units of meaning or participant contributors. However, while data-poor nodes may be very suggestive, Saldana (2016) argues that the frequency of occurrence does not necessarily stand as an indicator of significance. Consequently, there is no hard-and-fast rule regarding the ratio of data required (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). In undertaking the review of the obvious targets, Scharp and Sanders' (2019) argument that instead of asking questions of quantity, the questions asked should centre on whether a set of data helps answer the research questions in a meaningful way. In this way, any node's existence is not solely reliant on the extent of its content. The review identified the four possible nodes listed in Table 4.2 based on logical arguments for their exclusion or collapse.

Table 4.2.

Initial List of Potentially Redundant Nodes

Node	Parent Node	Number of Units of Meaning	Number of Contributing Participants
Actually Coping	Coping	5	4
Benefit	Engagement	3	2
Suitability	Online	5	4
Efforts to Develop Social Life	University Social life	4	2

The content of the first three nodes, 'Actually Coping', 'Benefit', and 'Suitability' did not contain any units of meaning that reflected unique or minority voices or content that represented critical counterpoints regarding the phenomenon. Consequently, following confirmation of the coding of that unit of meaning within another node where required, the collapse of these three nodes proved to be relatively straightforward. However, the content of the fourth node *Efforts to Develop Social Life,* appeared to represent more distinctive data in the form of narrative that held the potential to be a unique theme, or at least an important aspect of the phenomenon. Consequently, although no similar units of meaning occurred in the other interviews, it was unclear whether the area relating to specific efforts to seek and create social friendships perceptibly added anything to understanding the phenomenon. Given that the analysis process was in its early stages, it was considered appropriate to retain the particular node for further review. After evaluating the areas *Attitudes* and *obvious targets,* thirty-nine nodes of the initial forty-four nodes remained.

4.7.3 Revisiting and Restructuring the Remaining Nodes

There are various approaches to analyzing qualitative research data generally and phenomenological research data more specifically (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, Theme in qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis, 2019; Wyer, 2015). However, the general approach to forming a fundamental structure involves time spent immersed in the raw data, followed by a gradual reduction of the data into units of meaning and themes (Bengtsson, 2016; Dufour & Richard, 2019; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Sundler, Lindberg, Nilsson, & Palmér, 2019). During the node restructure, the Coding Reference Guide (Appendix H) provided the basis for considering which nodes aligned together and, ultimately, what grouping of nodes made sense. The original recording and transcript data were revisited to support the restructuring and ensure that the analysis remained connected to and reflective of the participants' experience. Based on relevance and connection, nodes were regrouped and merged to reduce the number of nodes in line with Creswell's (2015) refinement process. In doing so, several options presented themselves. However, the restructure layout shown in Appendix J and detailed in Appendix K was considered to be the most representative reflection of the participant's description of the phenomenon. To stabilize the

structure, an additional node *Perceptions of Coping* was added to accommodate the combining of the nodes *Approach and Attitude*, *Definition of Coping* and *Origins of Coping*. As a result of the restructure, the number of nodes was reduced to sixteen from thirty-nine.

4.8 Theme Development

Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2013) consider a theme to be a thread of underlying meanings within which similar pieces of data can be tied together. In this perspective a theme comprises of the identification, analysis and reporting of patterns within qualitative data (Herzog, Handke, & Hitters, 2019; Scharp & Sanders, 2018). However, a theme does not necessarily capture all available data or the majority experience. However, it does capture and represent the salient aspects of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000) comment that themes are not superimposed on the data by the researcher as part of a hunt and seek process; instead, they emerge from the data. However, to a large degree, this negates the active role of the researcher's analysis process (Taylor & Ussher, 2001) and the researcher's judgement (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in actually determining what a theme is.

Similarly, Lucas and D'Enbeau (2013) suggest that the use of the traditionally favoured term *emerged* reflects a woefully truncated version of reality. This reality is a conscious and complicated process of making sense of extensive data which may materialise from multiple sources (Humble & Radina, 2018). Research analysis involves the movement of data to theory as part of active processes, and it is these active processes that provide the conduit for the emergence or identification of themes rather than the somewhat serendipitous position of themes merely emerging (Grodal, Anteby, & Holm, 2020; Humble & Radina, 2018). A similar view is held by Tesch (1987) who makes the call for avoiding the use of "passive, slightly withdrawing, almost mysterious language" (p. 230) such as emerge, appear or reveal, when discussing the identification of themes. In accepting these arguments, this study uses the term *identified* in place of the often-cited *emerged* to describe the themes obtained from the analysis progression outlined in Figure 4.1.

4.8.1 Identifying Candidate Themes

Following the refinement of the original forty-four nodes down to sixteen, the remaining nodes were then considered further and subsequently revised down to twelve candidate themes. The process adopted to achieve this refinement involved a series of reflective analyses of the 153 descriptors identified within the sixteen nodes as detailed in Appendix M. This part of the analysis was completed using Microsoft Excel and reflected both a growing familiarity with data and an intuitive awareness of the commonality of which data look and feel alike (Lincoln & Guba, 1991; Saldana, 2016). The analysis involved two stages. The initial stage consisted of analysing the 153 descriptors to collect like with like based on those descriptors with a natural and immediately recognisable connection. Where the appropriate grouping of a descriptor was not immediately apparent or where the use of similar descriptors occurred in a different context, then context or meaning was sought from the units of meaning encapsulated by the descriptor. Following this analysis, twenty-nine *collective* descriptors or classifications remained from the initial list of 153 descriptors.

The second stage involved a similar analysis of the twenty-nine collective descriptors, with the intent of reducing the number again by moving conceptually further from the *real or particular* to the more *abstract or general* as outlined in Figure 4.1. Because of the progression towards a more holistic view, the analysis encompassed Braun and Clarke's (2006) directive to search for themes or patterns across the data rather than within the data. As part of this process of reduction, candidate themes are developed. Candidate themes provide a useful starting point in giving a sense of the relationship between potential themes and refining the data into a structured format (Xu & Zammit, 2020). However, candidate themes are a temporary step in the formation of themes (Herzog, Handke, & Hitters, 2019; May, Strauss, Coyle, & Hayward, 2014; Yi, Wu, Xiang, & Liu, 2020), and Tesch (1987) notes that some candidate themes may be quite tentative in formation or less revelatory of the phenomenon experience than other candidate themes.

Consequently, as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006) not all candidate themes will have sufficient data to support them, or the data they contain may be too diverse to be representative of a particular aspect of the analysis and therefore do not transition into

a theme. Further caution is advised by DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000), who note that since candidate themes are not strictly bounded, they are capable of traversing or encompassing several categories. Accordingly, identifying candidate themes does not conclusively confirm the appropriateness of those themes or preclude further consideration of the data from alternative perspectives. To overcome the potential inconsistency in boundary formation, the candidate themes were manipulated by review until a "sufficient demonstration of a true representation of a theme became evident" (Roberts, Dowell, & Nie, 2019, p. 5) and the structure of candidate themes best reflected the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon. Following this analysis, the twelve candidate themes detailed in Table 4.3 were identified. The process used to develop a node to a candidate theme and then subsequently on to a theme is conveyed in Appendix N using the *Engagement* node classification as an example.

Table 4.3.

Candidate Themes

Candidate Theme	Descriptors Subsumed
1. Communication	Communication, Forums, Peers, Volume.
2. Content	Access issues, Adaptability, Adaption, Clarity, Comprehension, Content, Course material, Engagement, Study.
3. Delivery	Delivery, Delivery issues, Limitation, Taught
4. Interaction	Availability, Class, Student interaction, Community interaction, Faculty, Institutional, Interaction, Lack of interaction, Lecturers, Quality, University.
5. Life Influence	Accomodate family, Accommodate life, Accommodation, Career Change, Engagement, Familiarity, Family, Finacial, Juggling, Lack of recency, Life, Re-think, Right time, Routine, Outside influences, Work or career required, Working.
6. Motivation	Benefit, Interest or satisfaction, Lack of connection to unit, Lack of interest or motivation, Loss of Focus, Maintain focus, Motivation, Self Drive.
7. Perception	Experience, Flexibility, On-campus, Online lacks, Online offers, Online requires, Perception, Preparation.
8. Personality	Attitude, Belonging, Commitment, Confidence, Emotions, Experiences, Inhibited, Personal Attitude, Personality, Values, Frienship, Social, Upbringing.
9. Strategies	Behavioural, Cognitive, Developed, Emotional, Genetics, Parents, Physical, Rational/Time, Self-Management, Social.
10. Study Practices	Ability, Academic, Being involved, Being proactive, Break, Concentration, Concept, Direction, Do my own thing, Excluson, Focus, Function, Participation, Study, Study attitude, Study expectations, Study practices, Tasks and activities.
11. Support and Health	Access to suport, Activity, Alcohol, Anxiety, Assit in life, Contact, Health, Knowledge of support, Stress management, Use of support.
12. Under Performing	Approach, Avoidance, Distraction, Effort, Failing, Fall behind, Implemented, Keeping up, Knowledge, Recognition, Underperform.

4.8.2 Exclusion of Definitions and Strategies

The identification of candidate themes expressly excluded two nodes; *Definitions* and *Strategies*. The exclusion was not because the data within the nodes lacked relevance but because of why the data were sought. By design, two nodes were established to define coping and engagement with the intention that the units of meaning gathered would not be written up as a theme. The purpose of collecting the data was to build and reinforce the participants' perception of coping and engagement. Understanding the context of the participants' perception of these terms was considered essential in appreciating the context of the units of meaning obtained concerning the phenomenon.

Similarly, the purpose of collecting data regarding specific coping strategies was, while immensely relevant to answering the research questions, undertaken to be informative rather than determinative with respect to describing the phenomenon. However, while the nodes themselves did not form themes, the units of meaning they contained were valuable and significant and were incorporated as part of refining nodes through to themes. In deciding to exclude individual nodes, consideration was given to DeSantis and Ugarriza's (2000) reiteration that most themes are said to be implicit, implied, and tacit rather than explicit, declared, and easily expressed. Therefore because of the research design's conscious intent, the participants' responses obtained represent explicit rather than implicit data and cannot be said to have been discovered in the data through a completely inductive process.

4.8.3 Confirming Themes

Given (2008) reiterates that themes are not generated simply by counting words but by assessing and examining the constructs that occur in the data. This point is echoed by Kiger and Varpio (2020) who maintain that "when engaging in thematic analysis, researchers can identify themes irrespective of the number of times a particular idea or item related to that theme appears in a data set" (p. 848). Therefore, as Welsh (2002) recommends, the evaluation of themes involved considering other influences beyond merely counting who said what. Two significant influences were the memos written during the analysis process, and these were incorporated into Appendix G as part of the record of the steps taken in the analysis process and the development of a mind map (Appendix J) of the relationship between the nodes. This map-making process

enabled the nodes to be placed and reconsidered in the context of what Castleberry and Nolen (2018) consider to be the broader landscape of the phenomenon and subsequently validated. There were three other considerations taken into account as part of the formation of themes; the systematic review of all emerging candidate themes, establishing the themes, and confirming internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity.

1. Formation of Themes.

The process of theme development is about clustering codes or nodes to identify patterns of meaning. It is within the rich diversity of the texture and nuance of these patterns that the important something relevant to the research question resides (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). In moving to identify the patterns, the first consideration in forming themes was a systematic review of all emerging candidate themes by using a series of questions about the various data elements identified up to that point. The questions set out in Table 4.4 came from the following sources: Labra, Castro, Wright and Chamblas (2019), Castleberry and Nolen (2018), and Ryan and Bernard (2003).

Table 4.4.

Questions Developed to Review Candidate Themes

Questions
1. What is this expression an example of?
2. If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something useful about the dataset and my research question)?
3. Does the theme accurately represent the data it contains and with which it links?
4. Is the theme too abstract or difficult to understand, or conversely, is it so specific that it cannot be linked more broadly to the data?
5. Is there an identifiable logic to the hierarchical relationships between themes and categories (i.e. is there a clear distinction between the broader and more specific elements of the data collected)?
6. Is the theme a good representation of the categories it contains?
7. Are the data too diverse and wide-ranging (does the theme lack coherence)?
8. What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?
9. Are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme thick or thin)?
10. Does the thematic matrix contain the information necessary to answer the research question and the study objectives?

In addition to asking the theme review questions, the second consideration involved establishing the themes by seeking guidance from Scharp and Sanders' (2019) suggestion that in generating themes, the researcher should follow the steps developed as Table 4.5.

Table 4.5.

Process for Generating Themes

Steps
1. Collate initial codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to the particular theme
2. Review the themes to check whether the themes work concerning the coded extracts and the entire data set
3. Define and name themes by determining the heart of what each theme conveys: knowing what it is and what it is not
4. Locate exemplars by making a selection of compelling examples that provide evidence of the theme and which relate to the research question

The third consideration in forming themes was to confirm that the themes exhibit internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. This means that the data within the themes should be meaningfully related to each other, and the themes themselves should be explicitly differentiable (Javadi & Zarea, 2016; Yi, Wu, Xiang, & Liu, 2020). The validity checking of the themes involves two steps:

- First, revisit the extracted codes of each theme to determine whether these codes form a consistent pattern, and if they do, then;
- Second, revisit each theme's extracted codes again to considering the validity of the themes regarding all of the data within the entire data set.

The purpose of the steps is to make it apparent how many themes there are and whether these themes have subtheme(s) or not. The process also clarifies what differentiates the themes, how they match, and the whole story they tell about the data Javadi and Zarea (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). As outlined by Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen and Snelgrove (2016) at this point, it should be possible to develop a narration that describes and connects the various themes and how these themes answer the study question.

2. How Many Themes?

The actual number of themes generated for each project will vary due to a variety of contextual factors (Labra, Castro, Wright, & Chamblas, 2019; Saldana, 2016), and often these boundaries are arbitrarily chosen (Elliott, 2018). However, Saldana (2016) while noting that there is no standardized or magic number of themes to achieve, does indicate a preference for the final number of major themes to be held to a minimum. This position echo's DeSantis and Ugarriza's (2000) contention that presenting a large number of themes not only dilutes the unifying function of a theme but is equivalent to presenting unanalysed, raw data which may prevent any meaningful interpretation of findings. In practice though, a low or a high number of themes may indicate that the analysis has been prematurely closed without a complete interpretation and conceptualisation of the data, resulting in a potential misunderstanding of the participants' experience (Ravindran, 2019; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019).

Further confusion about the ideal number of themes is visible in the wide variation in the number of themes identified by researchers. For example, at one end of the scale, Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016) recommend a number that is more than one[27], and Mayan (2016) suggests one to three themes. At the other end of the scale, the number identified in published studies has been as high as thirty-one (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). To establish a precedent, the twenty-five qualitative research sources presented in Table 4.6 were analysed to identify an average for the number of themes suggested or identified within those sources.

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[27] Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016) state that you generally want more than one, and probably less than six, in a 10-15,000 word report.

Table 4.6. Extent of Themes Suggested or Identified for Qualitative Projects

Extent of Themes Suggested or Identified for Qualitative Projects

Themes	Author
3	Zeeck (2012)
3	Schuemann (2014)
3	MacMillan, Forte and Grant (2014)
3	Mendez, Tygret, Martin Conley, Haynes and Gerhardt (2020)
4[28]	Jarrett and Burton (1999)
4	Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004)
4	Mills, Jadad, Ross and Wilson (2005)
4	Isabirye and Makoe (2018)
5	Jugder (2016)
5	Garner (2016)
5	Hall, Chai and Albrecht (2016)
5	Noon (2017)
5	Walsh, et al. (2019)
5 to 6	Creswell (2013)
5 to 7	Lichtman (2010)
5 to 7	Creswell (2015)
6	Basit (2003)
6	Ayres, Kavanagh and Knafl (2003)
6	Thomas and Harde (2008)
6[29]	Johansson, Ekebergh and Dahlberg (2009)
7	Holroyd (2001)
7[30]	Davies, Knuiman, Wright and Rosenberg (2014)
8	Derico (2017)
10	Dennison, Morrison, Conway and Yardley (2013)
11	Cassol, et al. (2018)
15[31]	Chu and Taliaferro (2019)

[28] Jarrett and Burton (1999) refer to themes as dimensions
[29] Johansson, Ekebergh and Dahlberg (2009) use the term 'constituents'.
[30] Davies, Knuiman, Wright and Rosenberg (2014) identified 7 main themes and 63 sub-themes
[31] Chu and Taliaferro (2019) identified 3 main themes and 12 sub-themes

The data in Table 4.6 suggest between five and six as an average number of themes reported. Interestingly to some degree, this reflects the argument proposed by Elliott (2018) that the final number of themes reported often seems to be governed by journal space, which rarely allows for more than five. Ultimately in undertaking the coding and analysis of the data for this study, there was no expectation for the number of themes. Instead, as Friese, Soratto and Pires (2018) recommend themes development was based on an investigation of the data for meaningful patterns relevant to the research questions. However, while not a conclusive endorsement, the average figure from Table 4.6 does provide a level of reassurance concerning the actual number of themes attained within this study.

4.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a detailed account of the data analysis undertaken to refine the coded units of meaning extracted from the interview transcripts to candidate themes and then to themes following a version of Saldana's (2016) *Streamlined Codes-to-Theory Model* as modified for analysis using NVivo. The discussion included details and reasoning for adopting the NVivo software program and supplementing this program with elements of a more manual analysis process. Throughout the chapter, arguments are presented to demonstrate trustworthiness in the analysis process and the outcome reached through that process. The chapter also references several supporting appendixes developed to record the analysis process and provide oversight of the study's validity and reliability by establishing trustworthiness. Also outlined were the steps and procedures to ensure appropriate bracketing. The next chapter presents and discusses the study's findings into the nature of online learning regarding the coping strategies and perceptions of engagement held by mature-aged students.

5. Findings and Discussion - Participant Engagement, Coping and Attitude

5.0 Introduction to Chapter 5

This chapter describes three *non-theme* areas which are relevant to understanding the phenomenon under investigation. The first two areas relate to the participants' descriptions of what the terms *engagement* and *coping* mean to them. The third area reflects the participants' *attitudes* towards and experiences within the online environment. As previously discussed, these non-theme areas do not represent actual themes because they have been imposed on the data and do not meet the discovery requirement outlined by Creswell (2018). In line with the approach recommended by Colaizzi (1978) and Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016), quotations taken from the participants' narratives are used illustratively and analytically as part of a reflective commentary supported by the research literature. The discussion within this chapter provides a foundation for considering the themes discussed in Chapter 6.

5.1 Participant Definitions of Engagement and Coping

In addition to providing an overview of online learning and mature-aged learners, Chapter 2 presented an extended discussion of coping and engagement. While students can choose when and how they study, the extent of control that a mature-age student has over coping or engagement is debatable. For example, family or financial commitments frequently restrict when a student can participate in study activities. Similarly, students have little if any, control over the delivery format or the assessment task structure. Perhaps more significantly, students cannot ensure that they will cope with study demands or guarantee that they will be engaged. Ultimately, while coping and engagement are concepts that are very much influenced or driven by personal traits, they are both subject to patterns of transience (Ungar, et al., 2015) in that neither concept is fixed across a point of time and may vary in response to changing circumstances.

Both coping and engagement are used extensively in everyday speech and in the education and psychology academic literature. However, while both terms can be

considered familiar, they are often diverse in operationalisation because of the potential for multiple meanings and application. Therefore, the provision of a suitable definition matters in that definitions provide a level of certainty as to what something should mean and by extension make it easier to understand the context in which it is used (Van Mil & Henman, 2016). Without such clarity, it is difficult to see the world through another person's eyes and attain the insider perspective sought by descriptive phenomenology (Lieberman, 2007). Consequently, to place the phenomenon in the participant's context, the participants were asked to describe what the terms 'coping' and 'engagement' meant to them.

5.1.1 What Engagement Represents to Participants

Kuh (2003) argues that the engagement premise if not self-evident, is deceptively simple; the more time a student spends on task, the more they learn about it. However, as part of the process of challenging themselves to learn, there is a requirement for students to expend a certain quality of effort (Coates, 2005) and hold a positive level of self-efficacy in their own ability (Doménech-Betoret, Abellán-Roselló, & Gómez-Artiga, 2017). Unfortunately, in some instances, students can become frustrated with their learning experience if it fails to meet their expectations of an effective study programme (Nixon, Scullion, & Hearn, 2016). Consequently, while there is an expectation that students will take more active responsibility for their learning, in reality, students may not fully engage at the appropriate level if they believe that doing so will involve more work (Beichner, et al., 2007).

In considering what engagement meant to them, the participants identified engagement as an essential component of their academic success, and they expressed the concern that a lack of opportunity or ability to engage would be detrimental to the studies.

> **Diane:** If I don't have that ability to engage, then I won't be able to do the assessment to the best of my ability.

> **Anne:** It might be you don't engage, and you just get a pass, and some people might be happy with that. But I think if you do have that

engagement, it might give you that leverage to succeed more in your
studies than what it would if you didn't engage.

> **Kate:** I think if you didn't engage, you'd miss too much of the
> supporting information that allows you to actually complete the course.

However, it was also evident that the participants recognised that engagement required a commitment to making time for concentrated study. Achieving this accommodation frequently involved establishing periods of isolation where they could shut out distractions.

> **Brian:** I think that to me, engagement is a very, very important point
> because [it involves] basically shutting out the rest of anything else.

> **Hanna:** I have to try and not get distracted by what's out there, and I've
> like really got to get stuck and get it done.

> **Frank:** For me [engagement involves] me in my dining room, where I sit
> through the early evenings and just shut the rest of the world away from
> me and my own little environment.

The participants also identified that in addition to committing to complete their study, there was a requirement to be able to work through and master the content satisfactorily. Success in this regard for the participants' effort in three broad areas: making sense of the content, appropriateness of delivery, and involvement in interaction.

1. Making Sense of the Discipline Content.

Units of meaning ascribed to making sense of the content included the following descriptors: *content, focus, tasks, comprehension* and *moment*. The responses within this category reflect the participants' perception of what was required to absorb and comprehend the unit material. The participant's personal history and background context and the participant's expectations of any potential academic or life outcome

were highly influential in directing the level of effort they were prepared to expend. In particular, the intervening time between finishing school studies and the commencement of tertiary education required an awakening of long-lost knowledge. As stated by one participant:

> **Frank:** When we done the first maths package, I thought I would remember a lot more than I did. I suppose I haven't really needed to do it, you know, remember them sort of things, doing differential calculations and simultaneous equations and matrices and all this sort of stuff, you think whoa I'd forgotten about that stuff.

There is an overriding requirement to provide students with a learning experience that is both worthwhile and promotes their learning and development (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher, 2020; Kreber, 2007). For the participants, there was an expectation that they would have access to a deeper level of engagement with the content that would enable what Karagiannopoulou and Entwistle (2019) describe as an independent understanding. The participants expected that rather than just understanding the content, they would draw out meaningful learning experiences from the content and activities presented to them.

> **Gail:** I could see that how all the stuff that I'm learning now is very, very relevant because I saw how they [nurses] engage with him [father] and other patients.

> **Frank:** I suppose it's for me, engagement is more to get involved with, to work with. It is working you know with something.

> **Kate:** [Lecturers need to] make sure that students get [actual] practice for things like counselling and that kind of thing.

Involvement in higher-order thinking correlates with increased student engagement (Bae & Kokka, 2016; Karabiyik, 2019; Lee, 2017a). In seeking a deeper level of engagement, participants identified a desire to obtain a broader understanding of the

course content rather than confine themselves to merely the tasks that were necessary to complete the assessments, for example:

> **Gail:** There's extras with some of the courses that I have, like extra videos that they offer for you to go and watch. And it's like you don't have to do them, but, you know, they give it to you as an option so you can learn more information about the course. So it's like being engaged in all different areas rather than just engaging in, okay I've only got to complete this assignment, I'll complete this assignment. It's engaging in the whole course rather than just focusing on the things that need to be done.

> **Fiona:** My personal choice is to read widely about the subject. So I've found that a lot of the things that I read about, and I guess this is additional self-directed learning in a way, then I can take that and tie it back in relevance to the subjects I'm doing now with the subjects that I'm doing in the future.

However, the expectation went beyond more than just completing the material offered within the course. There was a requirement that the material would inspire the student to seek a deeper understanding or appreciation of the content and its purpose. This perspective reflects Marton's (1975) outline for a deep approach to learning where the student endeavours to make meaning from the learning task and explore the content beyond the immediate requirements. This aspect of student expectation reflects the constructivist position, where encouraging students to construct meaning from the taught concepts will enhance learning (Arghode, Wang, & Latham, 2017; Dagar & Yadav, 2016).

> **Jane:** Engagement for me means, so academically it means understanding the work. Having the work presented in a way that is not easy to grasp but that you can track, and it inspires you to branch off in and look at things, investigate things.

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> **Gail:** Where for me now, it's like no, all this information is given to me for a reason. And it's not just there just for fun and games, it's actually there to help me become the best nurse that I wanna be.

In addition to making sense of the content, the participants' comments regarding engagement encompassed the ability to focus on what was required to achieve comprehension. Consequently, while higher education is fundamentally about knowledge (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015), the participants' referred to moving beyond retention and being able to apply the content in practice. This desire aligns with the argument that learning is not merely committing a set of facts to memory but it is the ability to use resources to find, evaluate, and apply information (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher, 2020; Lujan & DiCarlo, 2006). These practices occur as part of the process of "transferability to real-world contexts" (Gillett-Swan, 2017, p. 27).

> **Hanna:** I know the theory of it all, it's just, can I actually do it in a practical setting? Because at the moment, I sort of got the blinkers on.

> **Lucy:** So I guess that's engaging with the actual content [and] what you're actually taking away from what you're learning, I suppose.

2. Appropriateness of Online Delivery.

Units of meaning assigned to the appropriateness of delivery included the following descriptors: *delivery* and *lecturers*. The responses here reflected the participants' views on whether the delivery of content met their needs or expectations concerning the academic tasks set and content presentation. Wells and Field (2003) argue that the online format facilitates students' learning opportunities because it aims to make student learning possible by providing improved access to education. Unfortunately, there are difficulties in achieving the desired level of interaction in online courses (Bali & Liu, 2018; Lee, 2017b; Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017). The lack of interaction was of significant importance to participants who valued the ability to be able to connect to the lecturer and the content.

> **Adam:** Engagement, in the context of being an online student, is having the engagement with not only the subject matter experts being lecturer and the tutors, but also the engagement with the subject matter to the extent that is relevant to what I'm wanting to achieve.

> **Hanna:** So to me at the moment, that [engagement] means connecting with the lecturers or the, yeah, I guess they're the tutors.

Beyond identifying the desire to connect to the lecturers, the participants indicated a desire for a more in-class experience. Consequently, even though the concept of distance education involves a separation of the student by space or time (Islam, Kim, & Kwon, 2020; Moore-Russo, Wilsey, Grabowski, & Bampton, 2015; Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020), participants expressed a preference for having actual access to lectures.

> **Frank:** It would be nice to actually be able to go to the lectures.

> **Fiona:** So, without a doubt, I think being present in the learning classroom environment is a better way or an easier way.

This preference is not unexpected as there is a general tendency for students to prefer face-to-face learning for several reasons, including the perception of higher engagement (Bahnson & Olejnikova, 2017; Kemp & Grieve, 2014). However, in the online setting, access to actual lectures was limited, and most lectures were pre-recorded. In addition to having more significant interaction with the lecturer, participants also sought a connection with the content. While some comments indicated a preference for a more surface approach, generally, the participants' comments reflected a deeper approach to learning. In particular, participants wanted a resonance with the content and to have that content inspire them. Consequently, an essential aspect for success in the design and presentation of distance and e-learning course materials is the creation of relationships and the facilitation of constructivist or connectivist learning approaches (Downes, 2020; Makani, Durier-Copp, Kiceniuk, & Blandford, 2016; Picciano, 2017).

> **Jane:** I like the extra titbits of information because it's all those little things that [lecturer] talks about that aren't necessarily relevant right now, maybe relevant in second or third year or when working. But it inspires me to go and look it up or look up words.

> **Emily:** That's [forum discussions] really interesting, it's not course material, it's not actually engagement in the assessments I have to do. But it is engagement in the subject, and it keeps you looking at things around it.

However, as outlined by Touffaily, Zalan and Lee (2018), the value of an online curriculum is often only perceived from a functional or utilitarian perspective. In such instances, while the student may consider the content to be helpful, relevant and important to other tasks or aspects of the student's life, they may not be regarded as exciting, thought-provoking, or even necessary.

> **Brian:** If you don't complete these things or you don't do it, then it's only going to hinder your study. It's only going to hinder you when you become a nurse, or whatever anyone else is studying is only going to hinder you later in life.

> **Emily:** But asking all of those questions like what's the purpose of this really?

Content disenfranchisement is often more pronounced where the quality and format of lectures is low. For example, research has identified that online video lectures not only enhances engagement with the content but provides a positive overall learning experience (Jenner, Helwig, & Rufer, 2018; Scagnoli, Choo, & Tian, 2019). Unfortunately, the delivery of poor-quality visual media has a negative effect on the learning process (Gilardi, Holroyd, Newbury, & Watten, 2015; Lange & Costley, 2020). The negative impact that low-quality presentations had on engagement was identifiable in a high proportion of participant responses.

> **Diane:** I guess the quality of the recordings sometimes aren't that great … I feel like I can get more if I read for an hour than listening to an audio for an hour and not be able to see what they're talking about.

> **Jane:** She's sitting in her office delivering our lectures that we can still log in for at 8 am. But there is a difference, you can feel the difference because there's no engagement process happening for anybody.

As outlined in Table 3.5, the participants for this study represented nine different discipline areas. As this was a descriptive phenomenological study, there was no intent to analyse the participants' descriptions and perceptions, particularly given the small sample size for each discipline area. However, apart from content that required a practical attendance, it did not appear that discipline area influenced the student's perception of the appropriateness of online study. What was noticeable was where there were elements of practical attendance, such as for nursing, there was some anxiety. For many students, the opportunity to access interactive and realistic simulations is beneficial and an essential element of the online learning process (Aebersold, 2018; Khalil, et al., 2020; Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj, & Sethi, 2020). However, the limited access to such programs was severely impacted by the onset of Covid-19 because many institutions were unprepared for the necessary transition from an in-house practical component to a fully online format.

> **Lucy:** I'm frustrated at that. Because that was essentially my one chance to actually get in a lab and actually do the things we're supposed to be doing to learn it a bit more visually, especially as I'm a visual learner.

3. Involvement in Interaction.

Units of meaning ascribed to involvement in exchange included the following descriptors: *belonging, communication, interaction, forums, peers* and *university*. The responses here reflect the participants' desire for more significant interaction and social presence, which, while recognised in the research, is as yet not fully realised in practice (Park & Kim, 2020; Tang & Hew, 2020). Choy and Quek (2016) discuss that having a high degree of social presence enables a student to feel the existence of

themselves and others which can lead to feelings of connectedness and belonging. A similar positive connection is made by Mulder (2018) who suggests that in online learning, social presence may be more of a factor because students are typically more isolated; consequently, having a high social presence can represent a highly desirable benefit. It was evident within the participant's responses that there was a desire for social presence.

> **Brian:** I was sort of hoping for more of social interaction. And I guess that's one thing that the online environment does not provide.

> **Emily:** I enjoy the forums, though I miss having the people around.

There is a general recognition of the need for lecturers to instigate regular and targeted communication to enhance the student's sense of belonging and engagement (Peacock & Cowan, 2019; Stone, 2019; Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2019). Lecturer communication is also essential for students who may be uncertain of their abilities and need affirmation and reassurance (Topham, 2015). While interaction with lecturers was particularly significant for participants in terms of engagement, there were several other areas of communication that the participants considered to be an essential part of defining engagement.

> **Emily:** Being able to talk to people. To me, because to engage in an activity, to understand what's going on around it, and to discuss that with other people, to be a part of what's going on in that class or on that assignment, that is probably what engagement means to me most.

> **Kate:** Engagement means participation and interacting on a consistent level.

Although interaction with other students was considered almost a necessity for engagement, this was not the case for the social aspect of relationships. The value of social capital is frequently cited as being an essential factor in student success and

wellbeing at university[32]. As noted by Raspopovic, Cvetanovic, Medan and Ljubojevic (2017) social online interaction and discussion not only provides opportunities for students to discuss their tasks collaboratively and raise academic concerns but also to establish online connections and minimize feelings of isolation. However, only one participant referred to social interaction as an aspect of defining engagement.

> **Jane:** And then engagement socially for me just I guess means chatting, connecting not just about the work, but letting those conversations flow into other things.

Unfortunately, at times, the participants' definition of engagement reflected a perception that the unit structure and delivery approach were not translating to opportunities for involvement in exchange or adequate engagement, a point not lost on Banna, Grace Lin, Stewart and Fialkowski (2015) or Khan, Egbue, Palkie and Madden (2017).

> **Diane:** So engagement to me looks like emails or online tutorials or the forums. That's pretty much the only way of engaging with anybody at Uni[33].

The importance of students being able to identify and connect with other people, such as peers and the lecturer, is well recognised (Alrashidi, Phan, & Ngu, 2016; Bowden, Tickle, & Naumann, 2019), particularly in distance learning environment (Moore, Warner, & Jones, 2016). The lack of opportunities for students to engage or interact can represent a missed opportunity to stimulate the motivation and willingness to participate in class activities (Wanders, Dijkstra, Maslowski, & Van der Veen, 2020). For the participants, the connection with others was meaningful.

> **Brian:** But to me, just being there in a group of people all focused on one thing I think is a little bit that is lacking in an online environment.

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[32] See for example Brooks (2007); Budgen, Main, Callcott and Hamlett (2014); Karaşa and Baytemir (2018)
[33] In reporting the participants' comments the participants' use of the abbreviation Uni for University has been retained.

> **Anne:** Engagement, to me, means being able to have access to speak to the lecturer being that I am online and be able to interact with other students.

While having a connection with *anybody* was identifiable as a frequent requirement for engagement, it was clear that the participants also valued engagement in the context of belonging more broadly, such as with the university or achievement. This response was not unexpected, given that belonging and engagement are connected and active elements within student success (Freeman & Ortiz, 2019; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Masika & Jones, 2016).

> **Fiona:** And I guess engagement means feeling like I'm part of the course.

> **Adam:** But I think it's also an engagement in less of a focus on academia and more of an engagement on what else you would achieve in university, so with other students and what you would learn. Engaging with your peers irrespective of life experience or age or expectations of the course.

4. How Do Mature-Age Students Define Engagement?

The participants' comments portray engagement in terms of comprehending the unit content through connections made with the lecturer in delivering that content and opportunities to discuss and question that content with the lecturer and other students. This perspective aligns with the findings of Bond, et al., (2020), which identify that active participation and involvement in learning features as one of the most popular aspects within definitions for student engagement. For some participants, engagement extends beyond the content material. It encompasses the broader aspect of connectedness and feeling part of a larger picture in the form of a particular course, a class or even the university itself (Farrell, Jorgenson, Fudge, & Pritchard, 2018; Korpershoek, Canrinus, Fokkens-Bruinsma, & de Boer, 2020). Again this connection was not unsurprising given the recognised relationship between engagement and the sense of belonging. By considering the participants' comments regarding the definition

of engagement holistically, several essential components are noticeable. By combining these elements, the following participant defined working definition of engagement can be formed.

> *Engagement is the level and quality of a student's participation,*
> *response and connection with the content, the lecturer, and the challenge*
> *of the academic activities that facilitate the desired outcome.*

In considering the participants' definition of engagement, it is evident that a significant aspect of the definition is acknowledging the variety of interactions that foster engagement in the academic context. This perspective is highlighted by several authors, including Ashwin and McVitty (2015) and Bond, et al., (2020). The definition also encompasses the precept of the connection between engagement and academic outcomes and performance as outlined by Alrashidi, Phan and Ngu (2016) and Wang and Degol (2014). One aspect missing from the definition is the inclusion of any detail on the various forms of engagement such as behavioural cognitive or emotional engagement as typically covered by authors including Balwant (2018) and Anderson, Hardy and Murphy (2017).

5.1.2 What Coping Represents to Participants

While mature-age students face many of the issues and concerns of other students, they encounter other impacts which may be considered unique and specific (Christensen & Evamy, 2011). In particular mature-age students typically have far greater responsibilities relating to family, work and financial commitments (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018b; Heagney & Benson, 2017; Mallman & Lee, 2016), all of which draw on a limited resource pool. The participants were very aware of these competing commitments and generally actively sought to address or at least try to make sufficient accommodations to work through the difficulties.

> **Anne:** Trying to make sure it doesn't get on top of you, things don't get
> on top of you. Creating mechanisms that [allow] time with the family,
> my studies, my work, and I can [also have] time for the general running
> of home as well as a bit of social life.

> **Kate:** [Coping is] making adaptations to make something work, or like behaviourally changing your behaviours.

Within the participants' descriptions of coping, three broad areas of significance were identifiable; family accommodations, health perspectives, and time management. In other areas of the interviews, the participants talked about the impact of work or career on their studies. However, apart from Diane's mention of having to juggle her work life, student life, and mum life, there was no other reference to work impacts when defining coping.

1. Family Accommodations.

Units of meaning ascribed to family accommodations included the following descriptors: *children, family, home, life,* and *spouse/partner*. The responses here reflect the participants' difficulties in working study requirements into or around the family or household needs. Although the demands placed on mature-aged students are not necessarily negative, Nguyen and Sawang (2016), suggest that these demands can turn into work-family stress when there is an imbalance between work and family tensions. One of the more complex issues for prospective distance education students and their families is anticipating what impact undertaking study will have on family life, particularly distance study may not always be as convenient as expected (Bird & Morgan, 2003; Kahu, 2016). For mature-aged women, there is the potential for further increase in these difficulties because the familial influence on mature students is linked inextricably to gendered roles within the family, notably the traditionally female role of a homemaker in contrast to the conventional male role of the provider (Dicke, Safavian, & Eccles, 2019; Gill, Hayes, & Senior, 2015). As highlighted in the literature, women returning to education, particularly mature-age women who have family responsibilities, encounter unique issues and challenges (Atherton, 2017; Lin, 2016; Olson-Strom & Rao, 2020; O'Shea & Stone, 2019).

> **Gail:** Then plus doing the cooking, cleaning, trying to go to work, you know, doing basic everyday life. That was very hard to have to deal with.

> **Diane:** Coping to me is being able to juggle my work life, student life
> and mum life because I'm doing three subjects a semester and I work 30
> hours a week. And yes, a 15-month-old takes up a lot of time, especially
> my time. So coping for me is I have to make sure my time management
> is pretty good, otherwise, I can't do what I'm doing.

The need to strike the right balance aligns closely with the metaphorical juggling of many different and sometimes competing balls simultaneously (Christiansen, et al., 2019). Within the participants' responses, juggling references came up several times when describing coping and discussing coping in general. At times, the responses suggest that the juggling skill was almost necessary for completing studies.

> **Fiona:** Keeping all the balls in the air … having some time out for me.
> Feeling lucky, not overwhelmed by the balance of study, work and life.

> **Adam:** I feel that I'm at a point where I can't afford to spend a lot of time
> trying to revolutionize my methods just because I've got so many other
> things I have to juggle in life.

From the responses, it was evident that while participants would rearrange their life to accommodate their study, this accommodation appeared conditional on family needs. The requirement or desire for compromise is a reality for most students to achieve a working solution to life balance challenges (Adams & Blair, 2019; Christiansen, et al., 2019; Nicklin, Meachon, & McNall, 2019). Paradoxically, having the first-hand experience of the juggling act also means having a limited amount of uncommitted time for reflecting on that experience (Gaze, 2001), and ultimately the time to do something constructive about it.

> **Hanna:** For me, specifically, it [coping] would be knowing that I'm
> balancing the family life with the study life. So I guess my husband is a
> good measurement of my level of coping. If he's looking a bit stressed
> out, then I think, oh dear, something is going to have to change there.

> **Lucy:** Obviously, taking a full day off to do that [devote to study] is a massive sort of burden on the family, so I mean, I don't think that's going to happen as much as I want it to.

However, while online study makes it possible for students to continue working while meeting other responsibilities such as childcare (Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016), many students still have to make sacrifices to accommodate diverse personal and family challenges (Gair & Baglow, 2017). For some participants making these accommodations meant that online study represented the only workable option. For example, as noted by Jane and Diane when asked how they felt about undertaking online study:

> **Jane:** I don't have an option, so I don't feel any particular way about it. I can't go to Uni everyday as I full-time care for my 16-year-old autistic son.

> **Diane:** I'm fine with it. I prefer online study because I have to work and I have a one-year-old. So I can't really not work and go into campus, so online is my only option.

These comments highlight the earlier commentary on the gendered role of family carer and the reality faced by women in overcoming the gender perceptions associated with accommodating family interests (Shuvra, Khan, Tanvin, Mozahid, & Khan, 2019; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). The participants' comments confirm the argument that women returning to study or work are often less able to separate their personal and domestic lives from their academic or career aspirations (Chambers, 2019; Naz, Fazal, & Khan, 2017; Olah, Kotowska, & Richter, 2018; Tett, 2000).

2. Health Perspectives.

Units of meaning ascribed to health perspectives included the following descriptors: *mental health, physical health, stress* and *self-care*. There has been a considerable body of research exploring needs and the challenges faced by non-traditional students[34], and one of the areas considered is health and well-being. Sadly the findings

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[34] See for example Asta and Margarita (2018); Bohl, Haak and Shrestha (2017); MacDonald (2018)

indicate that university students are very reluctant to seek help for health issues, especially mental health issues (Browne, Munro, & Jeremy, 2017; Williams, Case, & Roberts, 2018; Winter, Patel, & Norman, 2017). This reluctance represents a significant problem in that unaddressed health issues can precipitate the development of more serious mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Pascoe, Hetrick, & Parker, 2020).

According to Park and Adler (2003), coping takes on two connotations within the stress literature; firstly, as a way of dealing with stress, and secondly, the effort to master conditions of harm, threat, or challenge when a routine or automatic response is not readily available. The participant responses reflect a high level of awareness that the concept of coping encompasses the need to ensure that they took care of themselves, both mentally and physically, to perform well.

> **Carol:** So now, if I'm feeling like I'm not coping, I have to physically do something different. So I'll need to, all right I'd better go and mow the lawn.

> **Hanna:** It [coping] would mean being able to put in the amount of effort that I want to put in without negating my mental health, I guess.

> **Brian:** So to me, it means be able to cope. It's not just old brain work, you need some activity, you need some downtime, some me-time or whatever the latest phrase is, or self-care. All different terms are used, but it's not from my experience, it's always been the jobs come first. Whereas now, I'm slowly migrating across to the fact that you've got to look after yourself physically and mentally to be able to cope.

Unfortunately, the statistics show that the percentage of adults engaging in regular physical activity is low (Guthold, Stevens, Riley, & Bull, 2018; Lachman, Lipsitz, Lubben, Castaneda-Sceppa, & Jette, 2018). Making appropriate accommodations to find the time, desire or the drive to actively do something towards improving their health was another challenge the participants faced.

> **Kate:** Yeah, well, I've been thinking about that. I really want to do
> something physical if I could fit it into my day like I used to do yoga a
> lot. But yeah, trying to manage it and fit it into my day is challenging.

> **Hanna:** Because for me I need to, probably actually that is one of the
> harder things of the study, and maybe because of the effort I'm putting in
> I'm not getting enough time to exercise, I know that is really important.

Interestingly, several responses indicate that some level of stress was a desired if not a necessary element to their study. This response is consistent with the view that some stress may be beneficial for learning for some students, with a reasonable level of stress potentially leading to higher performance (La Cascia, et al., 2019; Rudland, Golding, & Wilkinson, 2020).

> **Irene:** But for me, I have a very stressful job. So for me, stress is just the
> normal side of being. So I don't really kind of worry about it too much.

> **Brian:** For me personally, I'd say I've become the sort of person that
> relies on pressure to get things done.

Unfortunately, the research is conflicting regarding the impact of health issues on student progress and success. For example, while researchers such as La Cascia, et al., (2019) have failed to find a significant correlation between student stress levels and academic success, other researchers have identified links between well-being and academic success (Preoteasa, Axante, Cristea, & Preoteasa, 2016; Yu, Shek, & Zhu, 2018), and between health and academic success (Babatunde, 2017; Shaw, Gomes, Polotskaia, & Jankowska, 2015). In part, this variation in findings may be attributable to the range of factors that fall under the broad umbrella of health or well-being, which appears to serve as an influential variable in the reported results. Encouragingly several responses indicated that participants had recognised the need to consider their health and subsequently sought assistance from the university's support services:

Emily: I've been in to see the doctor in there, I've spoken to the various tutors when I was having problems and they've been really good. I got to talk about pretty much everything between, you know, mental health stuff and study tricks, aids, you know, like what sort of, and just general should I be worried, you know is this how things are or isn't it how things are? I wasn't very big on talking to anybody at all when I came in [to university study], so I just really had no point of reference to say anything from.

Brian: But as a mature person, you know, I've realized that you're not expected to carry the whole load by yourself. You know, there is support there. And I'm absolutely been amazed at the support that USQ[35] has for learning, for mental health, for financial support.

3. Time Management.

Time management is a significant issue for adult learners as they struggle to balance maintaining their family and financial obligations while still performing well academically (Adams & Blair, 2019; Pozdeeva, 2018; Razali, Rusiman, Gan, & Arbin, 2018). However, finding time to accommodate all of their obligations can be challenging within a student's hectic schedule. Consequently, time management represents a necessary skill for students (Cyril, 2015; Razali, Rusiman, Gan, & Arbin, 2018). A similar but stronger observation was made earlier by Arksy, Marchant and Simmill (1994), who suggest that time management represented the most significant survival tool for most mature students in their attempt to balance their roles and responsibilities. Beyond the planning aspects, Adams and Blair (2019) maintain that good time management skills provide a buffering effect on stress and improve academic achievement. For the participants' as mature-age students, this contention was evident in their perceptions of coping. In outlining what coping meant to them, the participants' primary consideration centred on the ability and necessity to manage their time and progress towards successfully completing their studies. In seeking to accommodate the need to progress their studies, participants faced pronounced time

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[35] In reporting the participants' comments the participants' use of the abbreviation USQ for the University of Southern Queensland has been retained.

management challenges in circumstances where study was not the priority consideration in their life.

> **Lucy:** I think setting the time to do it has certainly been the most difficult because essentially nothing's changed in my, in my other world, in terms of my family or my work, I still work four days a week, I still have my family there. So I've literally just had to try and fit the study into that time. I haven't been able to allocate, you know, take an extra day off work or do anything like that.

> **Hanna:** For me, the most difficult aspect is managing the family. Yeah. Sort of a time management, I guess. So yeah. But I just keep thinking, like, if I was single before kids, I would just spend all day long studying, it wouldn't really mind right now because that's what I want to do is just launch myself into it all day long.

To cope with the difficulties associated with time management, participants sought refuge in routine, planning and alternatives to establish order in the chaos. These approaches reflect a positive response to time management challenges (Adams & Blair, 2019; Ghiasvand, Naderi, Tafreshi, Ahmadi, & Hosseini, 2017).

> **Anne:** So it's putting it in that routine of your life and making sure that you do actually get it done, and I think once you've found that routine and what's going on, it then becomes second nature. So Tuesdays for me, I don't work, but both my kids are at kindy and school. So Tuesday is my study day during school hours, and that's how I've designed it. My daughter never used to go to kindy on a Tuesday but this year when I'm studying nope, you can go on Tuesdays.

> **Brian:** So it's more getting a routine that's been my problem as a mature person.

Unfortunately, as outlined, finding the balance between family, study, and employment is not only a constant juggling act but a continual challenge for mature students (Adams & Blair, 2019; Mukwevho, 2018). For many students, time management proves to be more difficult than expected, and this dilemma contributes to student attrition (Au, Li, & Wong, 2018; Morison & Cowley, 2017). While no participant reported having reached a point where they had to withdraw from study completely, several participants had faced the reality that there simply is not the time available to accommodate all of their activities. To cope with the conflict, the participants opted to reduce their study load.

> **Frank:** Maybe a little bit impatient, tried to sort of do perhaps two units every semester, but I've finally come to the conclusion that perhaps just one subject at a time is, you know is better. It was too big a bit to chew with work and everything else.

> **Emily:** I started off with three and had to drop one because I just couldn't manage the three.

> **Kate:** I think I'm going to go down in units, possibly. Yeah, I think maybe lower my workload a little bit.

4. How Do Mature-Age Students Perceive Coping?

The participants' consider coping in terms of successfully juggling study, work and family. In particular, coping is seen as being facilitated by the motivation and the ability to time manage these competing interests. For many mature-age students, although the delay in commencing study motivates them to complete their education, study often has a lower priority than other considerations (Gill, Hayes and Senior, 2015; Lin, 2016), particularly for students with a young family. Consequently, participants will consider modifying the extent of their study participation before making changes to family or work commitments. This selective refinement of commitment represents a significant element of the student's coping strategies. By considering the participants' comments regarding the definition of coping holistically,

several essential components are noticeable. By combining these elements, the following participant defined working definition of coping can be formed.

> *Coping is the strategies and behavioural adaptations required for the successful management of stressful events or challenging situations that may tax or exceed the student's available resources and lead to academic, health or life concerns.*

In considering the participants' definition of coping, it is evident that a significant aspect of the definition is the acknowledgement of the multidimensional nature of the coping construct, a perspective highlighted by several authors including Doron, Trouillet, Maneveau, Neveu and Ninot (2015) and Reach, Fompeyrine and Mularski (2015). The participants' definition also recognises that an individual's resilience or ability to cope or respond to a stressor adequately may be exceeded by a stressor resulting in a coping failure or stress, as discussed by Deasy, Coughlan, Pironom, Jourdan and Mannix-McNamara (2014) and Van der Hallen, Jongerling and Godor (2020).

5.2 Coping Strategies

Coping is an essential construct in understanding reactions to the stressors and adjustments experienced in life. Unfortunately, there has been no consensus as to what constitutes the scope of the construct or the extent of the coping strategies and coping actions encompassed, and it appears that the terminology is an incredibly loose taxonomy (Garcia, 2010; Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002; Stanisławski, 2019). A further problem in considering the concept of coping is the lack of consistency as to what constitutes a coping strategy. For example, Dada, Babatunde and Adeleye (2019) identified thirty coping strategies that students employed in dealing with academic stress, including the strategies of "yell, scream or swear", "drink alcohol", and "sleep to recharge" (p. 374). However, the documentation of thirty strategies is considerably smaller than the list of "more than 400 ways of coping" was compiled by Skinner, Edge, Altman and Sherwood (2003, p. 241).

It is, however, evident that the perception of coping strategies has evolved. For example, Lazurus and Folkman's (1984) dichotomous grouping of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping has been reiterated extensively in the literature[36], including by Folkman, et al., (1986). However, Folkman (1992) acknowledges that reducing coping to either problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies may be too restrictive. Similarly, Lazarus (1996) admitted that the distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping might be an overly simplistic conception of how coping works. This evolution is highlighted by Stanisławski (2019), who notes that the bipolar dimensions of problem coping and emotion coping define a space for eight other coping categories forming a coping circumplex.

In classifying the participants' coping strategies, this study adopted a modified version of the strategies outlined by Murray-Harvey et al., (2000). The analysis of the participants' comments resulted in the ten strategies listed in Table 5.1, six problem-focused strategies and four emotion-focused strategies. Appendix L details these categories and provides brief descriptions of the coping strategies and examples of units of meaning that represent the essence of the various strategies. An analysis of the participants' responses concerning coping strategies revealed four specific areas of interest; problem or emotion-focused approaches, adaptive or maladaptive approaches, coping flexibility and substance use.

[36] For example see Eatough and Chang (2018) and Schoenmakers, Van Tilburg and Fokkema (2015).

Table 5.1.

Participants' Personal Coping Strategies

Coping Strategy	Strategy Focus	Number of the 14 Participants who Adopted this Strategy
Approach[37]	Problem-focused	8
Cognitive	Problem-focused	11
Institutional	Problem-focused	4
Physical	Problem-focused	6
Rational or time organization	Problem-focused	10
Self-management	Problem-focused	5
Avoidance	Emotion-focused	4
Behavioural	Emotion-focused	4
Emotional	Emotion-focused	4
Social	Emotion-focused	2

5.2.1 Problem and Emotion-Focused Coping

While there are many different frameworks for understanding coping and many different ways of classifying coping strategies (Carroll, 2013), the problem-focused and emotion-focused coping classification remains an effective approach. Problem-focused coping is generally perceived to be a positive stress response. As part of this response, the affected individual seeks to address the source of the issue creating the distress and endeavours to apply a solution-focused action. In contrast, emotion-focused coping involves the individual focusing on reducing their adverse emotional reaction and lessening the feelings of distress (Yikealo & Tareke, 2018). Because of the perception that emotion-focused coping involves an element of avoidance and

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[37] Approach coping is a stress management response where a person actively focuses on or directs a response or reaction to a problematic event or threat (Dubow & Rubinlicht, 2011; Vandenbos, 2015). Approach coping responses include logical analysis, positive reappraisal, seeking guidance and problem-solving (Stanisławski, 2019).

evasion, emotion-focused coping generally represents a negative response (Amponsah et al., 2020).

Martínez, Meneghel and Penalver (2019) suggest that male and female university students may categorise stress differently and respond to those stresses differently. This view reflects the generally argued position that because femininity correlates with emotion-focused coping, women will tend to use coping strategies aimed at changing their emotional responses to a stressful situation (Jensen, Forlini, Partridge, & Hall, 2016; Zbihlejová, Frankovský, Birknerová, & Suhányi, 2018). In contrast, men will tend to use more problem-focused methods (Chen & Sun, 2019; Martinez, Meneghel, & Peñalver, 2019). These positions broadly align with the gender role socialization theory and the expectations that society places on men and women (Chen & Sun, 2019). However, the findings within the literature on gender differences regarding coping mechanisms are mixed. For example, Adasi, Amponsah, Mohammed, Yeboah and Mintah (2020) and Martínez, Meneghel and Penalver (2019) report little gender difference in approach to coping. On the other hand, both Gefen (2019) and Kao, Chen and Craigie (2017) identify that gender plays a significant role in a university students' coping strategy choice. From the participants' responses, gender did not appear to influence the willingness to seek assistance from the institution, with both genders showing equal willingness to seek support.

> **Adam:** My first and probably my only thought would be to have a chat with my partner and try and bounce it off of her.

> **Brian:** And I've considered in the next couple of weeks that I'm going to go and see one of the wellness advisors just to talk through things, just to offload, I guess you'd say.

> **Emily:** I have already sought support from the university for practically everything.

> **Irene:** But one thing that I've been really, really adamant about is really bringing myself up to date with the support that the university has.

In analysing the participants' reported choice of strategy as outlined in Table 5.1 and Table 5.2, there is a clear preference for problem-focused strategies over emotion-focused strategies even though there were considerably more female participants than male participants. While this agrees with the findings from Kwaah and Essielfie's (2017) investigation of distance education students, it does not conform to the generally argued position regarding strategy use by gender as discussed previously. Arguably the difference may lay in the constraints placed on mature-age students, particularly those with work or family considerations, and the necessities of online study, which may require the students to problem manage factors such as time and logistical constraints.

> **Diane:** Absolutely. I think because I wasn't doing that [planning] before, but I have started [planning]. And I was doing a lot of it [study] on the weekend, which was why I couldn't have much family time. So I'm like, okay, now I need to fix this, so I looked at it like oh well, if I get to work earlier, I'm not stuck in traffic for an hour and a half, and I can study for an hour and a half instead.

> **Gail:** I guess so. I guess, you know, if I was an emotional person, I would deal with this differently because I know if you become too emotional, then emotions can take over and then you can't see clearly. So, I guess, you know, being more practical helps you achieve, helps me achieve better because if I put too much emotion in to it … it's only going to hinder my studies.

Even so, while problem-focused strategies were predominant with all fourteen participants reporting using them, ten of the fourteen participants also reported using an emotion-based strategy. For example, when asked what they did when they felt they were not coping, Jane and Hanna responded:

> **Hanna:** Drinking too much alcohol. So, I guess looking to external things to keep you going to prop you up, that might be unhealthy in the long term.

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Jane: I write. It's not a journal. I'm too lazy to journal. So I only ever do it when I hit that rock bottom. But I just purge words. So, I write singular words. I just write the raw words of where I'm at what I'm feeling. Yeah. I usually just put all that out there. I don't share it with anybody, I don't. Nobody knows that I do it, but it seems that if I do that, it almost unplugs me a little bit.

There are many arguments as to the relative merit or suitability of one coping strategy over another[38] there is no consensus as to which coping strategies are most effective (Morgan, Chittleborough, & Jorm, 2016; Tuncay, Musabak, Gok, & Kutlu, 2008). Considering whether problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategies is the more effective strategy has proved to be difficult because of the tendency for both to occur alternately or simultaneously (Stanisławski, 2019; Tuncay, Musabak, Gok, & Kutlu, 2008). While the literature seems to highlight the ineffectiveness of emotion-focused coping, Baker and Berenbaum (2007) suggest there are several reasons to be sceptical of this view. This point is echoed by Libin (2017), who maintain that while emotional strategies may be viewed as contradictory to cognitive and behavioural strategies, emotions play a beneficial role in resolving life difficulties when used in a manner appropriate to the task. Consequently, it is not helpful to assume that one set of coping strategies is suitable for everyone (Anzaldi & Shifren, 2018). In fact, the ability to adapt or adopt coping strategies is an essential part of coping flexibility and resilience (Kroemeke, 2019; Van der Hallen, Jongerling, & Godor, 2020).

Anne: So it's all about trying to adapt it to how like trial and error really. So if one thing doesn't work, OK, I'm not going to give up on it. I'm going to try to do it different.

Kate: Like, really sticking to that structure is a coping strategy. Because if I just went with my gut, I would never get anything done ... Or my friends, I have a couple of other friends who are online adult age students who I talk to.

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[38] See for example Baker and Berenbaum (2007); Freire, et al., (2020); Tran and Lumley (2019)

> **Emily:** I've tried coping about 100 different ways. So I'm kind of open
> to trying new things as far as that sort of stuff goes.

Even though a survey sample of fourteen with only three male respondents does not support the generalisation of the results, the in-depth nature of the qualitative approach does make it possible to draw causal explanations. In this instance, the findings reflect the contention that mature-age students will employ and modify coping strategies based on need and circumstance. This finding aligns with the generally recognised position that age is a factor in the reaction to stress and the application of coping strategies (Chen, Peng, Xu, & O'Brien, 2018; Maeng, et al., 2017). Because mature-aged students can draw upon a broader range of previous life experiences (Jurjus, Butera, Addelnabi, & Krapf, 2017), they demonstrate a higher degree of coping adaptation or flexibility than the traditional student (Johnson & Nussbaum, 2012; Zimmer-Gembeck, et al., 2018).

5.2.2 Adaptive and Maladaptive Coping

In addition to considering coping in terms of problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, there has been considerable research into adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies[39]. While the specific context will determine whether a coping style is functional or dysfunctional (Moritz, et al., 2016), adaptive behaviour generally allows an individual to adapt to a situation positively, whereas maladaptive behaviour can be dysfunctional. Consequently, while maladaptive behaviours may offer short term relief to stress, they are generally unproductive and can lead to more significant difficulties in the long term[40].

> **Brian:** So a coping strategy for me is, oh, I've got this assignment due
> I'll just grind away at it. Now, you know your productivity is going to go
> down. You know, you're not going to do your best work. But that's a
> coping strategy.

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[39] See for example Fallahchai, Fallahi and Moazen Jami (2019); Tran and Lumley (2019)
[40] See for example the discussion presented by Doron, et al., (2009) and Lee, et al., (2017).

The research appears divided regarding the impact of adaptive and maladaptive behaviours on academic performance and engagement. For example, previous research has reported performance as indirectly and positively related to adaptive coping and negatively related to maladaptive emotional coping (Crego, Carrillo-Diaz, Armfield, & Romero, 2016; Stanisławski, 2019). However, Vizoso, Rodríguez and Arias-Gundín (2018) failed to find any significant correlations between maladaptive coping and any academic engagement dimension. This finding suggests that the hypothesis of maladaptive coping and academic engagement among university students being negatively related is not confirmed. This result is relevant because it reveals that while adaptive coping appears to foster intellectual engagement, maladaptive coping does not necessarily reduce engagement and could even serve a protective function by promoting individual resilience (Lee, et al., 2017)

Xuereb (2015) maintains that in comparison to traditional students, mature-age students are more academically resourceful, showing greater use of adaptive coping skills than maladaptive coping skills. In considering the use of coping strategies reported in Table 5.2, it is evident that for the participants' problem-focused strategies were by far the most favoured approach accounting for three-quarters of the participants when compared to emotion-focused strategies. Interestingly the data suggests that the participants were far more likely to use problem-focused strategies adaptively (almost 92% adaptive use reported) than emotion-focused strategies (50% adaptive use reported).

Table 5.2.

Participants' Reported Use of Coping Strategies

Strategies by Participant

A = Adaptive approach, and M = Mal-adaptive approach

Strategy and Focus	Adam	Anne	Brian	Carol	Diane	Emily	Fiona	Frank	Gail	Hanna	Irene	Jane	Kate	Lucy	Frequency of Use
Problem-Focused															
1 Approach					A	A	A	A	A		A			A	**2**
2 Cognitive		A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A&M	A	A		A	**12**
3 Institutional						A				A&M	A		A		**4**
4 Physical		A	A			A			A	A				A	**6**
5 Rational	A	A	A&M	A	A		A	A	A			A		A	**10**
6 Self-Management	A	A							A	A	A		M		**6**
Emotion-Focused															
7 Avoidance		M	M	M		M									**4**
8 Behavioural		A		M		M				A					**4**
9 Emotional									A		A	A&M	A&M		**4**
10 Social				A				A							**2**
Strategies Reported	**2**	**6**	**4**	**5**	**3**	**6**	**3**	**4**	**6**	**5**	**5**	**3**	**3**	**4**	

As previously discussed, the research literature reports mixed findings regarding the preferential use of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. The mixed results are unsurprising, given that both coping strategies represent various coping mechanisms that are applicable in any given situation (Jensen, Forlini, Partridge, & Hall, 2016). The identification of a preference for problem-focused coping within this study is in keeping with those of Yue and Le (2013) but conflicts with the position noted by Jensen, et al., (2016). Similarly, in isolating the female participants' coping preference, the preference for problem-focus coping was retained, which conflicts with the position outlined by Dixit (2016) and Lo (2017) that female students prefer to use emotion-focused strategies.

These findings corroborate Xuereb's (2015) conclusion that experiences obtained by mature-age students over time act as a coping resource from which they can draw. Lee, et al., (2017) make a similar point reiterating that coping resilience develops as part of experiential interaction, and resilience endows confidence. Anne highlights the value perceived from having experience in a coping and confidence context:

> **Anne:** I suppose that's the one big difference I find is having that knowledge and a little bit more life experience to engage a bit more because you are willing to ask those odd questions that someone might just wait and see if someone will ask it.

However, while life experience due to age or maturity is often associated with wisdom (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2017; Weststrate & Glück, 2017), maturity is no guarantee of coping wisdom. For some participants, their maturity appeared to act against them in applying a positive approach to a situation.

> **Brian:** I guess most blokes with my upbringing you sort of tend to tough it out, you know. You don't ask for help. You're expected to be able to cope with it. And if you can't cope with it, well, there's something wrong with you not the problem

> **Jane:** I'm probably less inclined to reach out through fear of being considered annoying or old, or why couldn't you find it online?

Similarly, being a mature-age student is no guarantee that the use of a maladaptive approach would be recognised and corrected.

> **Carol:** When I began the university journey, I listened to [recommendations for study practices]. But didn't make those changes.

5.2.3 Coping Flexibility

Zimmer-Gembeck, et al., (2018) contend that it has become increasingly clear that no single coping mechanism holds the key to successful adaptation. Indeed, adapting behaviour across different stressor situations through the adoption of various coping strategies is equally, if not more important than the ability to use any single strategy (Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Freire, et al., 2020). The term for changing or adjusting coping strategies to facilitate positive outcomes is coping resilience or coping flexibility (Heffer & Willoughby, 2017). Coping flexibility functions to equip individuals with the active responses necessary to deal effectively with changing contexts or challenges (Freire, et al., 2020; Heffer & Willoughby, 2017). As a precursor to coping flexibility, there is a requirement to discontinue an ineffective coping strategy and produce and implement an alternative coping strategy (Kato, 2015).

However, to make this change, students need to possess or be familiar with a diverse range of coping strategies from which they can draw (Edwards, 2018; Heffer & Willoughby, 2017). As detailed in Table 5.2, all participants within this study reported applying multiple coping strategies regarding their education, with a high percentage of participants reporting the use of five or six of the ten strategies considered. It is through this repertoire of strategies that students can interact and respond to the challenge they face (Aini, 2017; Siltanen, et al., 2019). However, the availability of another strategy may not provide a suitable or beneficial alternative, for example:

> **Brian:** The coping strategy I use is essentially work my backside off and don't go to sleep. Another coping strategy I have is procrastination.

Consequently, the mere possession of a set of coping strategies only represents a part of an effective coping response. The extra component required is the ability to successfully select or adapt strategies as part of the student's coping flexibility and resilience (Delaney, et al., 2015). While the participants' responses identified awareness of the need for coping flexibility, for many participants, it was not always clear as to what changes were required, and often it required some form of catalyst to drive the change.

> **Carol:** I think I've made huge steps in limiting my procrastination. And it's been nearly a year battle. Nearly a year battle. And yes, we hear about it at Uni, and yes, we heard about it on campus. Until you've actually like suffered because of your procrastination that you might make those little changes.

> **Fiona:** I think over time, the studying is going to get harder and more intense. So then, yes, things may need to change. But I don't know exactly, I guess it would just mean putting more hours into the study side of it as you get into second and third years.

However, the ability to learn new or adapt existing coping strategies to suit particular needs does place the student in an improved or more resilient position (Davarniya, Shakarami, & Zahrakar, 2019; Stanley & Mettilda Buvaneswari, 2020) to manage and progress their studies. As Jane noted:

> **Jane:** I think my coping skills are definitely things you can learn, adapt and grow. I think what gets easier, or is what I tell myself, is that as I progress through, right now I'm laying the foundation of my course, I'm learning the stuff that I've never learned that I've got no clue on.

Even so, change is possible, and several participants reported an awareness of coping as a moving trait, something that could develop over time, or under the right circumstances, even implant itself immediately. This point aligns with the view that coping strategies are acquired (Ravindran, Shankar, & Murthy, 2019), and their efficient use improves with age (Aldwin, 2012). Consequently, coping rather than being fixed is a dynamic ability (Monteiro, Balogun, & Oratile, 2014; Martínez-Montilla, Amador-Marín, & Guerra-Martín, 2017). The concept that coping strategies and approaches can change over time due to age, experience or wisdom was identifiable in the participants' responses.

> **Kate:** Yeah, I think so. I think because I'm older. When I was younger, I probably would have quit.

> **Diane:** I guess I just learned, you learn through error, and I've had a lot of errors in ten years.

> **Carol:** The crisis was the exam, and although it turned out okay I learnt a lot from that, how to cope better during this semester, so it's not a crisis when you get to exam time.

5.2.4 Substance Use

There is mixed evidence as to whether using substances to improve cognitive function and enhance academic performance actually achieve these intentions (Abelman, 2017; Mazanov, Dunn, Connor, & Fielding, 2013). However, irrespective of any actual or perceived effect, there is an observable trend towards increased use of these substances for performance-enhancing purposes (Mann & Sahakian, 2018). In considering the use of 'study drugs'[41] to improve academic performance, Lucke, et al., (2018) contend that using such study drugs is not common among Australian university students. However, using legally available substances such as caffeine and energy drinks was. The participants' responses only identified three substances as coping aids: caffeine[42], alcohol, and tobacco, none of which represents a study drug.

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[41] Study drugs are considered to be misused prescribed medications such as Adderall and Ritalin
[42] The reference to caffeine includes NoDoz which is proprietary caffeine based alertness aid.

Brian: And that to me is what I'm trying to really adopt as far as study goes rather than leave it to the last minute, cram it in. You know, you're up all night living on the NoDoz, and you just cram it in. And then once the exam is over, it's all gone, you know. That's not the way to learn. That's the way to parrot stuff.

Hanna: So I probably do a lot more cups of coffee and alcohol to get through.

Carol: I used to rely on cigarettes, I'd be like I'm stressed out I need to have a cigarette. But that's not how smoking works so I try to avoid that.

The use of alcohol within the student population has been studied extensively, and an inverse relationship between alcohol use among university students and academic performance has been identified (El Ansari, Salam, & Suominen, 2020). Alcohol is considered a potential factor in a range of negative impacts on student wellbeing, including depression, stress, anxiety and aggressive behaviour (Mekonen, Fekadu, Chane, & Bitew, 2017; Tembo, Burns, & Kalembo, 2017). In many instances, alcohol use is often at a level that is considered problematic and part of a maladaptive coping strategy to remove, at least temporarily, the stress of anxiety (Heshmat, 2017). However, within this study, comments regarding alcohol use generally related to relaxation rather than the enhancement of academic performance or the management of anxiety. This delineation between studying and relaxation is particularly relevant given the importance place on relaxation as a critical component of stress management techniques (Can, et al., 2020; Holman, Johnson, & O'Connor, 2018).

Gail: Like you know, they'll [friends] be like, oh, what were you doing on the weekend it's like oh I had to study where they will be like, oh, I went out to this club or I went out and have drinks with friends … So that's my motivation, I have to get through this today before I go and hang out and socialize because while completing all my study is important, you need to be able to have this social environment of meeting with your friends.

Irene: So, I guess the seduction of sitting on a couch and having a glass of wine compared to going downstairs to the office and doing your work, you know, making that choice not to have a glass of wine. That's I guess for me has been the biggest difficulty.

Coping is a broad concept, and there are many distinctions used to distinguish, categorize or group different coping responses (Van der Hallen, Jongerling, & Godor, 2020). In part, this is because coping responses do not fall neatly into defined categories, and conceptualizing coping according to such categories has led to a limited understanding of the relationship between coping strategies and variables such as alcohol (Britton, 2004; Twersky, 2017). The use of a substance for the specific purpose of potentially enabling students to continue to study longer can be considered a problem-focused coping strategy (Jensen, Forlini, Partridge, & Hall, 2016). However, it may also be regarded as an emotion-focused strategy when used for avoidance purposes (Hassanbeigi, et al., 2013). Either way, using a substance such as alcohol is considered a maladaptive coping strategy (Twersky, 2017). For example, while alcohol may provide temporary relief from daily stressors, it can reinforce faulty coping strategies leading to increased stress in the longer term (Koob, Powell, & White, 2020). Similarly, during a time of distress, alcohol use can instil a negative reinforcement towards avoiding life stressors and, consequently, become a regularly used dysfunctional coping strategy (Wynn, 2017).

5.3 Participant Attitudes

Defining the term attitude has proved to be less than straightforward[43]. However, Andronache, Bocos, Bocos, & Macri (2014) contend that most definitions consider attitude in the context of an individual predisposition to evaluate something such as a fact, event or a person, as either favourable or unfavourable, and as a result, exhibiting a particular behaviour towards that fact, event or person. The nature of the predisposition is dependent on the values, experiences and beliefs that the individual holds, either as a world view or a specific view on that particular item. Similarly, a stronger or more favourable attitude toward an issue may affect behaviour and increase the motivation to work toward a particular goal (Brugger & Hochli, 2019). While not

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[43] For example see the discussion provided by Getie (2020)

agreed on within the literature, there is considerable support for the argument that there is a positive relationship between attitude and learning achievement (Erdoğdu, 2020; Kibrislioglu, 2015; Sen, 2013). In validating the argument for a positive relationship Zhao (2015) contends that attitude not only has a significant effect on the learning process and learning outcomes, but it determines a learner's success or failure to a large degree.

Considering the participants' responses concerning the phenomenon from a holistic perspective, they suggest an attitude more positive than negative[44]. For example:

- Regarding how they felt about online study, the participants expressed a high level of appeal for the format with fifteen times more positive responses than negative responses.
- In comparing the preference for undertaking studies in-class, the number of negative units of meaning was equal to the positive number. However, in comparing the reason for taking classes online, the number of positive units of meaning was ten times that of the negative number.

But more than just expressing comfort and appeal, the participants' responses often indicated a high level of satisfaction with the structure, the lecturers and the nature of the required activities. The possession of such positive attitudes toward an educational institution, its teachers and courses has been shown to improve the quality of student learning (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2020; Kara, 2009; Valeriu, 2015).

> **Gail:** I don't know, I quite like how it all is, and I don't know how else to make it better, I would say.

> **Lucy:** Good actually, it's been very easy to find what I need. Yeah, I was actually quite impressed with everything that's on there [study website].

> **Emily:** The study desk is great.

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[44] Based purely on a number count positive attitude accounted for twice as many units of meaning than negative attitude. In a matrix coding comparison of positive and negative attitudes across 38 nodes covering the areas of academic interaction, coping, engagement, mature-age, online and personal confidence only 8 nodes returned a higher negative count of units of meaning.

Brian: Online content is great; the lecturers, their assistants, the library, everyone has been really responsive.

Irene: I couldn't ask for better guidance. I feel like as if it's very clear what I have to do, and that's been that's the best thing.

The online format offers students considerable flexibility (Daniel, 2017; Stone, Freeman, Dyment, Muir and Milthorpe, 2019). Consequently, even though there are limitations associated with the online format (Baum & McPherson, 2019; Dumford & Miller, 2018; Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj, & Sethi, 2020), it was unsurprising that the flexibility of online figured prominently with the participants.

Adam: I like the flexibility that online study gives me as I work full time and I have a family, so it's tight for time.

Anne: I like the flexibility of [online study].

Brian: That flexibility part of it is a little bit of a new thing for me … there's so many options.

Another area reported favourably by participants was their belief in their ability to complete online study. Part of this positive feeling appears to lie in the participants' confidence that they had a relatively high level of control regarding responsibility and ownership over their studies. This control derived chiefly from their perception of the freedom that the flexibility of online study gave to them as self-directed students. Perceived academic control relates to the belief about the likelihood of one's actions bringing about desired outcomes (Robinson & Lachman, 2017). Academic control is also associated with several positive effects in the education setting, including the effective use of study strategies, motivation, self-efficacy and academic success (Arik, 2019; Respondek, Seufert, Stupnisky, & Nett, 2017).

Control is also a critical factor in the appraisal of stressful events and influential in the individual's choice of coping strategies (Dijkstra & Homan, 2016; Hashemi Razini,

Baheshmat Juybari, & Ramshini, 2017). For example, events perceived as controllable are more likely to elicit problem-focused coping strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies for events considered uncontrollable (Doron, Stephan, Boiche, & Le Scanff, 2009; Lavoie, 2013; Tsaur, Ku, & Luoh, 2015).

> **Fiona:** As I've got more comfortable with the online environment I've added more flexibility into what I created, so this is critical for this week, I need to make sure I've got that, that and that done this week, but I can leave that and pick that up next week. So I've been able to become more strategic in my online learning as I've learned.

> **Carol:** There are no limits to what I would request online now. No one that I'm too afraid to contact anymore. I tend to sit back less now, and I can have my views recognized as well as all the other students. So I don't feel that there's any block to being an online student now.

Even though participants raised several concerns regarding their ability to complete online study, many of these concerns were the same issues that would be raised by mature-age students commencing in-class studies.

> **Lucy:** But like now I don't know how to write an essay. I haven't written one in 12 years. So, you know, things like that, that definitely impacts me because now I need to, I suppose, reach out to those support services to work out, how do I do that?

> **Hanna:** [I feel] a bit nervous because I haven't had any results yet, so I don't know, you know, I sort of launched into it, but I don't know if my effort is good enough yet.

It is difficult to generalise the participants' positive preference for the online format, given the number of variables that would need to be identified and controlled. The mere fact that all participants in this study had enrolled in the online format either by preference or because it was the only avenue to study can be considered a significant

factor in the character of the responses received. Interestingly, the participants' preference for the online format does not align with the order of importance outlined in the research literature. For example, in considering the resulting hierarchy of preference, it is evident that the blended format is the most preferred, followed by the in-class format, with the online format favoured least (Azamat Akbarov, Gönen, & Aydoğan, 2018; Pechenkina & Aeschliman, 2017; Swanson & Swanson, 2019).

5.4 Summary of the Participant's Engagement, Coping and Attitude

This study followed a descriptive phenomenological approach involving mature-age participants drawn from the University of Southern Queensland student cohort undertaking online studies. The study's purpose was to describe students' experiences concerning a specific area of impact on engagement stemming from the intersecting factors of mature-age students' coping strategies in the online environment. In particular, the study sought a deeper understanding of how mature-age students cope with online study and how these students could or did adapt their coping approaches due to the experiences gained from engaging with online delivery. The findings have been discussed in four discrete sections. The first section provided an insight into how the participants' defined the concepts of engagement and coping. The second section outlined the strategies that the participants adopted and how they adapted these strategies over time. The third section analysed the positive and negative attitudes that the participants held toward online learning. The final section identified and discussed five themes that described the phenomenon from the participants' experiences.

5.4.1 Defining the Concepts

The participants expressed interpretations of the meaning of engagement and coping in similar terms to those within the literature. As outlined in the discussion, engagement is a complex term that describes the students' attitudes and approaches to their motivation, cognition, and behaviour towards academic endeavours. In describing what engagement meant to them, the participants outlined a connection based on three broad areas; making sense of the content, the appropriateness of delivery, and their involvement in interaction with other students and the lecturer. By incorporating these three areas, a working definition of engagement was established;

Engagement is the level and quality of a student's participation, response and connection with the lecturer, the content and the challenge of the academic activities that facilitate the desired outcome.

While all students face challenges in undertaking study, the challenges faced by mature-age students in the online environment represent a different set of issues and concerns mainly because of factors such as family, work and financial commitments. Within the participants' descriptions of coping, three broad areas of significance were identifiable; family accommodations, health perspectives, and time management. By incorporating these three areas, a working definition of coping was established;

Coping is the strategies and behavioural adaptations required for the successful management of stressful events or challenging situations that may tax or exceed the student's available resources and lead to academic, health or life concerns.

5.4.2 Coping Strategies

For students coping is a state of reaction or response to the stressors and adjustments experienced in life and their academic endeavours. In analysing the ten coping strategies identified within the participants' responses, it was possible to distribute the strategies across two broad classifications; problem or emotion-focused approaches, and adaptive or maladaptive approaches. The analysis highlighted that the participants were three times more likely to rely on problem-based strategies than emotion-based strategies. Considering how participants used these strategies, the findings suggest that participants are just as likely to use emotion-focused strategies maladaptively as they are adaptively. However, participants were twice as likely to use problem-focused strategies adaptively as maladaptively.

The participants' responses also highlighted that all participants used multiple coping strategies, with a high percentage of participants reporting using five or six of the ten strategies identified. These findings suggest that the participants were coping flexible, which equipped them with the active responses necessary to deal effectively with a changing environment. Unfortunately, it was evident that merely having a range of

strategies did not reflect a suitable or necessarily beneficial set of strategies or that the student would use these strategies effectively. On a positive note, none of the participants reported the use or need to use performance-enhancing study drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism.

5.4.3 Participant Attitudes

Academic satisfaction is an expression of how students perceive and understand their learning environment and the level of fulfilment that they receive from the experience. While several comments indicated that accessing on-campus lectures was still a highly desired option, the general attitude towards completing studies online was positive, with online study being an acceptable alternative to studying in-class. Many participants perceived the online format to be comfortable and appealing, and there was a high level of satisfaction with the structure, the lecturers and the nature of the required activities. However, while the participants' expressed a healthy positive attitude towards aspects of the course such as flexibility and control, there was a high degree of criticism directed against the poor quality of the lectures and the limited opportunities for interaction with the lecturer and other students.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the perceptions held by mature-aged students concerning engagement and coping strategies in the online environment. The chapter drew out definitions of engagement and coping from the participants' descriptions of engagement and coping. The chapter also outlined the participant's general attitude to studying in the online environment concerning the online experience and the challenges faced by a mature-age student. The context of coping flexibility and the participants' various coping strategies were identified and discussed in relation to the use of problem or emotion-focused, and adaptive or maladaptive strategies. The next chapter discusses the identification of five themes identified within the participants' responses. These themes collectively represent the participants' description of the phenomenon under investigation.

6. Findings and Discussion - The Themes Identified

6.0 Introduction to Chapter 6

This chapter reports and discusses the five themes identified within a study describing the adoption and adaptation of coping strategies by mature-age students in online learning situations and the consequential impact on engagement. In reporting the findings, the discussion recognises that the study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to answering the following two research questions:

1. How do mature-age students employ and adapt <u>coping strategies</u> in response to the experiences encountered in an online line study environment?

2. What impact does the approach to coping have on <u>engagement</u> for those students?

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format to obtain suitably rich and descriptive data to answer the research questions. An analysis of the interviews revealed five themes representing a culmination of the students' voices regarding encounters with the phenomenon under investigation. In keeping with the principles of Husserl's (1970) descriptive phenomenology, it is the participants' descriptions that form the discussion's focus, rather than an interpretation of any potential meanings within those descriptions. To avoid repetition and assist the reader, the chapter presents the findings and the discussion together. As recommended by Colaizzi (1978) and Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016) the discussion draws from the participants' narratives and the research literature to illustratively and analytically support the commentary.

6.1 Delineating the Themes

Dey (1993) states that there are as many ways of seeing the data as one can invent; consequently, there is no single set of categories or themes waiting for discovery. This point is echoed by Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016) who do not subscribe to the view that there is only one way of analysing qualitative data, or only one analysis 'in' a qualitative dataset. Instead, the authors suggest that what is taken from a data set relates to the purpose of the research and whether the analysis enables the fulfilment

of that purpose. In this regard, identifying themes in qualitative descriptive approaches is a flexible process (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). Further analysis flexibility is possible by allowing the researcher to determine themes in several ways, such as using tables, mind maps or code manuals (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Consequently, as Braun and Clarke (2006) note, there are no hard and fast rules about what constitutes a theme. There is, however, reasonable consensus about what a theme represents. For example, Maguire and Delahunt (2017) consider a theme as a pattern that captures something significant or unusual about the data and research question, while Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggest that you know you have found a theme when you can answer the question, "what is this expression an example of?" (p. 87). After identifying a theme, Braun, Clarke and Weate's (2006) recommend that the theme's names should be sufficiently clear, accurate and representative of what it encompasses. In seeking this clarity, Javadi and Zarea (2016) suggest that the naming of the themes should be preceded by a brief summarization of each theme's scope and contents.

Following the analysis and reconsideration of the candidate themes, it was apparent that the following five themes provided an appropriate description of the phenomenon; the individual's characteristics, accommodating external factors, facilitating learning, engagement and success, and the value of discourse. The themes, their primary descriptors and their summative statements are set out in Table 6.1, identifying the themes against the two research questions.

Table 6.1.

Identified Themes Mapped to Research Questions

Research Questions

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1. How do mature age students in employ and adapt <u>coping strategies</u> in response to the experiences encountered in an online study environment?

   Theme 1.   The Individual's Characteristics

   This theme relates to the influence that the student brings to the education setting in line with their own individuality developed as a product of many factors specific to that individual such their attitude, traits, needs and desires.

   Theme 2.   Accommodating External Factors

   This theme encompasses the impositions and restraints placed on a student's ability not only to participate in study but also how and when they can participate.

   Theme 3.   Facilitating Learning

   This theme considers the students' perceptions of the way that the study material is presented in the online context and the nature of that material with respect to learning outcomes.

2. What impact does the approach to coping have on <u>engagement</u> for those students?

   Theme 4.   Engagement and Success

   This theme incorporates the way that students approach their study and the nature and extent of any mechanisms that they employ to progress through their studies particularly when they perceive they are not progressing as expected or required.

   Theme 5.   The Value of Discourse

   This theme reflects the students' expectations and requirements in relation to the connections available between the students themselves and their peers, their lecturers or the broader context of the institution.

As a check of whether the proposed themes were relevant in the context of the entire data set, a mind map of the relationship links between the themes and the descriptors encompassed within the sixteen nodes was produced (Figure 6.1). In considering the layout of Figure 6.1, two points should be noted:

- The layout of themes within Figure 6.1 is not representative of the order of themes but provides the clearest demonstration of the links between the themes and the descriptors encompassed within the sixteen nodes.

- The links shown in Figure 6.1 represent the connections identified from the participants' responses and do not represent all connections that could potentially be made.
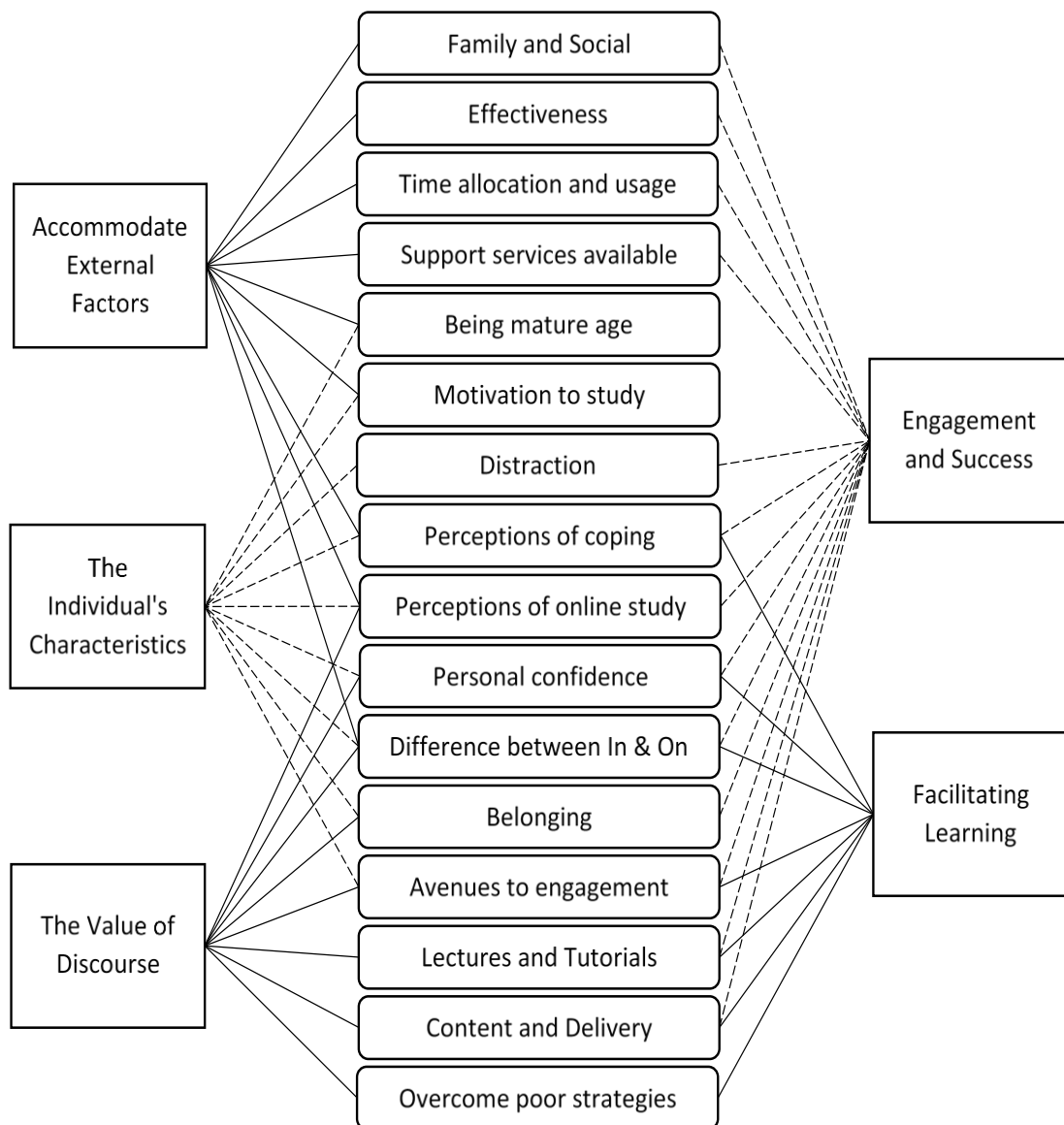
Figure 6.1. The Relationship Links between Candidate Themes and Themes

6.2 Theme 1: The Individual's Characteristics

Descriptors: Benefit, commitment, confidence, enthusiasm, experience, focus, interest, motivation, perception, personality, satisfaction, self-drive, values.

Students as individuals encompass various characteristics, including age, gender, prior academic study, motivation, self-regulation, and learning style (Day, van Blankenstein, Westenberg, & Admiraal, 2018). Given the wide range of characteristics and the many ways of combining these characteristics, predicting these characteristics' effect can be difficult. However, it is not difficult to recognise that the range of student characteristics will influence student beliefs about their learning ability and whether they can adapt effectively to the context of learning (Piergiovanni & Depaula, 2018). The different strategies adopted by two participants when faced with completing a non-favoured subject – mathematics, provide simple but relevant examples of the potential difference in approach or attitude.

> **Frank:** you know maths was not the best for me, it was always a subject I struggled with, even the first time and being quite honest I scraped through by the skin of my teeth before, you know 50, 60 per cent sort of low end. And I actually sort of deliberately started maths first this time as it was my worst subject. So I'm going to start on the hard one.

> **Emily:** I'm not terribly good at maths, so I find that challenging. So that's the one I dropped [to concentrate on the remaining subjects].

Unfortunately, the research literature does not provide a consistent categorisation of student characteristics, and the resulting diversity of student characteristics makes it difficult to consider all possible student attributes within this study. Consequently, there was a need to identify a sound base of mature-age student characteristics that held particular relevance for the research questions under investigation. A suitable set of characteristics was found in the six principles of andragogy, as outlined by Knowles (1970). The six principles are the need to know, the learner's self-concept, the role of the learners' experiences, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn. Knowles (1970) argued that while pedagogical theory assumes that the student

will simply learn what they have been told, andragogical theory assumes that students will be responsible for and involved in their learning. The adoption of andragogy was, in part, a reflection of the dissatisfaction with applying assumptions for teaching children to the academic needs of adults (Loeng, 2018). Even though the model of andragogy has not been universally accepted (Ekoto & Gaikwad, 2015; Loeng, 2018; Mukhalalati & Taylor, 2019), the six principles of andragogy provide a valuable rubric for considering individual characteristics. Consequently, in endeavouring to describe what mature-age students bring with them to the learning environment, the six principles were applied in a process akin to reverse-engineering the principles from the assumptions about how adults learn.

6.2.1 The Need to Know.

In one of his principal works, "Metaphysics", Aristotle wrote that all men desire to know (Metaphysics 980a-21). This desire and interest to know have been a significant influence on the drive to undertake formal study (Jensen, 2007; Kahu, 2017). However, for many adults, the ability or opportunity to study is removed or restricted by the constraints of life:

> **Hanna:** I was thinking that I was going to start Uni then and then I fell pregnant with another child, so all those plans got put on the backburner.

> **Kate:** Money, financial reasons, lack of finance. Yeah, I didn't have the money earlier to do it.

However, even though life has or continues to interfere with access to study, hope and desire persist.

> **Carol:** So I thought that it might be another 25 years, but I just needed more. I think that's my answer. Yes. So I'm still at that 'what do I want to be when I grow up?' stage.

Conaway and Zorn Arnold (2015) note that adult learners realise that they need to know more skills and information to pursue their goals even though they might not

necessarily know the specific skills and knowledge they need. In returning to the education setting, adults, as part of their motivation to participate and commit to the process of gathering skills and information, need to know the reason for learning something new (Ho & Lim, 2020; McGrath, 2009; Prakash, Sharma, & Advani, 2019).

> **Frank:** So I started to realize that if you want your career to keep going
> that, you know you need to bring yourself up to date, I guess.

> **Brian:** And that's the thing that I find, that there's this overwhelming
> feeling of, you know, what do I really need to know?

In the ongoing quest for knowledge Penman and Ellis (2009) outline that the love of learning can be a liberating and empowering experience as the student discovers and constructs their knowledge. Two of the driving forces within the love of learning are passion and interest (Altun, 2017; Kahu, Nelson, & Picton, 2017). Passion is a significant factor that can contribute to student achievement (Serin, 2017). Similarly, interest is a powerful motivational process essential to academic success (Harackiewicz, Smith, & Priniski, 2016). This love of learning aspect was identifiable in the participant responses.

> **Hanna:** But yeah it's sort of, I mean I can probably launch into study and
> just throw 100% into this and absolutely love it.

> **Diane:** So for me, studies like I just love to learn.

6.2.2 The Learners' Self-Concept.

Enhancing self-concept within students is enshrined in educational policies internationally (Han, 2019). Self-concept represents an individual's mental model or cognitive assessment of their abilities and attributes and draws in features such as personality, skills and abilities, physical characteristics and gender to form a series of self-schemas (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002; Ke, et al., 2020). In the academic setting, self-concept represents the student's personal beliefs or perception of their intellectual abilities or skills (Klapp, 2018; Trautwein, Lüdtke, Marsh, & Nagy, 2009). Self-

concept is not only linked positively to academic performance (Kumar Jaiswal & Choudhuri, 2017), but academic self-concept and academic performance mutually reinforce themselves (Herrera, Al-Lal, & Mohamed, 2020). At times the participants reported positive benefits from their self-concept backgrounds, drawing undeniable strength from the perception of those experiences. However, at other times, the participant's self-concept was holding them back from fully engaging in the education experience. The following two extracts highlight this disparity.

> **Irene:** I've been doing trust officer for like ten years. And so that made me decide, you know what, now I understand, I really understand business, and I really understand all that sort of stuff, and I have real-world experience.

> **Lucy:** I know what it's like in my work. Getting emails every day and having the time to reply to all of them would be frustrating. So I feel like I just don't want to add to their [lecturers], I suppose to take the time for me and answer a question that I have that seems silly and that I could probably find elsewhere or just to re-watch the lecture again.

While Irene's perceptions of the value of her work experience have facilitated a connection to the academic content, Lucy's attitude to work appears to have left her with a reluctance to call on support from the lecturer or her peers. As discussed by Wilson, et al., (2014) a student's perceptions can affect their confidence in completing academic tasks. These perceptions or beliefs can significantly influence appropriate cognitive functioning (Ordaz-Villegas, Acle-Tomasini, & Reyes-Lagune, 2013). Fortunately, self-concept is dynamic and will develop and change throughout a person's lifespan, particularly where positive reinforcement encounters allow the person to review their perceptions and grow (Gonzalez-Jimenez, 2017; Herrera, Al-Lal, & Mohamed, 2020; Ugur, 2015). Where this growth occurs and the person matures in outlook, their self-concept moves from being a dependent personality to being self-directed (Taylor & Kroth, 2009) and non-dependent (Loeng, 2020). This growth or awareness was reflected in the participants' responses, indicating a progression towards becoming more independent and responsible students.

Kate: Overall, it's been an adjustment and it's a bit overwhelming, but it's been really good having it all in my control, like I can do what I want when I want, and if I want to take extra time to submit something, I can think ahead and start you know, weeks ahead. So that's what I like about it.

Hanna: And you know, I always said if I can just pass, but secretly you want to do it really well, and you want someone to agree that you're doing well. So it's like a validation thing. And then once you get that, you can go, well, that's the standard, that's the amount of effort I had to put in to get that result.

Another significant aspect of the participants' self-concept was an awareness moment. As outlined by Tonseth (2015), particular circumstances, such as transitions in life, function as trigger factors and motivate adults to take the final step towards commencing studies. These pivotal events (Saddler & Sundin, 2020) can instil participants with a need or a drive to complete a long-term ambition or goal (Kantanis, 2000; Stone & O'Shea, 2019a) including the studies that they did not or could not complete straight from school. Dunne (2019) suggests that for some students, the delay represents a frustrating wait until "the time was right" (p. 8), and enrolment, late as it was, gave them "a sense that *'unfinished business'*[45] has been dealt with" (p. 13).

Hanna: Whereas now things have changed, I feel like I'm very mortal. And, you know, it's time I have to like get going and work out what I want to do. So I guess as I've got older that drive, I was like, yep, I've really got to knuckle down. Whereas when you're 17, you think, oh, anything could happen in life could be anything. And now it's like, oh, I'm running out of time.

Lucy: I don't want to put it off anymore. I want to actually do this now for me, especially so I can study online, I can make it work, but I need everybody's help to do so essentially.

[45] Original author's emphasis

This self-concept awareness included positive changes in the participants' perception of their ability and increased confidence and personal growth levels. This growth was reflective of Millman and McNamara's (2018) contention that for adults, successfully engaging in education brings with it a sense of empowerment which "may be likened to the notion of emancipatory action" (p. 45).

> **Anne:** But I've now discovered now doing, you know what you probably could have easily done this eleven years ago now. But I mean, in hindsight I wasn't in myself, I wasn't mentally prepared.

> **Emily:** It's pretty liberating. I wouldn't have been able to do it when I was younger. I always had a brain and I did go to school at a certain point. If I had a, if it had been my main desire I could have always done it I suppose, but it would be too much for me then, whereas now it's a pleasure.

6.2.3 Role of the Learners' Experiences.

In addition to a maturing self-confidence, mature-age students bring an extensive reservoir of life and work experiences representing their own 'habitus' (Millman & McNamara, 2018; O'Shea, 2016) which they bring to the learning environment. Frequently this provides an opportunity to connect learning to something the learner is currently engaged with or already knows.

> **Irene:** I think it gives me context to put some of this stuff, particularly when I'm doing business, especially having done quite a bit of real-world stuff.

The broader life experiences possessed by mature-age students give meaning and a richer understanding of the relevance of what they are learning (McCune, Hounsell, Christie, Cree, & Tett, 2010). This experience, combined with the desire and motivation associated with the mature-age cohort (Waters & Lemon, 2019; Yi-Yin, 2011) provides mature-age students with a positive outlook on their maturity.

Anne: So, trying to look at what's important in life and what's not, and what can be put on hold. It's definitely something I've managed to work to achieve over the last six and a bit years since having my son because that's a complete change. And I think that has made me probably more resilient to do online study because I'm like, you know what I can do this, I can manage it.

Emily: Actually, I just generally know a bit more than I did when I was 20. So I will walk into a room and words are being used. I understand what they are and may have heard of the concept over the last, you know, the stuff you pick up on just to have nothing to do with your own life, just as you age and that's got to help and not being so stressed out.

However, in gaining this life and work experience, students can feel that it comes at the expense of academic or technical skills, which they may have lost over that period or never had in the first place. The lack of academic skills represents a significant concern or challenge for mature-age students (Fragoso, et al., 2013; Pierrakeas, Xeno, Panagiotakopoulos, & Vergidis, 2004; Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017). Fortunately, anxiety about academic ability is not insurmountable and may only be temporary with "initial judgments of academic ability open to reflection and change" (Topham, 2015, p. 19). Although mature-age students appear to be as equally confident in learning new technology skills as younger students, mature-age students are more anxious about technology (Staddon, 2020; Tsai, Lin, Chang, Chang, & Lee, 2020). Frequently this concern is attributable to a lack of basic computer skills (Hensen, 2014) or "computer anxiety" (Awofala, et al., 2019, p. 53).

Given the negative and pessimistic estimation, students can often perceive themselves as unworthy to be a university student (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012). This perception simply increases the student's anxiety and compromises adjustment to university (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018b). The fallout from such perceptions may represent a contributing factor to attrition rates (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). In their responses, the participants outlined several concerns regarding deficiencies in their academic ability.

> **Carol:** I didn't know the difference between a PDF and whatever the other one is. I did not know the difference and could not have saved a document as whatever the other one's called, I couldn't do those basics.

> **Adam:** And during the assignment, I realized that I had some gaps in my knowledge.

> **Emily:** There was some group tasks that we had to do, and one of which I remember feeling really daunted by at the start because I just didn't know how to organize a group for any of that sort of thing, or how are we going to get in touch.

6.2.4 Readiness to Learn.

There are several ways to consider readiness to learn; for example, one way is to contemplate adult academic preparedness (Smith, Rose, Smith, & Ross-Gordon, 2015). Readiness to learn in the context of the six principles of pedagogy relates to the appropriateness of time or circumstances, such as being ready to learn because of changes in a person's life. This point is made by Lindeman (1926), who suggests that adults are motivated to learn when they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy. However, it may also be that it is life itself that changes the circumstances. Consequently, education may be about acquiring knowledge and providing the means to develop or restore a sense of self-identity and worth (O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Verhoeven, Poorthuis, & Volman, 2019).

> **Jane:** I have been a mum since I was 18, but I've also been a full-time carer since I was 18 and my children are mostly grown out of home, so my focus then shifted to, well my youngest is 16, and the reality is I don't have anything to offer. So I didn't want to end up in a dead-end situation. So for me, I thought to go to Uni, and I guess come out the other side with more to offer, more to offer a prospective employer given my age.

However, while mature-age students may often seem to be very motivated towards learning, there is usually a requirement for a form of a trigger to be present (O'Shea &

Stone, 2011; Tonseth, 2015). Triggers such as the transitions in an adult's life serve to effectuate the person's motives and initiate the final step towards participation in learning activities.

> **Lucy:** I finally realized it was time to do it. I wanted to do it since I left high school. Just life got in the way. I couldn't afford to do it at the time. So I just decided last year that it was just going to make it happen, essentially.

> **Hanna:** But yeah, definitely at this stage in your life, I think once you've had your children and you realize you have had to be very selfless for all those years and you start to think, oh, hang on, what about me? What do I want out of life? You know I want to learn too.

In coming to the recognition that they were ready to return to study, several female participants with children made comments indicating that even though they felt that they had attained a point where they had earned the right to put themselves first, they still felt guilty for reaching that conclusion. Parental guilt is a common issue for mature-age students particularly concerning the sacrificing of family time for study activities (Brooks, 2015) or work activities (Borelli, Nelson, River, Birken, & Moss-Racusin, 2016).

> **Hanna:** So the most difficult thing is that I've got three little kids out there that really want me to go and play hide and seek with them, and that would make them really happy. And then I feel bad that I'm not doing that.

Frequently the final push to commence study comes from aspirations relating to advancement in a career or work role (Waters & Lemon, 2019). For several participants, this push centred on the participant's disenchantment with their vocation or having reached a ceiling in their advancement prospects.

> **Adam:** I work for a bank and went straight in from school, so I didn't

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need a degree. However, I have now reached a ceiling where I cannot go further without one.

> **Carol:** Change of career path, I'd had enough of retail at the time. I was management in the retail setting just in the supermarket, and it was time to stop doing that because I'd stopped loving it.

Family and friends' support is essential in mature-age students getting back into study (Stergiou & Airey, 2017) and successfully completing those studies (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018b; Heagney & Benson, 2017). In addition to providing support, people can act in the role of inspirers, influencers, catalysts or change agents, and they can be highly influential in leading others into learning (McGivney, 2006; Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016). Unfortunately, this influence may not always be supportive and prospective students may be treated with mockery, envy or resentfulness, all of which "impact significantly on the transition of the individuals into their new role as a mature student" (Gill, Hayes, & Senior, 2015, p. 2). While there were indications of supportive influence on the participants, the general trend was for the participant to determine that it was the appropriate point in their life to undertake study, and it was they who set about making it happen.

> **Gail:** So that was, I suppose more on me that I was like, I don't want to put it off anymore, I want to actually do this now for me, especially so I can study online, I can make it work, but I need everybody's help to do so essentially.

> **Anne:** So he's [husband] always pushing me, you need to do something more with your life you can't just work for the [name] bank for the rest of your life, because I have been with them for 14 years this year. So I went, you know what, let's do it.

6.2.5 Orientation to Learning.

Students commence higher education with different aims and expectations. Unfortunately, many of those expectations are unrealistic (Hassel & Ridout, 2018),

and frequently students are required to adjust their expectations. However, Kahu, Neson, and Picton (2016) maintain that students generally have little understanding of how they will need to adapt their learning practices. This lack of understanding may make it difficult for students to make the transition to the new environment (Rowley, Hartley, & Larkin, 2008), particularly where the student has little if any recent experience with education (Mallman & Lee, 2016). The approach taken by a student in meeting or achieving their aims and aspirations forms the basis of the student's orientation to learning (Beaty, Gibbs, & Morgan, 1997; Kaur, Noman, & Awang-Hashim, 2017; Spronken-Smith, Buissink-Smith, Bond, & Grigg, 2015).The perceptions and attitudes held by students of their earlier learning environments influence their strategies and orientations to learning in later life (Khalifa, Nasser, Ikhlef, Walker, & Amali, 2016; Yüksel & Kavanoz, 2015) and may play a pivotal role in fostering student learning outcomes (Vereijken, van der Rijst, van Driel, & Dekker, 2018). Consequently, mature-age students may undergo an orientation adjustment due to the shift in focus from the teacher-centred focus they encountered during their school education to the more learner and problem-centred approach in their tertiary education. Aligned with this adjustment, students are now acquiring knowledge and skills for immediate application in life, whereas they would previously have been learning content for use later (Conaway & Zorn Arnold, 2015; Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher, 2020). For some mature-age students, this change in focus is a positive step; for example, as Irene noted:

> **Irene:** I think it [being a mature-age student] gives me context to put some of this stuff, particularly when I'm doing business, especially having done quite a bit of real-world stuff. And also, it just makes me a little bit more determined. And I can also see where it can take me further, like I see the practicalities of where it can take me.

Enhancing student confidence to succeed remains a goal of great significance (Han, Bong, Kim, & Kwon, 2019), consequently increasing a student's utility value, represents the foremost educational benefit for students (Cunha & Miller, 2014; Liebendorfer, 2020). For students, seeing where their studies can lead adds personal value and plays a part in whether the students believe they can and actually want to

solve a task (Liebendorfer, 2020). Students who see particular value in their course are more motivated to apply themselves diligently and to make an effort to plan and direct their study efforts will generally perform better than those who do not (Dell, Low, & Wilker, 2010; Steinmayr, Weidinger, Schwinger, & Spinath, 2019). According to Harackiewicz, Smith and Priniski (2016), extensive studies have identified the importance of value-related beliefs to student identity and short and long-term goals. In considering this point, Kahu, Nelson and Picton (2017) maintain that students are keen to study something they like; consequently, their interests may be the primary influence on their course choices and career goals.

> **Lucy:** Good, I think, because I'm motivated to do it. I've wanted to be a paramedic for since I was 15. So now that I'm finally getting to do that goal it's amazing. I'm loving the learning.

> **Gail:** I can definitely see how it's relevant and definitely can see how everything's happened, like why you do certain things. Especially because I've seen, you know, last year my dad actually went to hospital because he had a heart attack and you could see the nurses, and I could see how they were engaging with him.

However, given the broad range of content covered in a degree program, it is inevitable that some subject matter will not resonate with a student's preference for current or future knowledge. For example, longitudinal evidence demonstrates that students hold an indifferent attitude towards science (Shirazi, 2017), and despite the increasing focus on STEM (Li, Wang, Xiao, & Froyd, 2020) difficulties persist in developing and sustaining student interest in science as highlighted by Jane:

> **Jane:** And I don't know if that's just because that's the way the subject [chemistry] is, or that because, for him, he already has that love of it, so he just figures that people who study it must have the love of it, too. But we don't. Some of us don't.

6.2.6 Motivation to Learn.

Stone and O'Shea (2019a) identify that for mature-age students, the decision to attend university involves various factors, including the desire to increase skills or knowledge and the realisation of a long-term ambition or goal concerning work, career or academic achievement. As noted by Busher and James (2019), despite the hurdles, mature-age students have a desire to "transform themselves as learners to achieve their aspirations" (p. 74). Decisions of this nature can derive from the student's growing disillusionment with the way things are in their life and the aspiration to self-improve and grow personally (Boveda & Metz, 2016; Waters & Lemon, 2019).

> **Adam:** I have now reached a ceiling where I cannot go further without one [a degree].

> **Carol:** I had done a couple of diplomas previously over 20 years ago. But I felt that was just equal to glorified volunteers and only led to community development type roles.

Or merely a realisation of the fact that it's now or never.

> **Hanna:** I feel like I'm very mortal. And, you know, it's time I have to like get going and work out what I want to do.

> **Irene:** I guess because I'm thirty-seven.

Committing to undertake study is, in part, a consequence of motivational drivers. Motivation to learn and specifically self-belief with learning is an influential factor in successfully transitioning into higher education (Edgar, Carr, Connaughton, & Celenza, 2019). Attributes of motivated and successful learners include valuing and being committed to learning, and for intrinsically motivated learners, the reward often sought is a more profound insight or understanding (Luke & Justice, 2016).

> **Jane:** It's definitely something that I do. So it doesn't matter what it is. If it takes my interest, then I want to know more. So I'll go off, and I'll read,

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> or I'll watch something, it's definitely not solely study-related.

> **Kate:** But as far as my student behaviours, I feel definitely like I'm way more committed to it. And my hope for passing everything and getting good grades is a lot higher than when I was younger.

Comparative studies of students under 25 years of age and those over 25 years have identified that while there are no significant differences in their levels of perceived self-efficacy, students over 25 years of age have higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Rothes, Lemos, & Gonçalves, 2016). This view is in line with the belief that mature-age students in committing to undertake study act with a sense of volition and choice instead of being pressured or controlled (Vanslambrouck, Zhu, Tondeur, Philipsen, & Lombaerts, 2016). Such motivations can engender a strong sense of purpose or even higher persistence levels amongst this older cohort (O'Shea, 2018) despite facing economic, health, family, workplace and learning challenges during their student years (Plater, Mooney-Somers, & Lander, 2015). However, while intrinsic motivation facilitates goal orientation and persistence in the face of difficulties (Schumacher & Ifenthaler, 2018; Xuereb, 2015), many mature-age students are also extrinsically motivated by external rewards such as advancement at work or financial benefit.

> **Gail:** I have been a dental assistant for the last five years, and after a certain point, I guess I wanted to further my studies because there's only so much you can do as a dental assistant.

> **Frank:** Then a colleague told me [the company] was looking at getting most of our engineers chartered, and of course you can't be chartered unless you have a degree. So that was perhaps a bit of an excuse to do what I've wanted to do many years ago.

Stergiou and Airey (2017) point out that old frames of reference and perspectives become redundant for many mature-age students returning to education. Relinquishing these frames of reference acts as a catalyst for change, and there can often be a key or watershed moment that provides the impetus for deciding to commence their studies

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(Gill, Hayes, & Senior, 2015; Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016). One of the clearly articulated aspects relating to the participants' motivation to learn was a *dawning* or *recognition* moment where the participant became aware of their desire or need to begin study.

> **Fiona:** And I don't know, it was just one of those light bulb moments that went, you know what in ten years' time I want to look back and kind of go, wow, that was a really good decision to make and just jumped in. And if I stop, whatever I've learned is never lost.

> **Emily:** But that's what made me start studying. Things need to change.

> **Frank:** So that [changes at work] was perhaps a bit of an excuse to do what I've wanted to do many years ago.

However, while mature-age students demonstrate a high level of motivation, they are still subject to distraction and moments where they lose motivation.

> **Anne:** So there were a few nights where I'd normally go okay, 7:30 I'm in the study, going to watch lectures, going to do this and that, but I just went I don't want to, I can't be bothered. I don't have this mindset that I meant to do it.

> **Carol:** I'll log on to news, and I'll sit there for 45 minutes and then go, hang on a minute get back to what I was doing.

6.2.7 Theme Summary

Mature-age students bring the benefits of their experience with them, and their maturity strengthens their approach to study. However, the self-concept held by mature-age students varies in its positivity concerning the student's characteristics as influenced by life's opportunities and challenges. Recognising the need to refresh or update academic skills mature-age students generally held a high level of motivation and readiness to learn. This recognition established a determination to return to the

education setting and complete the study that they had not been ready for or were unable to access when they finished compulsory schooling.

6.3 Theme 2: Accommodating External Factors

Descriptors: Accommodate, career, familiarity, family, financial, juggling, life influence, outside influence, recency, re-think, right time, routine, work-related.

Besides providing valuable educational and intellectual growth, a university can be a place of fun and excitement for students (Ganesan, Talwar, Fauzan, & Oon, 2018). However, for mature-age students, the practicalities of accommodating or juggling external factors such as work, family, and financial commitments reduce the opportunity for fun and excitement. These practicalities also impact the amount and continuity of study that they can undertake.

> **Diane:** But I guess I haven't really been able to sign up for anything, because what with working five days a week and then doing my study and family time, I don't really have any extra time to do anything like extra clubs and that sort of thing. I mean, if I didn't work five days a week, I probably would be able to engage a bit more.

Accommodating responsibilities such as dependents, employment, and financial commitments, combined with a lack of recency in academic study, impact mature-age students transitioning back into education (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018b; O'Shea, 2019). In fulfilling multiple roles, mature-age students are inevitably time-poor and face the additional stresses caused by taking on the role of student in a tight schedule of work, parenting, domestic responsibilities, relationships and social life (O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015; Christiansen, et al., 2019). For most participants accommodating these factors required a complex negotiation of time, and making time arrangements featured strongly as a stressor and was an area where participants spent considerable effort in endeavouring to establish an appropriate routine;

> **Anne:** Creating mechanisms that okay I can fit time with the family in, I could fit my studies in, I can fit work in, I can fit the general running of home in too, as well as a bit of social life.

Unfortunately, many students find it hard to regulate their studies and their external lives (Van der Meer, Jansen, & Torenbeek, 2010) even with a routine to encompass the regularities of living (Heintzelman & King, 2018). For the participants, even with a carefully planned and choreographed routine, the participant could only count on brief periods for study fitted in between other competing activities.

> **Diane:** So what I do is I make sure I get up earlier, and I drop my daughter off to day-care, and I get to work two hours before the start.

> **Anne:** For me coping is getting into a routine, setting out my routine, but knowing that, okay, things are going to go crazy like they have. But I mean, I've set myself to have Tuesdays as my study day.

> **Adam:** I generally don't start studying until my son is tucked up in bed, and my wife knows that I am studying, and she leaves me alone.

The three main areas of competition reported as restricting or impacting available study time were work life, family life and social life.

6.3.1 Work Life.

Scholz Fenech and Raykov (2018) reiterate that the research relating to student employment and learning has not only demonstrated an increase in the number of students working during their studies but that the number of hours dedicated to employment has also increased. As a consequence, time spent on paid employment does not only infringe on the time devoted to studies but also on students' free time, reducing the time available for relaxation and recreation and where the student also has family commitments this may represent a considerable strain (Scholz Fenech & Raykov, 2018). However, for some students, paid work may be associated with potential social and psychological health benefits, such as representing an escape or

necessary distraction from everyday challenges and stresses (Christiansen, et al., 2019). Participants did not identify work as a beneficial factor in this study. Instead, the participants saw work as a financial necessity rather than as a desired activity.

> **Gail:** Yeah, I think so because I have life commitments, so I have a mortgage that I have to pay. That's something that I have to factor into everything, which is why I have to work full time.

> **Lucy:** I was hoping to take a day off to do that, which puts a bit more of a financial burden on us … Obviously, taking a full day off to do that is a massive sort of burden on the family, so I mean, I don't think that's going to happen as much as I want it to.

This perspective of work is not particularly surprising given that the most commonly cited reasons for enrolling at university are employment or career progression (Fishman, 2015; Laming, Martin-Lynch, & Morris, 2016; Waters & Lemon, 2019). This attitude is partly due to a general realisation that additional schooling is more valuable than work as an investment in a future career (Carnevale & Smith, 2018). For the study participants, the need to undertake study later in life centred on two work-related aspects; the desire to advance their career or the need to identify something different for their life.

> **Carol:** I think that successfully completing this Bachelor of Arts with its broad study options might give me an insight on what I can do for the next 20 - 25 years.

> **Diane:** I work in a kindergarten, and I like that age, so I wanted to do early learning - zero to eight.

> **Emily:** I was incarcerated recently, and while you are locked up, I personally tend to think you should probably take whatever opportunities you can get, and USQ was offering opportunities for online study, and so I took it.

However, although students may see study as the pathway to obtain more rewarding work opportunities, Sanchez-Gelabert, Figueroa and Elias (2017) contend that the research points to working while studying as having a detrimental effect on academic outcomes. The impact of this concern is potentially worse for mature-age students who, having delayed their transition into higher education, are far more likely to work during their studies than those entering higher education directly from post-secondary education (Heagney & Benson, 2017; Scholz Fenech & Raykov, 2018).

> **Hanna:** But also in that job we were working with 15-year-olds, while will camping out we were sort of working probably like a 70 hour week because we camped out for three days, three nights with the kids. So the job didn't give me enough time, but I also didn't have the drive to really want to prioritize the study.

> **Diane:** Well, I have been a student at CHC, and I was doing business back then, but because I was working full time, I just couldn't put the time in to study.

6.3.2 Family Life.

Adjusting to the role of a 'parenting' mature-age student comes with challenges (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018b; Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016). In line with the concerns raised in the literature, the participants' responses contained a significant number of comments regarding the impact of making accommodations for the family on their study. However, most of these comments were from the female participants, which was not surprising due to the limited number of male participants and their stage of life. This trend was noted by Pearce (2017), who reiterates that the incidence of parenthood and other caring responsibilities is strongly gendered. Interestingly the reported impacts were not concerning the loss of time with the family but centred on how the participant would be able to work around a compromised established routine due to what Augustine, Prickett and Negraia (2018) refer to as "time squeeze" (p. 964). Female students in their dual role of mother and student must also overcome the education system's inflexibility (Behboodi Moghadam, Ordibeheshti Khiaban, Esmaeili, & Salsali, 2017). Consequently, to

accommodate their family commitments and minimise time squeeze, female students with caring responsibilities are increasingly choosing the flexibility of online study (Stone & O'Shea, 2019b). From the participants' responses, it was evident that time squeeze was an issue.

> **Anne:** Tuesdays are my study days, but since starting Uni, this is my second Tuesday to myself, with not having a child at home unwell. So one week, I had my older son home, the following week it was my daughter. And then I had a week for me, and then it was both kids at home.

> **Hanna:** But I've only got that I don't know maybe four and a half, five hours between school drop off and pick up something like, oh, I can't take the time for that because I have to deal with screaming [daughter's name] later in the day. So I'm trying to fit it in while I go, if I can.

In their consideration of the work-study relationship, Scholz Fenech and Raykov (2018) identified that students wanted to dedicate more time to study-related activities and less to paid jobs. Arguably the same can be said in respect of study-family time commitments. Several participant responses highlight the sense of regret in not being able to engage with study to the extent or frequency the participant desired. This finding aligns with that of Behboodi Moghadam, et al., (2017) who identify that student mothers prioritise their families over their educational commitments. In comparing work-family and study-family conflicts, it is reasonably easy to suggest that in a work-family conflict, the constraint may be financial implications. In contrast, in a study-family conflict, the constraint is applied because of an ingrained sense of family commitment.

> **Irene:** But I mean, I have a five-year-old, so the thought of doing more than one unit, it would take too much time away from my life, from him, so I don't know I could do that.

Nevertheless, for some participants, the decision to commit to study overcame the practicalities associated with time squeeze and, to some extent, even the practicalities related to family commitment and family identity (Gill, Hayes, & Senior, 2015). However, reaching this point was not a quick or painless process and involved extensive planning around their finances, use of time and other commitments (Heagney & Benson, 2017). One participant highlighted this dilemma when explaining how difficult it had been to get her family to understand what her studying would entail.

> **Lucy:** Because a lot of times at the start, they, especially my husband, didn't understand why I was doing it. You know, it wasn't the right time. We still have young kids, wanting me to put it off for a few more years to make it sort of easier as such. So that was, I suppose more on me that I was like, I don't want to put it off anymore, I want to actually do this now for me.

The quality of family relationships, both the positive aspects, such as providing love, advice, and care, and the negative aspects, such as arguments, being critical and making too many demands, influences well-being (Thomas, Liu, & Umberson, 2017). Consequently, reaching the decision and living with that decision were two different things, and participants often felt a strong sense of guilt relating to their decision and the resulting impost placed on their family. Feelings of guilt or selfishness regarding compromising the familial role can also be emotional factors negatively impacting students with children (Stone & O'Shea, 2019b). Similar concerns are identified by Christensen and Craft (2021), who noted that students felt guilty because university study was eating into precious family time and the consequential long-term effect on family dynamics was unknown.

> **Hanna:** So it is that, you feel a bit guilty because it's like it, yeah I guess maybe study feels a bit like a guilty pleasure for me.

> **Anne:** I think I've probably studied too much, to tell you the truth … I'm still trying to find that balance between study work and family

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> **Diane:** I notice that I'm not spending enough time with my husband or my child.

It was also apparent that for some participants, the decision to return to study had been long in the making, which imbedded a sense of need or perhaps even necessity in the participant's desire to return to education. Consequently, while mature-age students return to education for a multitude of reasons, including employment or career progression (Stergiou & Airey, 2017), there was an element of personal fulfilment which Christensen and Craft (2021) refer to as "gaining a new sense of me" (p. 4). Whatever the reason for making the decision, there were clear signs that participants had a profoundly ingrained compulsion to make it happen. As highlighted by Irene, there were expectations that the family unit would assist.

> **Irene:** Well, I'm really lucky. Like, I have a very supportive family, so that's good. I think that's the only way you can do it is by having a supportive family, especially when you have like a family. If I was just working, coming home, and I was single that would be totally different with having a husband and a child and stuff. I couldn't do it without having that support.

However, where the assistance was not as forthcoming as expected, it could be disruptive for the participant. Mallman and Lee (2016) in considering this aspect identify that becoming a student, especially a mature-age student, is a highly emotional process.

> **Lucy:** That frustration tends to pan out to my family life, unfortunately. I try not to let it, but I do find that when I'm getting frustrated with the concept that I get very frustrated with my family when they're not giving me time to, I suppose you know, sit down and work it out or when I've got to get up and do something else, I sort of snap a little bit because I guess I'm just frustrated that I can't understand that, and then trying to do that at the same time is just quite annoying.

For those participants who did not have a young family to take care of, there were other, often mundane distractions that interfered with the student's ability to study.

> **Frank:** If it's at night, during the week it will be the dogs craving me to take them for a walk or something, you know.

> **Lucy:** I have to be careful that I don't get carried away with doing something else or, you know, putting a movie on when I should be sitting down and actually studying.

One factor that was exceedingly influential in making the decision to return to study palatable against the impacts of both family and work commitments was the flexibility of the online format (Pelliccione, Morey, Walker, & Morrison, 2019; Stone, Freeman, Dyment, Muir, & Milthorpe, 2019). The ability to structure and adequately manage the time available meant that by fitting study into the available time slots rather than rearranging the problematic areas of family and work, participants could make the necessary accommodations. Unfortunately for some students, access to the online format is the only available path to opportunities (Bettinger, Fox, Loeb, & Taylor, 2017), particularly where they have family and carer responsibilities (Stone & O'Shea, 2019b).

6.3.3 Social Life.

The third area of competition was the impact on social life. Committing to academic study generally means that some other aspect of the student's life is negatively affected. Darab (2007) identifies that some students redefine the concept of leisure to accommodate everything into the limited time available. At times, the study became a substitute for a social life. This aspect was also noted by Pusztai and Kocsis (2019) who suggest that students learn to compensate for the reduced amount of time available for their studies or use the time at their disposal more efficiently.

> **Gail:** Yeah, I definitely have to limit the amount of times I go out with friends. But before you know I only have to work, so it's like, oh, yeah I'll just go to work and then those three days that I would have off I could

go to the shops, or hang out with friends, it didn't really matter. I didn't have to have everything planned out of what I was going to do that day. Where now it's like, okay, so I need to know a plan of what I need to do. I need to be more organized I guess to be able to deal with and, I guess cope with study.

Anne: Trying to set times to do that so where I used to wash every sort of second day I might do it at the end of the week and do a big load, and that'll be it. So, just changing my routine up a little bit and not being disappointed if something doesn't go the way I want it to go.

From the responses, it appears that the participants were far more prepared to reduce social activity to accommodate study than they were to minimise family time. This preferencing is unsurprising given the strength of the family bond and the enduring and consequential nature of that bond (Thomas, Liu, & Umberson, 2017). Similarly, it was evident that work placed ahead of social life in the allocation of time. Again this was unsurprising given that work pays the bills and working out how to manage their finances was a primary concern for mature-age students (Heagney & Benson, 2017). Although none of the participants identified social life as having a profound impact on their study, social activities did have a powerful lure for the participants as a short term distraction or reward or incentive for meeting specific deadlines.

Gail: You got to be able to work out okay today I'm going to do the assignment because on the weekend, I'm going to go hang out with the girls from work or whatever.

Frank: I suppose the first couple of weeks you take it a little bit half-heartedly. Yeah, I know I've got to do that, but I'll just go for a bit longer walk. It doesn't really matter.

Although facing several competing interests for their time, mature-age students have a desire to participate in social activities (Mallman & Lee, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2019a). However, the participants were consciously, if somewhat reluctantly, prepared

to reduce their participation or involvement in social activities that they would have ordinarily pursued. This attitude is slightly different from that identified for the younger students where socializing was more than a desired activity; it was considered a significant aspect of the student's life, even trumping sleep (Adams, Williford, Vaccaro, & Kisler, 2017).

> **Diane:** But I guess like I normally do volunteering at my church, but because I've got Uni and work and family life, I've had to stop a few things with my volunteering.

> **Frank:** you know, before you would throw yourself in front of the TV, and that would be it for the night. Whereas now, basically, I guess I've removed myself from having a social life and just doing what I want.

Even when participants did take some time out to do something other than study, they frequently felt anxious or even guilty about that activity consuming time better spent in other areas. These feelings may relate to a perceived need to work harder due to a productive studying attitude or a lack of academic confidence (Skillen, 2019) and a fear of academic failure (Dunne, 2019).

> **Anne:** I'm not a gym junkie, and I find myself if I go, yep, I'm going to the gym. However, at the gym, I'm constantly looking at my watch, when am I getting out of here so I can go home and do this or I can go and do that?

> **Emily:** I tend not to go out. I probably turn down more outings online because I'm forever feeling like I should be studying.

Social considerations also came into play concerning academic and non-academic interactions with other students on the course or attending the university. The significance of these interactions is discussed in *Theme 5 – The Value of Discourse*.

6.3.4 Living with the Accommodations.

Tones, Fraser, Elder and White (2009) argue that while mature-aged students have the potential to succeed at university at the same rates as school leavers, their non-academic responsibilities may not only hinder their academic success but lead to attrition. Feelings of guilt and regret can also be emotional factors that negatively impact the mature-age learner on their re-engagement with formal learning (Behboodi Moghadam, et al., 2017; Willans & Seary, 2011).

Emotional barriers significantly influence a student's university experience and impact the student's sense of belonging and confidence which are integral parts of that experience (Thomas, Herbert, & Teras, 2014; Xuereb, 2015). The sense of belonging has a significant relationship with various mature-age student outcomes (Erb & Drysdale, 2017; Korpershoek, Canrinus, Fokkens-Bruinsma, & de Boer, 2020). If there are negative aspects within this relationship, then engagement and persistence can be negatively affected (Kuh, 2009b). Unfortunately, as Erb and Drysdale (2017) note, mature-age students often report a significantly weaker sense of belonging than traditional-age students. The lack of belonging can be exacerbated in the online study environment, where there can often be an increased sense of isolation (Elmer, Mepham, & Stadtfeld, 2020; Rush, 2015). The feeling of isolation and not belonging was identifiable within the participants' responses, not only concerning other students but also regarding the university itself.

> **Diane:** I'm not really feeling like part of the Uni environment. I kind of feel like I'm going through the motions of just, OK, week two got to read this, got to do that, yep that's it, check it, done. I don't really feel like to part of the Uni life.

> **Kate:** I think it's quicker online to lose track of where you are if you don't engage regularly because the environment is individual [more isolating].

In addition to making mature-age students feel that they are part of the university, it is also important to relay to the students the sense that they matter and they are valued

(Stone, 2019). This support is essential given that frequently students may identify themselves as holding minority status and "denied full membership as 'proper' or 'normal' students" (Mallman & Lee, 2016, p. 698). Mature-age students may also feel overwhelmed and at risk of isolation or disenfranchisement from the course, the lecturers or other learners (Heagney & Benson, 2017; Ramsey & Brown, 2018). For many online students, the lack of interaction or connection simply added to the effect of the external factors in their life, as one participant noted;

> **Anne:** Just because you are mature-age doesn't mean that you should be
> pushed off to the side.

For some participants, there was a recognition that their participation in study came at a cost. Johnston (2017) notes that mature-age students, particularly women, face the constant pull of family and study priorities. A similar point is made by Stone and O'Shea (2019b), who maintain that the additional caring load "by necessity, is time and energy consuming and frequently needs to be prioritised over study" (p.105). It was evident that when the cost became too high for the participants, they would re-prioritise based on their perception of importance.

> **Lucy:** And the first thing I do is step back from Uni because that's the
> one thing in my life that's just for me, not for anyone else. So that's the
> first thing I suppose I disengage from.

> **Hanna:** But if my family is impacted by [my study] and getting really
> upset, then I'd have to say, okay, I'm being a bit selfish and wind it back.

However, finding this family-work-life balance is often tricky for mature-age students to achieve, especially when some students are simply unprepared for the changes in familial structure and duties, financial constraints and employment commitments (Christensen & Craft, 2021). Unfortunately, a significant consequence of not achieving a suitable balance is a greater likelihood of student attrition (Morison & Cowley, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2019b). Ultimately, the reality is that achieving a balance (or at least no conflict) between the various competing interests is made more

complicated by the diverse nature of the individual's characteristics as a mature-aged student endeavouring to cope with returning to study in an online environment.

Figure 6.2 provides an outline of this reality, depicting the layers formed by the influencing factors. Each layer adds to the difficulties faced by the student in their endeavour to achieve a workable balance. However, while all the factors within Figure 6.2 can be considered as fixed states of being at any particular point in time, all of the factors are, for the most part, flexible concepts. For example, throughout the student's enrolment, a student may change jobs or have a child move from part-time kindergarten to full-time primary school. A student's increasing experience in undertaking online study or using coping strategies can alter the student's ability to respond to any difficulties they face later. Similarly, as students become more familiar with and adept at university study, the balance of advantages and disadvantages of being a mature-age student will shift.
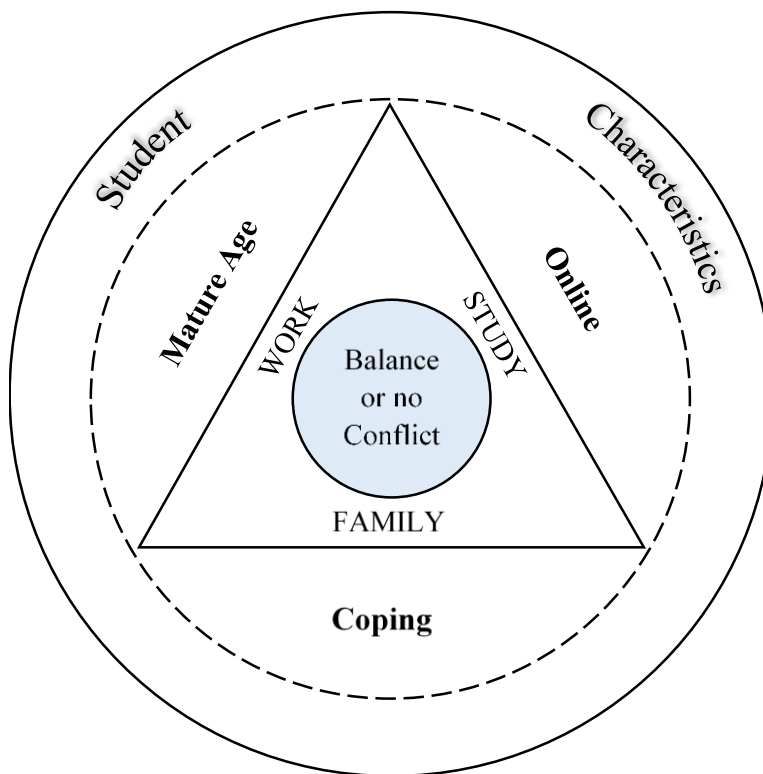
Figure 6.2. Factors Affecting the Family-Work-Study Balance

6.3.5 Theme Summary.

Mature-age students face several challenges in completing study which arise from their responsibilities associated with work, family and life in general. Although time-poor and faced with juggling the various aspects of their lives, Mature-age students manage to meet this challenge through determined planning and strength of purpose. At times the consequences associated with the student's drive represents an additional burden for the family, leaving the student with a sense of selfishness and guilt.

6.4 Theme 3: Facilitating Learning

Descriptors: Access issues, adaptability, clarity, comprehension, content, coping, course material, delivery, limitation, and taught.

Stewart (2010) in discussing the purpose of university education, comments that it has become more difficult to identify and articulate the purpose of a university and even more difficult to create the types of integration that would facilitate both a liberal education and a solid foundation for a future career. While educational aims may change over time (Gardner, 2019; Shilvock, 2018; Stehlik, 2018), it remains a basic tenet that education should equip students with the knowledge and skills they need to survive and make the most of their opportunities. As part of this process, students must have the opportunity and challenge of learning rather than just being taught; too often there is too much teaching and not enough learning (Lujan & DiCarlo, 2006; Mupa & Chinooneka, 2015). Unfortunately, at times, students can perceive that they are not even being taught. As Lucy noted:

> **Lucy:** I feel like it should be a bit more teaching, I suppose, I don't feel
> like I'm being taught things, I feel like I'm just being told things.

This view of simply being told things reflects a knowledge transmission model of learning (Lu & Wu, 2018), which limits the student's role in the knowledge construction process (Li, Yao, Guo, Yao, & Yan, 2019; Van Aalst, 2009). For some students, this approach aligns with their learning goals and achievement motives. However, not all students undertake study for the same outcomes (Lonka, et al., 2008; Steinmayr, Weidinger, Schwinger, & Spinath, 2019), and for some students there is a

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genuine interest in reflecting on the subject matter and understanding the meaning of the text (Dolmans, Loyens, & Gijbels, 2016). This variation was highlighted by the participants, some of whom sought knowledge that was directly applicable to their future ambitions, and others who took a deeper cognitive approach.

> **Gail:** I'm actually interested in what I'm learning and wanting to learn more about it.

> **Brian:** I'm actually looking at knowing more than what I really need to know.

> **Carol:** You know, life changes, and it's funny being, you know, I'm almost 50 and [becoming aware that my] 25-year career didn't, you know, finish the way I wanted it to finish.

While students may vary in their reasons for undertaking study and may vary in their learning preferences, all students face the reality of having to work through course material. It is this interaction; between student and content that students perceive to be the most important interaction, more important than the interaction between student and lecturer (Hannay & Newvine, 2006; Nwankwo, 2015), and more important than building or participating in a classroom community (More, Warner, & Jones, 2016). For time-limited students, there is a need to employ strategies that will provide them with an optimal outcome based on selective and intentional interaction with the course content (Coffin Murray, Pérez, Geist, & Hedrick, 2013). Because of this tendency to selectively pick which content to study, Rasmussen and Hagen (2015) maintain that lecturers play an important mediating role between the student and the course material. This role is significant in a student-centred learning environment where instructors are responsible for shaping course curricula and acting as a student guide (Keiler, 2018; Rayens & Ellis, 2018; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). In discussing the facilitation of learning, the participants focused on three primary considerations: the content, delivery and comprehension.

6.4.1 Content.

Learning involves a complex balance of content and physical interaction with that content, and as Dewey (1916) states, education is interaction, and interaction is essential to education. For Castro and Tumibay (2019), one of the learning experience's primary shapers is the student's interaction with content. Xiao (2017) highlights this point, noting that interaction with content is inextricably interwoven with learner-learner and learner–instructor interactions in the conventional face-to-face setting. This connection is more challenging in the online setting, given that student interaction experiences are much different in the online environment than in the face-to-face setting (Turley & Graham, 2019). As part of the move online, there is a criticism that sometimes the online content is mediocre, which constitutes a major issue for providing quality education (Dhawan, 2020). However, moving subjects online does not have to mean a loss of student engagement with content if the move represents a catalyst for the experimentation with new approaches and technologies, and for exploring creative alternatives (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020). Regrettably, at times the participants felt that the content presented, in terms of quality or design, was uninspiring and essentially amounted to the participant merely covering content rather than using content.

> **Jane:** It's not really run on the premise of let me pique your interest and get you loving the subject.

> **Lucy:** But yeah, I feel like online it's something that I could just read through myself.

Another concern for participants was the recognition that they did not have access to the same content resources as the in-class cohort. According to Whitelock, Thorpe and Galley (2015), student workload is a contentious issue partly because estimates of how much time a particular learning activity will take can only ever be approximate. Mather and Sarkans (2018) note that to some extent, the discrepancy in content can also be considered a consequence of the methods of participation experienced by students in the two forms of delivery.

> **Anne:** One of my courses I was sort of reading the topic question, and I was like, why can't I find the answers to that? It's like you've given us answers to some of these, but you haven't given answers to the others. It wasn't until I flipped back to the original like welcome thing that I reread I went ah! there's a tutorial which explains all this sort of stuff which isn't available to us.

> **Hanna:** But in two of the subjects they get extra tutorials, which we don't get.

Beyond the simple explanation that the variation in content was a consequence of establishing two delivery formats, the difference could be that lecturers hold expectations that online students will be highly motivated and self-regulated (Artino & Stephens, 2009; Pedrotti & Nistor, 2019; Wandler & Imbriale, 2017). Self-regulated learners employ various strategies to regulate certain cognitive, motivational and behavioural aspects and are academically motivated and demonstrate an effective learning ability (Oates, 2019; Yot-Domínguez & Marcelo, 2017). Because of these strategies, self-regulated learners can often be presumed capable of taking control over decisions regarding how to approach the study materials or the allocation of time for study (Wong, et al., 2018). For many participants, the allocation of time represented a significant of self-regulation.

> **Brian:** The online lectures, you know you can watch them over and over again, but you got to make the time for if you want, and time's precious to everyone.

> **Frank:** I think the biggest challenge is the discipline of sitting down there at night and doing [study] … I guess it's getting back into the routine of that sort of thing I would say is the hardest part of it.

Importantly, self-regulated learners can choose and implement an appropriate learning strategy (Dincol-Ozgur, 2019), for example choosing between a surface and deep learning. The surface learning approach typically represents knowing the ideas and

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concentrating on the assessment requirements (Alt & Boniel-Nissim, 2018; Hu & Yeo, 2020)[46]. In contrast, deep learning is about understanding and imposing meaning by transferring the content to new or novel situations (Fullan, Hill, & Rincon-Gallardo, 2017; Winje & Londal, 2020). Both approaches were evident in the participants' responses:

> **Adam:** I am not sure that that produced lasting results as it was only
> really surface learning.

> **Gail:** I'm quite passionate about health being in a health environment
> already. So I find it really interesting, and I want to learn more about it.
> So I feel I guess I'm in the right course because I'm actually interested in
> what I'm learning and wanting to learn more about it, so I engage in all
> the online activities.

Mature-age students are often associated with a deep learning approach more than younger students (Lake & Boyd, 2015; Rubin, et al., 2018). Unfortunately, mature-age students are particularly time-poor (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018b; De Silva, Robinson, & Watts, 2011). Consequently, mature-age students often face the reality that while they may well prefer to develop a deeper understanding of the content and the subject itself, they can only just keep up with the pace required to get through the volume of material.

> **Hanna:** So yeah, it would be nice to have less content so I could actually
> practice what they want us to practice, which is to go back and review
> the stuff, so it's sinking in. Otherwise it's like, this is great, but it's all just
> passing me by, and I don't know if I'll ever capture that information
> again.

> **Adam:** I did one unit last semester where I had trouble understanding the
> content, and for a while, I was falling behind, and I thought I was going
> to fail the unit. However, I just did more hours of study. I am not sure

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[46] It is worth noting Lindblom-Ylanne, Parpala, & Postareff's (2019) contention that a full surface approach is rare among university students, because it is not relevant or functional in universities today

that that produced lasting results as it was only really surface learning the content, but I passed.

The amount of content was clearly of concern to the participants who made numerous comments, identifying their perception that there was a considerable volume of content to work through.

> **Emily:** There's lots of it; it's just this barrage.

> **Brian:** Sometimes the lecturers have said, oh, we just want a brief overview of this, and then they put up a slide, which is like, oh, my goodness.

> **Frank:** [I have] difficulty in completing the work, twice as much work for the time available.

Research has identified that students' perception of their workload has a significant effect on their well-being and study success, with excessive workload associated with problems such as decreased performance and motivation, burnout, anxiety, and depression (Hernesniemi, et al., 2017). In the online context, the volume of content presents several problems for students. First, too much content is associated with shallow learning (Cheung, et al., 2020; Gerrard, Newfield, Balouchestani Asli, & Variawa, 2017), mainly because of the risk of crowding out the opportunities to consider the knowledge and practice the skills gained. Second, it is recognised that study leading to a surface approach yields perceptions of a heavier workload, whether or not it is actually more burdensome (Dolmans, Loyens, & Gijbels, 2016; Mork, et al., 2020). Third, there is a perception that the traditional in-class course is easier than an online course because of the lesser volume and intensity of the workload (Fidalgo, Thormann, & Kulyk, 2020; Stern, 2004). The volume of content appeared to impact the participants' perception of their academic capability and ability to cope.

> **Brian:** Some of the other subjects, you feel overwhelmed, and then you tend to spend more time on those subjects to the detriment of other

subjects. And, you know, that really then causes problems in itself. So I'd say yes, even now, you know, even though I'm a mature student, I've been learning every day, and yet I've still felt, wow, what am I doing?

Hanna: I understand that they're trying to give us lots of different perspectives, but I think I'm averaging probably a hundred pages per subject of reading that I have to do. And I was someone who probably read one book a year, you know, for the last eight years of my life.

6.4.2 Delivery.

Allied closely with the concerns over content was the impact of the method used in delivering that content. The participants discussed three main areas of delivery concern; lectures (including tutorials), forums and practical components. Although there was participant support for the online lectures, generally, the participant comments related to the recorded lectures' low quality and format. This finding conflicts somewhat with Lokuge Dona, Gregory and Pechenkina's (2016) finding that students generally report lecture recordings as a positive aid to their studies but aligns with Brockfield, Muller and de Laffolie's (2018) finding that students preferred live lessons to videoed lessons. In part, this variation is attributable to the recording's purpose, either as a primary content resource for online students or as a supplement for in-class students. However, the recording and content presentation quality plays a significant part in student dissatisfaction (Lange & Costley, 2020; Stone, 2019). For the participants, there was an obvious disappointment with how little effort went into the presentation of content, especially when the lecture was simply a slide show with a voice-over track.

Jane: I really do struggle with just the voice behind the slides. If there's nothing to look at I, find that really hard to connect with, and his slides are very heavy and packed with information.

Fiona: Someone reading from a script … it's not a natural kind of interaction.

However, it appears that some lecturers are more adept in the online setting, and the participants responded positively where a lecturer provided motivational stimulation.

> **Brian:** The lecturers and that are fantastic, and the zoom sessions they have are good.

> **Lucy:** [the lecturer] brought in this tin of spaghetti and was explaining this concept, but showing us on the camera, and it just made so much more sense.

> **Hanna:** I left that [tutorial] feeling really pumped.

While there have been other positive aspects of online teaching (Sun & Chen, 2016), there have also been difficulties with lecturers transitioning to online instruction (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017). Reflecting this concern, the participants expressed a lot of dissatisfaction with the quality and suitability of lecture recordings. For example, it was clear that the practice of recording lectures in the office or at home not only meant that there were no instances of student interaction within the lecture, but the recording incorporated a variety of distracting background noises. The research has identified several areas where the presentation quality of a recorded lecture can have a negative impact on student engagement and satisfaction (Kurzweil, Marcellas, Henry, & Meyer, 2020; Lange & Costley, 2020).

> **Frank:** When you when you're actually online and you are listening to the lectures as much as you can't hear as much as you would like to, obviously you can hear the lecturer, but you can't always hear the interaction between the students and the lecturer that well.

> **Anne:** And sometimes the pre-recorded lectures are done from home, so you get to hear all the barking and tweet of birds and things like that, which is a little bit distracting, where I prefer a recorded lecture that's happening then and there because you might hear those questions being asked.

Thomas, Herbert and Teras (2014) argue that students who cannot participate in live lectures directly can do so vicariously online. This point was highlighted by Fiona, who, even though she could not be there in person, expressed the desire to feel part of the lecture and obtain all the potential benefits.

> **Fiona:** To just make sure that if at all possible, all classroom delivered lectures are available for online students to be able to keep, keep in touch with and feel like they actually are a part of that course and that program. And you see the nuances of the lecturers, then you feel like you get to know their personalities. You know, it's more that you actually feel like you're more part of that class and that you're actually a student at the university.

At times the lecture recordings did not contain any visual content and were audio-only which the participants considered to be of limited value. This view confirms Fish's (2014) findings that students perceive audio-only recordings as less efficient and less useful than text-based lecture summaries. However, it is clear that the use and quality of videos vary considerably. For example, Xiu, Moore, Thompson and French (2019) identify a mixed response of moderate positive and strong negative attitudes, while Scagnoli, Choo and Tian (2019) report positive responses.

> **Diane:** Sometimes there's video, but a lot of my tutorials have all been just audio because the file would be too big. You can hear in the tutorial that they are writing something on the whiteboard and it's like well I've got no idea what you're doing because I can't see and that can make it challenging.

> **Adam:** The course I did last semester used video lectures which were obviously recorded during a previous semester, so it held less relevance.

The participants also felt strongly that because they were mature-age students, they had a lot to offer to the discussion, not only in relevant experience but also in their readiness to actively ask and answer questions that arose. This research literature

reflects this point, recognising that mature-age students come to study with experience of life, work, and responsibility (Barclay, 2018). A similar observation is made by Mallman and Lee (2017), who note that although mature-age students overcome their initial anxieties, "they participate with degrees of enthusiasm and dedication" (p.697). However, for most mature-age students studying online, there is often little opportunity for them to match up their available time with that of the planned lecture time. So there was not only a recognition but a resignation to the fact that they would have to accept a recorded presentation.

> **Diane:** I think my subjects for the semester don't have any lectures. They
> just have online tutorials, but those are held when I'm working or I'm
> feeding a child, so I can't go to those, and then I have to watch it later.
> And then it's one of those online tutorials where you get to talk to the
> lecturer and ask him questions, and I'm like I have just missed out on
> that now I'll have to do emails, so I'm just like, do I watch it or do I just
> send my email?

However, this resignation is simply part of the modifications to past learning practices required to develop the skills necessary for succeeding in the online learning environment (Burkle & Cleveland-Innes, 2013; Phungsuk, Viriyavejakul, & Ratanaolarn, 2017). However, not all students are comfortable with the required changes and maintain reservations about online learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). For many students, the changes imposed by Covid-19 has been a further complication to the process (Dhawan, 2020; Kim 2020). From the participants' responses, it appears that the majority of students demonstrate the capacity to adjust the online format. However, the responses also indicate a significant level of interest in attending actual lectures, as in a hybrid form of study (Eliveria, Serami, Famorca, & Dela Cruz, 2019; Raes, et al., 2020).

> **Lucy:** [If I can, I'd like] to see if I can do one of my courses on campus
> … I feel like that would make just my learning a lot easier, especially as,
> you know, after watching the lecture content, you can actually go into

the lab and learn what you've been learning in more of a visual sense, which I think would help quite a bit.

6.4.3 Comprehension.

Several participant responses indicated that the students had difficulty in understanding their subject matter. This difficulty is not surprising given that students have always faced various challenges with learning content, including the intellectual level or nature of the subject matter[47]. Where understanding content is difficult, it can lead to confusion. Arguel, Lockyer, Lipp and Lodge (2017) identify that confusion is an emotion that may be beneficial to learners in that it can foster engagement, leading to deeper understanding. However, if the confusion remains unresolved, then its effect can be disheartening and detrimental to learning (Yang, Wen, Howley, Kraut, & Rose, 2016). For some participants, comprehension was more difficult because there was a lack of interest in the content or confusion about what content went with what subject.

> **Jane:** So last semester, I did TPP, and we did a lot on environmental and sustainable energies. I didn't enjoy the subjects at all. I found it really, really heavy reading. It was hard, it was a really hard slog to drag myself through it. I mean, I did. But without the addition of all the little YouTube clips and things like that, I honestly don't think I would have dragged myself through it.

> **Emily:** I'm anxious because some of the requirements for two of the courses I'm doing are very similar, and I find it hard to separate the needs of one course from the needs of another and get the right stuff in and out.

Lodge, et al., (2018) propose that two learning processes apply when students experience confusion. The first is where the difficulties encourage students to engage in the additional mental effort to resolve the conceptual impasse and the confusion resulting from it. The second learning process is that students will utilise alternative approaches to consider the learning material they need to understand when facing a

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[47] See for example Raj Acharya (2017) who outlines the difficulties faced by mathematics students, and Ali (2012) regarding chemistry

conceptual impasse and the resulting confusion. However, for this second process to occur, students need to have experience with such difficulties. While some participants' comments indicated the ability to overcome their confusion, other participants appeared to have more trouble.

> **Emily:** Confusion is a hard thing to deal with, I just get confused sometimes but it's just a matter of sitting back and ordering it out.

> **Hanna:** I'm seeking clarification from other people that I've understood the content. I think I'm a bit of a slow thinker, and I tend to think something, and then you know, two days later I'd like go, oh none of that was right.

While anxiety in itself is not a bad thing given that it can foster motivation and academic performance (Cooper, Downing, & Brownell, 2018), anxiety can interfere with concentration and memory, both of which are critical for academic success. However, while the relationship between anxiety and academic performance is complicated, there is a general tendency for a negative relationship between symptoms of anxiety and academic performance among university students (Abu Ruz, Al-Akash, & Jarrah, 2018; Awadalla, Davies, & Glazebrook, 2020). For some participants, the anxiety they expressed was quite intense and appeared to represent a level almost to the point of distress.

> **Gail:** Sometimes I look at it and go, it's really, really upsetting, and I'm really upset.

> **Jane:** [I've hit a point where I'm just overwhelmed by my studies] so I begin to begin to turn on myself.

However, besides the material's complexity or volume, the presentation of that material played a significant part in the participants' lack of understanding. For many participants, the material was not presented in a form suitably palatable for their learning style, and therefore, the content made less of a connection with them. The

significance of such dissatisfaction is highlighted by Roddy, et al., (2017) who note that online instructors are a direct and important influence on the student experience. Because of their influential position, lecturers should endeavour to more than hand out a list of resources; instead, lecturers should invest sufficient time researching and designing authentic learning activities (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Unfortunately, far too often, online content is mediocre (Dhawan, 2020).

> **Jane:** I feel bad for [name] if I say yes it could be delivered better because he seems like a very nice person. I just find his lectures very dry

> **Anne:** So I'm finding I'm more engaged in two of my courses than I am in one of my courses because of how they record that lecture.

> **Hanna:** So what the on-campus students are getting is that extra interaction with the information, whereas we get a little one-line sentence that might say, oh, if you want you can go get this DVD and watch it and then answer those questions.

Although there is a lot written about student learning styles, there is little evidence to support the contention that instruction is best provided in a format that matches the learner's preference (Cuevas, 2015; Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork, 2008). Despite this, learning preference is generally recognised as an essential factor in improving student learning (Alharbi, Almutairi, Alhelih, & Alshehry, 2017; Bhagat, Vyas, & Singh, 2015). Unfortunately, tailoring the presentation of content to the individual learning styles of a large group of students is problematic in many ways, including the development of multiple offerings of content. However, teaching practices can accommodate various students' learning styles and multiple intelligences (Alrabah, Wu, & Alotaibi, 2018; Newton & Miah, 2017). As the online environment has progressed, it has moved from the simple text format with occasional images to a format capable of capturing a broader selection of learning styles (Bizzell, 2015; Jose, Berry, & Andrews, 2019). For example, while the full potential is as yet unrealised, it is now possible to create digital learning environments such as augmented reality that provide autonomy and flexibility to self-directed students while having the ability to

detect and respond to student difficulties (Arguel, Lockyer, Lipp, Lodge, & Kennedy, 2017; Huang, Chen, & Hsu, 2019). As one participant noted:

> **Jane:** So often with online, you're reading the text. So we get all our slide shows and all our work, and if you're not able to grasp it, there's no class time to put your hand up and ask a question or to engage in someone else's question or to be able to catch the lecturer to sort of say can you point me in the right direction.

Even though there were difficulties associated with comprehending the content, there were particular strengths related to the online format that participants referred to in their comments, which outlined an overall picture of general satisfaction. This positive finding aligns those identified by Nguyen's (2015) review of online learning effectiveness. In particular, the participants perceived the flexibility to study "from anywhere and at any time" (Sadeghi, 2019, p. 83) provides a positive mechanism for revisiting content where there was an initial lack of comprehension.

> **Frank:** If I didn't quite understand something, I could sort of just rewind it and go through it again and then compare it. Then if I still didn't understand, I could just turn it off and go and do some research into the questions or perhaps dip into the tutorials rather than the lectures.

> **Emily:** Online especially, I like that I can access all that stuff when I feel like it, as opposed to having to be up and at eight o'clock in the morning on a Thursday or, you know, there's a particular meeting.

> **Kate:** I really like that I can do everything as it fits into my schedule

6.4.4 The Online Context

As discussed in Section 2.1 *Online Learning,* the online context raises several areas of concern regarding the facilitation of learning. For example, the negative impact on the educational experience from a failure to adapt teaching strategies and content (Fawns, Jones, & Aitken, 2020) or the institutional inability to identify students at risk of

disengagement in the online environment (Chipchase, et al., 2017). Within the participant's responses, several comments highlight the challenges faced in completing online study in the context of facilitating learning. For some participants, it presented as a lack of belief in their ability to adjust to the online environment or that the facilitation of learning would not be as complete. This lack of positive response to the prospect or experience of learning in the online context aligns with the findings identified by (Martin, 2020), who notes that despite an overall positive response to the transition to remote learning, a considerable proportion of survey respondents indicated that they did not like the online learning experience and did not ever wish to experience it again.

> **Anne:** And that anxiety of I feel I need to be in a classroom to learn, I need that focus.

> **Fiona:** But you get a lot of just innate learning from being physically in the classroom.

But it was evident that with time and experience, participants believed that initial concerns could be overcome, if not entirely, at least to the point where online study remained an option.

> **Carol:** I like to have a physical copy of whatever that reading was, but I'm adapting, so I can't really answer other than I'm comfortable with it, and it wouldn't hold me back and make me decide to go back to on campus.

> **Irene:** [I was] nervous because I had done it [online study] before, and I haven't kind of succeeded at it. But now I feel like as if I'm better equipped to do it. I have that confidence.

> **Anne:** But I think it's all about finding the routine [of studying online], and the anxiousness starts to disappear as you do find the routine.

Interestingly, a particular aspect that the participants felt was lost in the online context was the support derived from having a structured study timetable. Having set times for classes to commence and finish to some degree allowed participants to relinquish accountability for their time commitment. Attending a two-hour lecture and a tutorial fulfilled study expectations.

> **Brian:** [With a traditional] class you go, all right I've got to be in H102 at 9:00, and you know, that's a deadline … and it keeps you focused on that subject for a set period of time, normally two hours.

> **Lucy:** [Attending university on campus] would be easier in the sense that, you know, yeah, you literally go to the classroom, that's when you do your learning.

> **Anne:** Time wise, I think it's more structured for an on-campus student versus an online student.

This preference for a set structure contrasts with the generally positive perception of flexibility that online study provides. Of course, a set structure cannot guarantee to facilitate learning; for example, as highlighted by Anne, a set structure holds the potential for a student to disengage from the learning experience once they step out of the classroom setting.

> **Anne:** I think if I was an on-campus student, I'd probably just attend lectures and do what I need to do with and get in the car and go home.

These perspectives reflect Van Wart, et al.'s (2020) argument that students who simply need to enrol in a class may be willing to consider studying online and teach themselves a bit more. In contrast, students seeking a good class experience expect the responsiveness and immediacy of a highly present teacher more commonly associated with an in-class setting. Ultimately, the mixed perception held by the participants as to how well the online environment does or would facilitate their learning aligns with the mixed results within the research. For example, while research continues to show

that the online pedagogy may negatively affect student academic performance (Arias, Swinton, & Anderson, 2018; Bir, 2019; Hurlbut, 2018), other research indicates no significant difference in performance between the online and traditional classroom setting (Harwood, McDonald, Butler, Drago, & Schlumpf, 2018; Homes & Reid, 2017; Paul & Jefferson, 2019).

6.4.5 Theme Summary.

Although the participants generally held a positive perception of studying online, they expressed some concern regarding the effectiveness of the online format in facilitating their learning. Primary concerns involved the volume of content provided and the lecturers' expectation that students would know what to do with the content and how to fill in any gaps that existed. However, the biggest issue for participants was the quality of the lecture recordings, which were not only considered to be poor but were at times disengaging. Ultimately, as pointed out by Stone (2019), because students engage with various forms of digital platforms through social media and the commercial world, "they are quick to recognise poor digital design and equally quick to become disengaged by a poor online experience" (p. 9).

6.5 Theme 4: Engagement and Success

Descriptors: Academic, alcohol, avoidance, distraction, effort, health, recognition, implemented, strategies, study practices, underperforming, well-being.

Cole, Lennon and Weber (2019) contend that student engagement in online courses may be more ambiguous and complex to understand than in the in-class setting. This issue may in part be due to the individual but also the context of their learning environment which plays a significant role in student engagement in the university experience (Bowden, Tickle, & Naumann, 2019; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Kim, Hong, & Song, 2019). Research shows that student engagement constitutes a crucial precondition for optimal and deep-level learning (Cents-Boonstra, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, Denessen, Aelterman, & Haerens, 2020). A significant aspect of this optimisation is that engaged students are more likely to succeed academically (Boulton, Hughes, Kent, Smith, & Williams, 2019; Olivier, Galand, Hospel, &

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Dellisse, 2020). The relationship between engagement and success in the online context is also well established (De Villiers & Werner, 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Ribeiro, Rosário, Núnez, Gaeta, & Fuentes, 2019; Wara, Aloka, & Odongo, 2018).

In analysing the comments forming the theme *Engagement and Success,* it is evident that the participants' perceived engagement as a multidimensional concept, a perception also identified in the research literature (Alrashidi, Phan, & Ngu, 2016; Johnston, 2018; Korhonen, Mattsson, Inkinen, & Toom, 2019). Unfortunately, the disagreement regarding the number and forms of engagement dimensions (Bond, Buntins, Bedenlier, Zawacki-Richter, & Kerres, 2020) complicates discussing the participant's responses. However, by adopting Bowden, Tickle and Naumann's (2019) model of student engagement as a suitable framework, it was possible to discuss the participants' responses against the model's four pillars of engagement: behavioural, affective, cognitive and social engagement[48].

6.5.1 Behavioural Engagement.

There are several ways to consider what is meant by behavioural engagement (Mamun, Lawrie, & Wright, 2016; Lei, Cui, & Zhou, 2018). However, Fredericks, et al., (2016) suggest that it is the student's behaviour on a learning task and includes aspects such as compliance, persistence, effort and self-learning. These aspects were identifiable in the participants' responses.

> **Lucy:** But it's has been good, and as long as I can stay disciplined, it will be all right.

> **Hanna:** So there is more potential for an online student to disengage I guess, maybe get wrapped up in what you need to do at home as well. But not for me specifically because of my dogged determination to get it done, because I have to try and not get distracted by what's out there, and I've like really got to get stuck in and get it done.

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[48] It is noted that other models of engagement have been proposed, for example Lei, Cui and Zhou (2018) outline three dimensions: behavioural engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement, while Appleton, Christenson, Kim and Reschly (2006) relate four; academic, behavioural, cognitive and psychological

> **Gail:** So far, it's been good. It's definitely, definitely helped because I keep my mindset on what I want.

Of particular note is the emphasis on the student's participation levels in their learning, including their involvement in learning activities. This participation reflects a process of the students monitoring, controlling and evaluating their cognitive performance throughout the learning process, activities which indicate self-regulated learning (Li, Ye, Tang, Zhou, & Hu, 2018; Wandler & Imbriale, 2017). Online learning environments are highly autonomous (Wong, et al., 2018), empowering students to think about how they learn (Carter, Rice, Yang, & Jackson, 2020) and develop positive attitudes towards lifelong learning (Oates, 2019).

> **Adam:** I had a really good engagement with USQ [in the online environment]. And I'm actually looking forward to doing future online courses as well.
>
> **Fiona:** It's wonderful what is being done [over the internet], the opportunities that are being opened up.

> **Carol:** But I need to be doing this so I can get some satisfaction and do something with my writings really.

There is a mixed perception of how behavioural engagement relates to time on task. For example, the initial perception was one of a dichotomy of being either engaged or not engaged (Anderson, 1975). In contrast, over time there has been a growing tendency to think of the relationship as a continuum concerning the extent and quality of participation as measured by the student's effort, persistence, and active involvement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Kariippanon, Lancaster, Okely, & Parrish, 2019). In describing their engagement, participants used wording that identified both dichotomies and continuums.

> **Hanna:** I just gave up.

> **Jane:** There's no engagement.

Fiona: You feel more engaged when you get a live lecture.

Lucy: Just to be a little bit more engaged.

Participants' also referred to the fact that time on task did not necessarily equate to engagement or understanding, a point also recognised by Mohamadi (2017) and Spanjers, Burns and Wagner (2008). The online format and the requirement to self-regulate their learning presented additional difficulties with comprehension and engagement for the participants. To overcome these difficulties, participants resorted to allocating more time to study or identifying alternative resources. Alshahrani, Ahmed and Ward (2017) in discussing this approach suggest that as students have become more self-reliant their "use of online learning resources has created a gap in the student - lecturer expert relationship" (p. 102).

> **Emily:** I just allocate more time. So. I sit down and put aside a whole weekend to grill myself on it and just put it to bed. Sit there for hours and look over it, and it is okay if I don't get anywhere. But at this particular moment, I'm just flat out spending Saturday and Sunday glaring at it.

> **Jane:** If you're not self-motivated to go and find another way of having it explained to you, then it's going to be a very big struggle.

6.5.2 Affective Engagement.

The affective dimension of engagement relates to the summative and enduring levels of emotions experienced by students (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2016). Encompassed within affective engagement are positive feelings, attitudes or perceptions towards the institution, peer and lecturer relationships, and the study content (Nadeem, Mehmood, & Haider, 2016; Weber, Wagner, & Ruch, 2014). Typically, these feelings will take various forms, including delight, enthusiasm, inspiration, elation and curiosity. In describing their experiences, the participants outlined several very positive attitudes reflecting affective engagement with their study:

Irene: The fact that all the literature is available there right there from the first day of semester or the week before the first semester is huge, awesome.

Hanna: I still feel quite energized and excited.

Gail: I don't know, I quite like how it all is, and it is, I don't know how else to make it better, I would say.

The participants also displayed a strong positive connection between their employment and what and why they were studying. The benefit of this connection is discussed by Schelfhout, et al., (2019) who reiterates that students who choose a study program aligned with their vocational interests arguably have better study results and a better chance of finishing higher education in a timely fashion. The participants' connection also aligns with Knowles' (1970) theory of androgyny and the argument that adults will be motivated to learn as long as they perceive the learning is useful to them in their lives (Loeng, 2018; Palis & Quiros, 2014).

Lucy: I can also see where it [studying business] can take me further

Gail: So, I tried to complete all the readings, and I try and complete all the videos, especially, I don't know because I'm quite passionate about health being in a health environment already. So, I find it really interesting and I want to learn more about it. So, I feel I guess I'm in the right course because I'm actually interested in what I'm learning and wanting to learn more about it, so I engage in all the online activities.

This positive perception also translated to the lecturer and the online format, which is not surprising given that "online learning, by nature, changes the way teaching responsibilities are performed" (Baran, Correira, & Thompson, 2011, p. 426). Included within this changing of responsibilities is a requirement for lectures to create interactions with students and adopt immediacy behaviours which have proved identifiable with positive increases in student attitudes (Dhilla, 2017). The positive

perception was identifiable in the participants' responses which outlined feelings of enthusiasm and motivation.

> **Emily:** I'm not entirely sure how it might be part of what motivates me as well. You know that it could be part of what makes it exciting because I find studying exciting. I think it's cool and just awesome.

> **Hanna:** I mean, I feel I still feel quite energized and excited.

Participant's also referred to the fact that they were now academically and mentally better placed because of their experience. This perception is in line with the contention that mature-age students are often more intrinsically motivated towards their studies (Bye, Pushkar and Conway, 2007; Lin, 2020; Shillingford and Karlin, 2013).

> **Emily:** If it [studying] had been my main desire I could have always done it, I suppose, but it would be too much for me then, whereas now it's a pleasure.

> **Hanna:** But yeah, it's sort of, I mean I can probably launch into study and just throw 100 per cent into this and absolutely love it.

However, despite a continued increase in non-traditional students (Remenick, 2019), the reality is that these students can be a neglected or marginalised cohort (Chen, 2017; Mallman & Lee, 2016; Sims & Barrett, 2015). An example of this marginalisation is provided by Auguste, Wai-Ling Packard and Keep (2018) who contend that the research shows a tendency for non-traditional students to perceive the need to prove their abilities or worth to instructors because of the condescending or underestimating attitudes they experience. For mature-age students, this perception may, in part relate to their concerns that they were not a good student at school. This belief may result in the student being keen to ensure that they are more successful at university (McCann, King, & Luzeckyj, 2019). Consequently, students strive to be more academically enthusiastic. Mallman and Lee (2016) caution that academically enthusiastic mature-age students can encounter a paradox in that while they may exhibit ideal zeal for

learning, they may at the same time infringe on the expectations of the student culture[49]. Of course, not all participants felt so positive or motivated, and there were several areas concerning the content, the delivery or the format of the interaction that served to disengage students.

> **Lucy:** I find that YouTube actually teaches me, whereas I don't find the lectures are teaching me, they're just telling me essentially. I feel bad saying that, but it's generally how it goes with that.

> **Jane:** Whereas with chemistry, I just find it very overwhelming and I find there's no live lecture, so we just get recordings and the recordings are simply the slideshow with a voice. And I find it very hard to connect with, so I find myself avoiding those lectures over the other ones that have that live aspect.

6.5.3 Cognitive Engagement.

Cognitive engagement involves integrating and utilising a student's motivations and strategies (Barlow, et al., 2020; Sesmiyanti, 2018) and relates to the mental energy that students apply to the learning process to make meaning of the material presented to them (Casimiro, 2015). Cognitive engagement involves engagement in the learning process and the promotion of motivation or effort to learn, understand, and master the knowledge or skills embedded in their academic work (Cooper, 2014; Sesmiyanti, 2018). Because of its relationship with student achievement, cognitive engagement represents a critical component of the educational experience (Barlow, et al., 2020). Consequently, to ensure that a student is cognitively engaged, they must have the intellectual challenge to seek, interpret, analyse and summarise information through critique and reasoning (Zhu, 2006). In their responses, the participants made several references to their investment in engaging with the content.

> **Fiona:** I really enjoy some of the extra bits and pieces that get put up there because funnily enough, you look at one thing and then that will

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[49] As highlighted by Barclay (2018) mature-age students may feel frustrated with younger students because they may have less commitment, and this frustration can lead to conflict in collaborative groups

take you off down a path of learning and all of a sudden, you know, your five different talks, but they're all related and that just expands your learning experience. My personal choice is to read widely about the subject.

Irene: I've found that instead of just having a book or just having a lecture or whatever, having the whole mix of things, and then also the way that the literature is presented, that's what engages me.

For some participants, the desire to be cognitively engaged was clearly evident and actively sought because it was perceived as beneficial for their academic progress. This perception reflects the view of cognitive engagement as an important influence in a student's learning activity, and Casimiro's (2015) contention that of the engagement types, cognitive engagement is the closest to learning.

Gail: Where I look at it and go, this information is going to help me cope and deal with different situations in life. I guess it may be coming back to that where if I did it straight from school maybe I would have looked at it differently and been like, well, maybe all this information is not going to be relevant, I'll just skip past that and just move onto the next thing. Where for me now it's like no, all this information is given to me for a reason.

Where this desire is present, then there is a more significant opportunity for cognitive engagement to generate what Dole and Sinatra (1998) refer to as conceptual change. This change involves restructuring existing knowledge into a more in-depth understanding, or the generation of knowledge beyond that presented to them as part of the course (Barlow & Brown, 2020). However, to achieve this, there is a requirement for a strong learning community to foster active participation and support discourse, leading to knowledge construction among students (Casimiro, 2015). In the online context, cognitive engagement from discussions is dependent on the lecturers, the questions they ask and the roles they play (Zhu, 2006). Consequently, the quality

of student-teacher interaction is an important determinant of cognitive engagement (Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2014; Wang, Hofkens, & Ye, 2020).

> **Anne:** So that engagement between myself and the lecturer is really important because you then don't feel that you're on the outside and that you've been forgotten just because you're online. So, it's being able to have that extra support and speak to your fellow students and lecturers throughout the course.

Unfortunately, most participants described the existence of barriers to cognitive engagement, including the lecture format's limitations and the lack of interaction with the lecturers themselves and other students. The interaction between faculty and students is an essential component of the learning process because of its effect on the learning environment and academic outcomes (Akhtar, Hussain, Afzal, & Gilani, 2019). For example, a lack of interaction between lecturers and students can lead to a loss of student engagement, motivation, persistence and achievement (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Rivera Munoz, Baik, & Lodge, 2020; Roxa & Marquis, 2019; Yu, Huang, Han, He, & Li, 2020). While limited interaction was often just an inconvenience for the participants, the participants did perceive the lack of interaction negatively.

> **Lucy:** I'm not sure if it's just the courses that I'm doing at the moment, but a lot of it is literally you don't even see the lecturers in the lecture. It's pretty much just the lecture slides on the screen and then literally reading out what's on the lecture slide. There's no, I suppose, interaction with the lecturer or with anyone that's in the lecture, which I find hard.

> **Brian:** [the lack of interaction is] the main obstacle with online learning.

In part, this perception reflects Mayer's (2014) contention that the lack of attention paid to video lecture production negatively contributes to the way students perceive and cognitively process the information presented to them. It was evident that at times the participants did not comprehend the material presented to them and sought other avenues to obtain a sufficient understanding of the content or concept. From a positive

perspective, this approach reflects proactive, autonomous, self-regulated learners (Anthonysamy, Koo, & Hew, 2020; Harding, et al., 2019; Oates, 2019). However, the downside is that student use of online learning resources is already creating a gap in the student–lecturer expert relationship (Alshahrani, Ahmed, & Ward, 2017). Arguably, where a student has to use additional online resources to replace the lecturer's resources, the gap is widened.

> **Jane:** So yeah, in a way it disconnects you from your learning in the fact that you have to log on to the forum or log on and email your question, and I think it's just that lapse in time of feedback that perhaps your thoughts have shifted or you've gone off and found the answer yourself or whatever. But it does impact the connectivity of your learning, to a degree.

> **Lucy:** Not at all, they actually frustrate me. To be honest, I end up doing a YouTube video for 15 minutes and learn more in the YouTube video that I'm learning in the lecture slides at the moment, which I'm finding quite frustrating. Yeah, because literally it's just the lecturer reading what is on the screen.

Cognitive engagement represents the psychological investment students make towards learning (Barlow, et al., 2020) and is associated with academic achievement (Greene, 2015; Wara, Aloka, & Odongo, 2018). The existence of barriers to cognitive engagement can decrease understanding of the value and importance of academic work (Bowden, Tickle, & Naumann, 2019). However, students adopting a deep cognitive approach are more likely to be invested in their learning, hold a preference towards challenges, and a desire to go beyond the standard requirements (Redmond, Heffernan, Abawi, Brown, & Henderson, 2018; Sesmiyanti, 2018). Unfortunately, deep engagement is more likely to develop when student-teacher relationships are healthy. Without this relationship, engagement can be negatively affected (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Quin, 2017; Pedler, Yeigh, & Hudson, 2020). As highlighted by the research literature, interactions in the online environment are different from those in an in-class setting, with student-teacher relationships being less prominent (Kebritchi,

Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017; Nieuwoudt, 2018; Turley & Graham, 2019; Wang & Liu, 2019). Interaction with the lecturer was obviously an important aspect for the participants.

>**Lucy:** You know, it gets hard with things. It's difficult because I don't have that teacher interaction as such.

>**Diane:** If you're face to face, you can see how [the lecturer is] saying it, like their body language and all that sort of stuff.

>**Jane:** So, we don't get to engage in that live fluid conversation [online].

6.5.4 Social Engagement.

Bowden, Tickle and Naumann (2019) identify social engagement as reflecting "the bonds of identification and belongingness formed between students, staff and the broader tertiary experience" (p. 14). An essential component in this perspective is the relationship between social engagement, mutuality and reciprocity (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). A benefit of promoting values such as mutuality and reciprocity is student belongingness. Student belongingness describes a sense of fit or a feeling of acceptance (Bouchard & Berg, 2017) and supports relationships built on trust, confidence and empowerment (Bowden, Tickle, & Naumann, 2019). Conversely, a lack of belongingness can lead to feelings of anxiety, frustration, and boredom (Peacock, Cowan, Irvine, & Williams, 2020) and impact student psychological adjustment and the ability to cope with stress (Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2019). However, while belongingness is central in the social engagement precept, the research literature is mixed regarding the relationship between belonging, academic achievement and success. For example, Ahn and Davis (2019) indicate that a student's sense of belonging is strongly associated with academic achievement. Similarly, St-Amand, Girard and Smith (2017) report the sense of belonging as being of paramount importance for students' academic success and engagement. However, Korpershoek, Canrinus, Fokkens-Bruinsma and de Boer, (2020) only identify a small association between belonging and achievement.

Beyond its connection with belonging, social engagement can foster positive, proactive habits towards continuous learning, personal growth, and development, leading to increased educational and emotional commitment (Bowden, Tickle, & Naumann, 2019). Unfortunately, it was clear that the participants felt there were limited opportunities for social engagement in the online environment.

> **Fiona:** So, you have a cohort. You have others that are that are sharing your journey. So that just naturally fosters friendships, relationships, shared experiences, someone to talk to.

> **Brian:** I've been in touch with [an online social club], but … I haven't received a response from them yet about it. But you know I'm trying, but finding likeminded people is very difficult in today's university.

> **Anne:** I would probably say you'd be more engaged [with] on-campus content because you do have people to bounce a lot of ideas off there and then face to face, especially with tutorials and workshops.

Opportunities for social engagement are significant because through social engagement, students can create "purposeful relationships with others" (Redmond, Heffernan, Abawi, Brown, & Henderson, 2018, p. 191). However, to be effective, social engagement should be focused on the educational value of the interaction between the student, their peers and the lecturer rather than on how the student may feel about the course in general (Koranteng, Wiafe, & Kuada, 2019; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Nguyen, Cannata, & Miller, 2016). By maintaining this focus, the interaction obtained through social engagement can operate as one of the main drivers of student engagement in online courses (Leslie, 2019). The strength of the social connection is identifiable in the participants' responses, which clearly indicate a desire for contact with other students as part of the learning process.

> **Gail:** Yeah, because I like to get other people's input and I feel like if, you know, when you socialize and you get to meet with other people you can get their opinion on something … if we can interact with each other

and, you know, other people can come up with a conclusion of how this is a better way of doing something, and you go oh I didn't think of that.

Emily: But I like people, I like them up close, you know. I like individuals. I like the different perspectives that I get at a university when I'm discussing things with other students. And there are other reasons for being there and what they see that I don't because their purpose for being there is different from mine.

While there is undeniable value in students interacting with other students, the real value lies in interacting with the lecturer (Gray & Diloreto, 2016). This value is particularly beneficial for students enrolled in online learning (Nieuwoudt, 2018) and those in their first year of study (Rivera Munoz, Baik, & Lodge, 2020). However, to be effective, this interaction must be more than just a lecture. More importantly, it should preferably not be in the form of a recorded lecture where the student has no opportunity to be involved or contribute. Unfortunately, while there were positive comments concerning the presentation of content, overwhelming the participants' comments highlight the low quality of lectures and the limited value that the participants derived from those lectures.

Fiona: Again, possibly when there was less into less of that personal interaction. So, where the online lectures were not engaging. And so then you were left to try and, well, I felt left trying to learn everything from that particular course kind of semi on your own. And that I felt it was hard.

Lucy: I don't even really know who the lecturers are because I've never seen their face. I know their names, but that's about it.

Gail: They [lectures simply presented in PowerPoint] are tedious.

6.5.5 Support.

In addition to the commentary on engagement and its implications for success, the *Engagement and Success* theme also considers the participants' perceptions and requirements for academic support to ensure they are successful.

Effective student support services are a vital structure in enabling students to cope with the academic and personal pressures of distance education (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020) and progress to a timely graduation (Ballzer Carr & London, 2019). Simmons (2013) contends that the significance of student support is in enabling students to meet and cope with academic demands and expectations and to counter attrition. However, beyond this, support for the transition to tertiary studies, particularly for mature-aged students, is vital in ensuring overall success and satisfaction (Markova, Glazkova, & Zaborova, 2017; Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009). Unfortunately, a lack of support services in the online environment can pose a significant barrier to student wellbeing and academic progress because many online students "are not in the required geographical district needed to access these services, in person or via phone" (Roddy, et al., 2017, p. 7). The nature of support raised in the participants' responses reflects a broad range of areas, including academic proficiencies, coping skills, finance, health and well-being, and study resources.

> **Brian:** And I've absolutely been amazed at the support that USQ has for learning, for mental health, for financial support.

> **Carol:** So, I hooked up at the end of last year with an online mind course all about you and your coping skills.

However, even if students are aware of support services' function, they may not know where or how to obtain that assistance, and several participants mentioned concerns regarding difficulties in identifying university support information. However, for some students, the concern was not that they could not find the information, but it was confusing due to its volume and presentation.

Jane: I think the Uni offers a really good level of support. I think sometimes though, it's really hard to find it, and it's really hard to figure out who do I call? Who do I go to? What am I looking for? Which can put you off asking, especially as a mature student, because you don't want to be seen as technologically inept, and you don't want to be seen as annoying.

Frank: The only thing I do find is sometimes you've got to go backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards through to find different bits and pieces.

Hanna: But yeah, they've definitely got all the information there, they've got too much information, they've got information overload.

Students having difficulties identifying and accessing support services represent a genuine concern, particularly as learning support services can improve students' academic performance and retention and enhance learning (Ashford & Lawrence, 2006; Balzer Carr & London, 2017). However, there is a tendency for students and people, in general, to be reluctant to seek help for academic, physical or mental health issues because of fears of embarrassment or prejudice[50]. As reiterated by Bavel, et al., (2020) behaviour is influenced by social norms, such as what they perceive others are doing or what they believe others approve or disapprove of. Unfortunately, these perceptions are often inaccurate. To promote and increase help-seeking attitudes towards support, there needs to be a change in perceptions. Regrettably, changing such perceptions has proved difficult. As stated by Goodman (2017) "in order for students to receive supportive services, they must first recognize their own need for services" (p. 33). However, not all participants appeared ready to overcome their reluctance to seek help, even though they were aware of their reluctance.

Emily: I'm probably less inclined to reach out [to seek support] through a fear of being considered annoying or old.

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[50] See for example Fossey, et al., (2015); Jaffe, Organ and Bender (2015); Mehta and Edwards (2018); Salaheddin and Mason (2016); Simpson and Ferguson (2014).

> **Frank:** You know, the very last thing I always do is give up and have to go and ask somebody.

In addition to student-related factors such as age and gender, whether a student seeks help or not can also be affected by system-related factors. Aleven, et al., (2003) identify system-related factors such as course goals or the nature of the feedback provided to students as attributes of the help-seeking environment. As discussed by Al-Bashir, Kabir and Rahman (2016), the provision of feedback represents an essential skill for lecturers in higher education and has proved to significantly influence the quality of the students' learning process (Floden, 2016). Unfortunately, effective feedback is complex and unlikely to be achieved successfully if considered merely in the context of how to deliver the feedback comments (Henderson, et al., 2019). Importantly lecturers need to help students understand and use the feedback constructively (Winstone, Nash, Rowntree, & Parker, 2017). The provision of feedback was raised by several of the participants.

> **Irene:** She's [a lecturer] very responsive to forums. I haven't had to ask any questions directly outside of the forums. But yeah, I find her, like what she's been doing on the forums, very insightful. She's responsive to when you put up a post or whatever and kind of critiquing or giving you some feedback on the class activities. So that's been good.

> **Hanna:** And yeah, the lecturers were really responsive and giving really positive feedback.

> **Gail:** Getting feedback from how you've done it and then going, no, you need to do this is sometimes, I guess, more helpful than actually looking at something and going that's how you do it.

Even though there were instances outlining difficulties in identifying support services, many participants reported using various support services.

> **Emily:** I mean, I live near the Uni so I also use the campus for things like printing and for the library and for all the other student counsellors and doctors and whatever else, that I could see me being quite happy just settling online.

> **Brian:** I've actually got a good relationship with one of the health and wellness advisors on Toowoomba campus … And I've considered in the next couple of weeks that I'm going to go and see one of the wellness advisors just to talk through things, just to offload, I guess you'd say.

Encouragingly, several responses indicated that even though they had not had to call on support services, the participants were aware that the services were available, providing them with a level of comfort. This level of awareness reflects positively on the extent of promotional efforts regarding support services in academic and non-academic areas within universities (Arnold, 2018; Balzer Carr & London, 2017; Papadatou-Pastou, Goozee, Payne, Barrable, & Tzotzoli, 2017).

> **Kate:** I know they offer counselling. I've never tried to access it or whatever, but that's kind of comforting to know that they have it as an option.
> **Lucy:** I know they do offer a lot of support services like counselling and career advisement and helping with essays and whatnot.

6.5.6 Theme Summary.

The participants generally expressed satisfaction with the level of engagement in their studies. However, the participants were dissatisfied with the quality of the lectures, which were frequently poorly made and failed to hold student interest. In response to the poor quality, students resorted to identifying alternative resources such as YouTube. However, the participants did report a positive perception of the level of support provided by the university. Although there was some difficulty identifying the support, the responses indicated a reasonably high level of awareness of the support available and a willingness to access that support.

6.6 Theme 5: The Value of Discourse

Descriptors: Availability, communication, contact, faculty, forums, interaction, lecturers, peers, university and volume.

Banna, Lin, Stewart and Fialkowski (2015) argue that although content has traditionally been the main focus of online courses, interaction now plays a crucial role in stimulating learning. Interaction is also a factor that significantly affects success in online courses (Bettinger, Liu, & Loeb, 2016) and encourages higher course engagement (Dixson, 2010; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Unfortunately, the lack of sufficient interaction between students and faculty is potentially "online education's Achilles' heel" (Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019, p. 5). The lack of online interaction was the aspect raised most by the participants, who perceived that the lack of interaction with other students and the lecturer negatively affected their level of academic engagement and content comprehension. This perception is in line with Jaggars' (2014) findings that most students believed that they did not learn the course material as well when they studied online due to reduced lecturer explanation and weaker interaction with other students and the lecturer. The limited interaction is one of the unfortunate "sacrifices online learners make when it comes to an engaging educational experience" (Dumford & Miller, 2018, p. 462)

> **Fiona:** And that was the one that my written results were not good
> because again, you weren't getting the input from the actual lecturer.

However, not all participants felt that there was an issue with the interaction with the lecturer.

> **Irene:** I feel like as if for the unit that I'm doing, because this is my first
> one, I couldn't ask for better guidance. I feel like as if it's very clear what
> I have to do, and that's been that's the best thing.

One reason for this lack of learning clarity relates to Turley and Graham's (2019) contention that student interactions in the online environment are much different from those in face-to-face courses. In part, this difference is due to the traditional classroom

verbal and nonverbal communication being able to close the psychological distance between the teacher and student. Non-verbal communication is not only highly reliable in the communication process, but more attention is given to non-verbal over verbal messages because non-verbal cues frequently reveal the sender's emotional reactions and general intention of the information (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017). The importance of nonverbal communication in interpersonal interaction is heightened in online learning (Wang & Antonenko, 2017). However, even though the significance of interaction in online courses has long been acknowledged in the literature (Huss, Sela, & Eastep, 2015) the transition to an online format from the traditional in-class format challenges the expectations and roles of both instructors and learners (Redmond, 2011). Unfortunately, making this transition can compromise teacher presence, particularly given the lack of body language in the online environment (Alawamleh, Al-Twait, & Al-Saht, 2020).

6.6.1 Teacher Presence.

Facilitating online delivery requires the lecturer to take on multiple roles and responsibilities, including promoting and moderating discussions, responding to the class and individual students, monitoring learning, and providing support. (Martin, Budhrani, Kumar, & Ritzhaupt, 2019; Roddy, et al., 2017). These aspects are not new, being closely aligned with the role outlined for online instructors by Rohfeld and Hiemstra (1995). However, the importance of such roles makes them integral components of a successful online course because of the impact that a lecturer's presence and immediacy can have on student satisfaction and learning. As noted by Dixon (2010), the lecturer needs to be actively involved in student learning and must instigate activities that transform "virtual interaction into an impression of a 'real' person" (p. 2).

This aspect was summed up by Martin and Bolliger (2018) who suggest that online students want to know that someone is on the other end paying attention and are there to support, listen to and communicate with them. By having a good working relationship with their students, teachers and lecturers can inadvertently reduce student anxieties about workload "which then leads to higher student engagement in academic activities" (2018, p. 601). As highlighted by the following two participant quotes,

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while there were positive perceptions of the lecturer being an active presence, this was not always the case.

> **Irene:** So, it's got to do with the teacher and the unit that I'm doing right now, she's very engaging. She's very like direct, you know exactly what you need to do and everything.

> **Fiona:** That when there wasn't any personal interaction with the lecturer, that was really, really hard. And to this day, I don't think I know what that the lecturer of that particular course looks like.

Making yourself known to the students can be considered an essential part of the lecturer's role, particularly in the online environment where teacher presence plays a significant role (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020; Redmond, 2011; Stone & Springer, 2019). However, it is easy to see that 'presence' may not occur to the extent that it should, given the responsibilities that lecturer's take on regarding the student learning within the module space (Coker, 2018). Unfortunately, there may be a loss of face-to-face social cues and signals (Al Tawil, 2019; Dixson, Greenwell, Rogers-Stacey, Weister, & Lauer, 2017) in facilitating student learning from the different physical and temporal space of the online environment (Coker, 2018). This loss can be a significant challenge for the online lecturer and the students who may find it hard to get a sense of the instructor's personality and teaching style through online communication (Dickenson, 2017). However, the cues and signals are still present in the online environment; they are just different (Blackmon, 2012). Indeed, with the communication technologies available for use in the online environment, nonverbal communications can be transmitted, received, and interpreted (Al Tawil, 2019). Unfortunately, students have not overcome the perception that online study lacks in this area of communication.

> **Diane:** I would say that definitely easier to engage in face to face because if you're an online student, the only way to engagement is either through emails or through group messaging sites, so you have to wait for

them to see it, respond, and then messages can be misconstrued or not understood through the text, like through an email.

Emily: But it did take a lot of communicating, and I found that difficult online.

As outlined by Richardson, et al., (2016), the unique features of online environments have led to the change and expansion of both the instructor's and the student's role. Whereas the student's role has often been one of a passive learner, students are now required to be more active learners, and by extension, the lecturer has become a facilitator (Liu, Bonk, Magjuka, Lee, & Su, 2019; Martin, Wang, & Sadaf, 2020; Zulfikar, et al., 2019). As with most change, there can be challenges, and the move from face-to-face to online can be quite confronting (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020; Redmond, 2011). A significant aspect of the transition for lecturers has been the development of different online teaching competencies to enhance the inclusion of experiences to challenge the student's higher-order cognitive skills as opposed to merely transferring content to them (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012; Roddy, et al., 2017). Unfortunately, university teachers do not appear to be well-equipped to respond to the pedagogical and technological challenges of online learning (Ammenwerth, 2017). Consequently, lecturers have had difficulties successfully transitioning to the online environment (Cochran & Benuto, 2016; Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017; Lichoro, 2015) which has impacted student engagement (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). As one participant noted, when asked if she perceived any difference in how lecturers approached the presentation of content:

Jane: But there is a difference. You can feel the difference because there's no engagement process happening for anybody. She sits in the room recording herself, speaking to us,

Of course, in some instances, instructors may have to teach with predefined content, and in these instances, lecturers face the issue of lack of empowerment (Evrim, Correia, & Thompson, 2011). However, even in these instances, the lecturer should

still finesse the content into a format that challenges and engages the student. This concept is not a recent development as indicated by Reid's (1948) call for teachers to improve subject matter presentation by questioning the reliance on traditional lectures. The transition also challenges lecturers in the online environment because of the increased need to be more aware of student participation and progress. In the in-class setting, lecturers can take cues from students' verbal and non-verbal interactions in the classroom (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017). Unfortunately, the usual conversations and behavioural cues are restricted in the online class (Coker, 2018; Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020) because of the limited opportunities to see or even hear their students. As pointed out by Brian, there is a barrier of distance that impacts interaction.

> **Brian:** I find that a lecture is a lecture. I mean by that the fact that the lecturer is not getting feedback from the students; do they understand what's important?

> **Fiona:** there wasn't any personal interaction with the lecturer. That was really, really hard.

Because of this distancing, there is a reliance on the lecturer to enact what Coker (2018) describes as a qualitatively different approach to online facilitation. As part of this new approach, the relationship between lecturer and students becomes more interactive and collaborative (Alshahrani, Ahmed, & Ward, 2017; Saqr, Fors, & Tedre, 2018). This new relationship includes responsibility for lecturers to be more actively involved in what is happening with their online students, particularly as students frequently feel ill-at-ease seeking help and may choose to remain uniformed and simply struggle on instead.

> **Emily:** I'm not very good at asking for help in the first place.

> **Diane:** Like you feel like it's a bit uncomfortable actually, because you're just e-mailing a stranger.

As Cheng, Liang and Tsai (2013) state it is an unfortunate reality that students who need the most help can often be the ones to seek assistance the least. Given that the online environment may present a barrier to some students, it may be necessary for the lecturer to reach out to students and offer the needed assistance (Wandler & Imbriale, 2017) and to foster the use of help-seeking strategies (Sun, Xie, & Anderman, 2018).

6.6.2 Student to Student Interaction.

Not all interaction activities promote participation and performance (Song, Rice, & Oh, 2019), and the amount or frequency of online interaction is not a guarantee of engagement or academic success (Nieuwoudt, 2018). However, the general perception is that student to student interaction is important in distance learning (More, Warner, & Jones, 2016) because it represents a meaningful dialogue among learners (Hurst, Wallace, & Nixon, 2013; Fawns, Aitken, & Jones, 2019). The interaction also represents a vital aspect of participation in a successful learning process (Lee, Lee, Liu, & Bonk, 2009; Song, Rice, & Oh, 2019). To achieve an appropriate level of interaction, lecturers regularly design discussion prompts or build collaborative group activities into the course structure (Dixson, 2010; Ehrlich, Ergulec, Zydeny, & Angelone, 2013; Le, Janssen, & Wubbels, 2017). The focus on the effectiveness of student-student interaction is not without foundation. For example, discussion forums constitute a valuable feature for building community among online students (De Lima, Gerosa, Conte, & Netto, 2019; Lee, 2007), and a fundamental way of promoting learning in online education (Mtshali, Maistry, & Govender, 2020; Xia, Fielder, & Siragusa, 2013). However, while there is a recognised connection between classroom interaction and learning (Hurst, Wallace, & Nixon, 2013; Virtanen, Vaaland, & Ertesvag, 2019), there is a perception that the online environment lacks the richness and vitality of traditional classroom interactions (Downing, Lam, Kwong, Downing, & Chan, 2007; Roddy, et al., 2017). This argument was identifiable in the participants' responses.

> **Jane:** So, there is no, for me personally, there's no connection with my
> peers. There's no study group that I can access.

> **Emily:** When you're in-class right, you're there and you definitely attended to and you've got these other people with all their energy or whatever, you know, just helping with that even if it is a chore to get up and go. But online, I think … it can be just plod, plod, plod when you're on your own.

Unfortunately, while today's students have taken to social networking like fish to water, there appears to be far less uptake of academic or social interaction taking place (Hurst, Wallace, & Nixon, 2013). This situation has not improved with the onset of Covid-19 (Elmer, Mepham, & Stadtfeld, 2020). However, a lack of social interaction is not necessarily a sign of significant failure within the system. Many students simply prefer not to be active in this way; a point often expressed on t-shirts as "I am not antisocial, I'm selectively social". Indeed many learners gravitate toward online environments because it provides them with the perceived benefits of virtual anonymity (Bawa, 2016; Odo, Pace, & Albers, 2017). Consequently, there is a sense that students who study online face a greater risk of isolation (Ali & Smith, 2015; Danver, 2017). In part, this relates to the different perspectives and preferences that students hold towards online interactions, for example, as one participant noted.

> **Frank:** Now, I must admit, I have not really used the forums. I suppose I haven't had the need to yet. There's no particular good reason why I haven't used them much, just I guess I tend to like doing things on my own.

This limited interest in forums can be significant in that forums represent a primary avenue for interaction; promoting numerous benefits including dialogue and reflection (Seethamraju, 2014), social capital and offline engagement (Pendry & Salvatore, 2015), and knowledge construction (Redmond, Devine, & Basson, 2014). However, not all participants enjoy posting comments, limiting contributions and participation (Humber, 2018). There is often uneven participation for those who contribute, with some students contributing more posts than others (De Lima, Gerosa, Conte, & Netto, 2019; Kang & Zhang, 2020).

> **Diane:** So, I wasn't part of my marking. I probably would just leave
> them, leave the forum postings and just do my own thing.

> **Jane:** We have the forums, but they're not used.

The reluctance to contribute to online discussion forums is significant because for forums to function effectively and support learning, there is a need for balance, active and regular member participation (Aloni & Harrington, 2018; Dommett, 2019). Without appropriate participation, forums may simply function as a storage space for electronic reflection papers and the instructor's feedback, rather than for the exchange of ideas and opinions (Zhu, 2006) or appropriate cognitive engagement (De Lima, Gerosa, Conte, & Netto, 2019). However, over-posting to forums can also be a problem, particularly with the workload associated with the length and the number of online posts (Edeh, Edeh, Alhuseen, Noorulhasan Naveed, & Sumaya, 2019; Seethamraju, 2014), and whether the forum posts were actually being read and understood (Ebrahimi, Faghih, & Dabir-Moghaddam, 2017; Peddibhotla & Jani, 2019).

> **Lucy:** I find it really hard to find what you're looking for in the forums
> because there's just so many things being posted again and again …
> there's been just that much going on again that to find what you need
> takes you 20 minutes just to find it, which is sort of a waste of time.

While several comments reflected a more pessimistic view of a forum's value, overall, the participants perceived the interaction available within forums as beneficial. This positive perspective reflects Martín-Monje, Read and Barcena's (2017) recognition of the importance of intercommunication as part of the learning process, and aligns with the view that participation and interaction in discussion forums enhance engagement and supports the development of knowledge and understanding (Dommett, 2019; Galikyan & Admiraal, 2019).

> **Diane:** So, I don't know if I'd be able to pass these particular subjects if I
> didn't have that forum ability.

> **Emily:** If I'm not communicating and reading the forums and just checking out other people's questions and stuff, then I think I would get lost.

Consequently, although there is a positive perception of the value of online interaction, students do not always appreciate the usefulness of discussion board students, and they can have negative attitudes toward discussion boards (Clinton & Kelly, 2019).

> **Diane:** I've had to comment on a couple of people's posts as part of my marking. But I mean, if I didn't have to do that, I wouldn't really go out of my way and search for all of their forum postings and then see which one I want to write on. So, if it wasn't part of my marking. I probably would just leave them, leave the forum postings and just do my own thing and go along with the study schedule.

> **Jane:** But you wouldn't know that there's one hundred and twenty people in our course because the forums aren't active.

Where such attitudes exist, merely offering an online discussion forum is not enough to improve learning outcomes, support enhanced cognitive presence, or ensure participation (Moore, Oliver, & Wang, 2019; Parks-Stamm, Zafonte, & Palenque, 2017). Fortunately, discussions can be optimized by using strategies and improvements such as credit points for useful posts, posing open questions and defining sub-forums for various purposes (De Lima, Gerosa, Conte, & Netto, 2019). Another typical response towards increasing participation is for lecturers to make various forms of online discussion mandatory or a mechanism for assessment (Delaney, Kummer, & Singh, 2018; Klisc, McGill, & Hobbs, 2017). However, it is noted that some students take a pragmatic approach to mandatory participation and only participate in meeting the minimum requirements (Cho & Tobias, 2016; Downing, Lam, Kwong, Downing, & Chan, 2007). Only Diane referred to having to complete forum activities concerning assessment tasks.

> **Diane:** Because a couple of forums from week two to six make part of

your marks, and if I didn't do that, then I would lose marking.

In addition to assessment tasks, a few participants reported using academic and social interaction avenues to seek help from other students. Abdous, He and Yen (2012) suggest that for many students, communicating with another student regarding technical or academic difficulties in a course is easier than raising such concerns with a faculty member.

> **Hanna:** But if I do have questions, I just posted on the forums to say, hey, is anyone else feeling a bit overwhelmed with this, or what do you guys think about that?

> **Kate:** And also reaching out to other students, like in the, you know, the forums or we have like a WhatsApp chat group thing.

However, participants also identified that in seeking assistance, they would prefer to informally contact someone they know, such as a friend doing the same course or a non-cohort contact such as a family member. This tendency of only calling on lecturers as a 'last resort' is at odds with the view of the lecturer as a source of support (Crawford & Johns, 2018) and a key player in helping students throughout the learning process (Molina, Perera Rodríguez, Melero Aguilar, Cotán Fernández, & Morina, 2016)[51].

> **Lucy:** So generally, if I have a question, I will ask her [friend doing the same course] first to see if she understands this or not. And then, depending on her, we will then work out what we need to do, whether we ask someone else or she's got a couple of friends that have done the course before, so she tends to ask her friends first before we will post anywhere.

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[51] It is of course recognised that while teaching staff are expected to take an interest in their students' learning and to provide associated 'pastoral care', it is generally not their role to counsel distressed students or support students to manage emotional or psychological difficulties (Baik, et al., 2017).

> **Frank:** As far as the coping I'm reasonably lucky at home because I've
> got a twenty-five year old still at home who'll sometimes say, well have
> you looked here, have you looked there?

The lack of "opportunities for discussions with diverse others" (Dumford & Miller, 2018, p. 461) in online courses makes interaction and building relationships with other online students challenging. There is, of course, access to discussion boards and forums; however, these arrangements are not without their challenges (De Lima, Gerosa, Conte, & Netto, 2019), and it is questionable whether they constitute authentic interactions (Davis, Gough, & Taylor, 2019). In addition to academic interaction, mature-age students also show concern for sociality in the student community (Mallman & Lee, 2017). Consequently, as part of the student's desire for social interaction, they may seek to develop friendships from the informal relationships between students (Stadtfeld, Voros, Elmer, Boda, & Raabe, 2019).

According to Picton, Kahu and Nelson (2017), friends play multiple roles in how academic life is experienced, ranging from providing simple company to instilling a sense of belonging. The importance of friendship relationships is outlined by Thomas, Orme and Kerrigan (2020) who note that the failure to form friendship bonds has negative consequences for both the students' mental health and their academic success. Given the importance of friendships in the academic setting, it was interesting to note that only one participant reported a desire to establish social interactions at university that went beyond mere study colleagues to actual friendships.

> **Brian:** I know in nursing, one of the classes has what they call the tea
> and coffee club you know, because of remote students where they can
> just get on talk about anything and form some sort of relationships, yeah
> friendships through that.

Unfortunately, Brian has so far been unable to make such friendships, which he, in part, appears to identify with his mature-age status. As highlighted by the following quote Brian now holds a negative perspective which has impacted his self-confidence.

Brian: Even though there's a lot of mature students, and I've seen some there that are a lot older than me. But it's sort of, I guess, trying to find the right fit or that, you know. Like if I go to the refectory, I'll go and sit by myself. I am a very social person, so I can actually go and talk to people. But it's still not, you know, is still sort of you know, it might be a personal thing, but I feel like a bit of a creep. You know, if I go up and there's a table full of nursing girls [Brian is a nursing student], and I go up there and start talking, I have this social stigma like, oh, here some old predator trying, you know, interact with us. It's more up here [head] is the thing I've got to overcome.

6.6.3 Self-Confidence and Self Esteem.

Artherton (2017) maintains that an essential aspect of encouraging diversity at university is to ensure that students have the skills and confidence to succeed in their academic pursuit. Because of their diverse background, mature-age students commencing study for the first time may bring negative experiences that have positive and negative connotations for academic success. Included within these experiences are the student's self-confidence and self-esteem. While these terms are interchangeable, self-confidence is the confidence that a person has in a particular area of their life, such as performing or completing something successfully. Self-esteem is how a person regards themselves and is closely related to their personal beliefs about skills, abilities, and social relationships (Abdel-Khalek, 2016). Both self-confidence and self-esteem have links to academic performance and success (Edgar, Carr, Connaughton, & Celenza, 2019; McCabe, Gilmartin, & Goldsamt, 2016; Moyano, Quílez-Robres, & Cortés Pascual, 2020; Stankov, 2013). However, the way students feel about their abilities is not solely determined by their abilities, as evidenced by the fact that students of equal abilities in different settings can have different academic self-concept levels (Pulford, Woodward, & Taylor, 2018).

Academic self-confidence is a salient factor in enhanced academic performance (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013). Teachers who move beyond teaching merely for the mastery of curriculum content can assist learners in recognising opportunities for academic success, the promotion of positive self-belief and a healthy self-concept

(Maclellan, 2013). Akin and Radford (2018) echo this point, noting that educators play a significant role in creating positive learning environments. These environments build and support student self-esteem and resilience and contribute to the student's overall positive mental health, academic and social success. An essential factor in achieving a positive learning environment is understanding the nature and impact of low self-esteem on students and their academic competence. At times to help students improve their self-esteem, a teacher may even take on a counsellor's role (Bruno & Njoku, 2014).

Ichsan, Adawiyah and Wilujeng (2020) highlight the value of the quality of communication between the teacher, acting as a teacher or a counsellor, and the student. However, communication between the students themselves also plays a significant role, particularly as a student's ability to communicate serves to increase, develop and foster self-esteem and self-confidence (Anggeraini & Farozin, 2019). Similarly, as student self-esteem increases, communication skills increase (Gurdogan & Uslusoy, 2016). However, low self-esteem negatively affects communication in that it can increase the fear of interaction with others (McCroskey, Richmond, Daly, & Falcione, 1977). Sadly, not everyone can communicate well, and some students are hesitant or embarrassed about expressing their ideas or opinions (Oktary, Marjohan, & Syahniar, 2019). This hesitancy can hold them back in their studies.

As mature-age students, the participants' had life experiences to draw on that gave them a level of self-confidence which eased the transition into study. However, for a mature-age student, commencing study remains a daunting task. And although they may have wanted the opportunity to return to education for a long time and may have overcome several challenges to get to this point, the participants felt anxious, particularly regarding their academic capability.

> **Anne:** It's daunting for me. I haven't studied like really full time since I
> left high school back in 2002, so it is a little bit daunting.

> **Hanna:** I don't know how I'll go on the exams, because I just don't know
> that my ability to retain the information [will be good enough].

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The emotional impacts of starting at university are mixed and powerful (Edgar, Carr, Connaughton, & Celenza, 2019; Topham, 2015). For many mature-age students, the journey to enrolment is a roller coaster ride of emotions such as optimism, pessimism, guilt and elation (Baptista, 2014; Christie, Tett, Cree, Housell, & McCune, 2008; Henritius, Lofstrom, & Hannula, 2018). For the participants, these feelings appear to derive from a perception of the potential impact that committing to study will have on their family situation and them as a person.

> **Lucy:** Yeah, it's been a massive, I suppose, like hardship for our family to you know, understand that I have to set aside time now to study and it's taken, I suppose quite a toll on the family in terms of, you know, especially the first few months were very, very difficult. But I think we've mostly talked that through now, and we're sort of starting to get into a bit more of a routine and a rhythm, and they're starting to understand why I'm doing this.

Because of the consequential impacts, mature-age students take their decision to return to study very seriously (Stone & O'Shea, 2019a). As part of their justification process, students will hold high expectations for their performance. Where those expectations are too high or prove to be unrealistic, then their motivation and progress may be impeded (Hall & Sverdlik, 2016; Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Stankov, Morony, & Lee, 2014). It is also possible for the student's confidence to be entirely eroded, leading to further frustration and anguish.

> **Frank:** And as much as yes, I knew what I was going to have to do, I suppose the reality of having to do it was a bit more difficult than I anticipated.

Anxiety adversely affects learning and achievement because anxiety in the educational environment tends to be context-specific (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019). For example, the anxiety may relate to the context of completing academic assessments or the student's lack of technology recency (Saadé, Kira, Mak, & Nebebe, 2017). Completing study in the online context simply adds more anxiety to the mix, particularly given the

logistical obstacles students can face in an online environment (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Gillett-Swan, 2017).

> **Kate:** You have to be sure that you're in a space that's, you know, that I have everything technologically connected correctly and everything like that. Yes, so that's been anxious, you know, that's been causing me a bit of anxiety.

The online format also impacted participant self-confidence in that studying in isolation was something different from what they had undertaken during their compulsory schooling years. For some participants, there was a longing for the default familiarity and safety of the in-class format. In particular, participants' commented on the lack of direct interaction with other students, which is a common factor in students feeling isolated (Ali & Smith, 2015; Elmer, Mepham, & Stadtfeld, 2020).

> **Fiona:** You have a set time to be there, and you're part of a group that are going through it together. So, you have a cohort. You have others that are that are sharing your journey. So that just naturally fosters friendships, relationships, shared experiences, someone to talk to. So, without a doubt, I think being present in the learning classroom environment is a better way or an easier way, possibly.

Hinsley, Sutherland and Johnston (2017) reiterate that while self-esteem and question-asking have a complicated relationship, both are connected by a desire for self-preservation or anonymity. Frequently this self-preservation may relate to a lack of confidence in the students' ability to pose an appropriate question for fear of being humiliated (Nuri & Marsigit, 2019), or simply a desire to maintain anonymity (Tan, Small, & Lewis, 2020). As pointed out by Mupinga, Nora and Yaw (2006) the reality is that some students simply need time to "marinate their ideas" (p.188), rather than present them in an impromptu fashion during class. The participants expressed this reluctance and made particular reference to their fears that their questions would be considered silly or stupid.

Lucy: I'm supposed to email them, but I feel that's just a bit awkward, I don't really want to have to email a lecturer a stupid question. So, I'd prefer to just YouTube it and find out the answer like that.

Emily: I think maybe that question's a bit silly, maybe I don't really need to do that, or perhaps you've been asked this a dozen times, and they're sick of it. So I have second thoughts about asking questions initially anyway, in an online course.

A student's motivation to contribute and succeed in their studies is influenced by internal and external factors, some of which are motivational drivers while others are motivational barriers (Gonzalez, Arteaga, Ramirez, & Rincon, 2020; Mahmoudi, 2015). For example, Burrow (2018) maintains that a reluctance to participate in learning activities may be a conditioned passivity derived from the student's prior educational experience. However, while a student may initially have lacked the confidence or desire to engage in activities openly, overcoming this feeling is often not difficult once they are confident and familiar with the study routine. (Baik, et al., 2017; Sierra-Díaz, González-Víllora, Pastor-Vicedo, & López-Sánchez, 2019).

Carol: I think I'm comfortable with it now that it's a couple of months into this semester. There are no limits to what I would request online now. No one that I'm too afraid to contact anymore. I tend to sit back less now, and I can have my views recognized as well as all the other students. So, I don't feel that there's any block to being an online student now.

6.6.4 Theme Summary.

The participants' value interaction with other students and the lecturer as this interaction not only assists them with their study, but it engenders a sense of belonging in the learning community. However, opportunities and mechanisms to meaningfully interact are limited, and for some participants, the challenge of little interaction was a source of frustration. Participants clearly strategized their time, prioritising activities such as lectures and forums that they will participate in based on their perception of

what is essential and necessary. While participants may enter study with a somewhat anxious and pessimistic approach, this generally eases over a relatively short time when they begin to benefit from their mature-age experience and outlook.

6.7 Member Feedback

As outlined in Chapter 4, this study's methodology included obtaining member feedback from the participants. The purpose of this feedback was not to capture the participants' input on the identification of the themes, but to highlight any theme not resonating with the participants as a clear descriptor of their experience of the phenomenon. All fourteen[52] participants were contacted by email and asked to provide feedback by completing a Likert scale for each theme and a short written response to the following two questions about their online studies that semester.

- What was the one thing about online learning this semester that didn't work well for you?
- Did you make any change to how you expected to cope with your online studies this semester?

Eight of the fourteen participants responded to the request for feedback. This return rate was considered reasonable given that response rates to member checks are frequently very low (Thomas, 2017). Unfortunately, one of the eight responding participants, Irene, advised that due to the impact of Covid-19, she had to withdraw from all units for that semester. Consequently, Irene was unable to contribute to the member feedback.

6.7.1 Likert Feedback

Receiving only seven responses meant that a detailed analysis of the results was not possible. However, as outlined in Table 6.2, the data identified that the participants considered all themes relevant to their perception of the phenomenon, with none of the five themes reported as significantly less appropriate than any other theme. As discussed in Chapter 4, the Likert scale was based on a range from 'very important' through to 'not important' with the midpoint being 'moderately important'. For

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[52] The pilot participant was not contacted as her responses were not used in the data analysis.

analysis purposes, this descriptive scale was replaced by a numeric scale, with the number 1 representing not important and the number 5 representing very important. Given the participants' responses, the five themes identified reflect an appropriate description of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon.

Table 6.2.

Participant Likert Ratings for Themes

Theme Rating					
Participant	**Theme 1** The Individual's Characteristics	**Theme 2** Accommodating External Factor	**Theme 3** Facilitating Learning	**Theme 4** Engagement and Success	**Theme 5** The Value of Discourse
Adam	5	4	5	3	4
Anne	4	4	5	5	5
Emily	4	5	4	4	4
Fiona	4	5	4	5	3
Hanna	4	5	5	5	5
Jane	4	5	5	5	5
Lucy	5	5	5	4	5
Total rating (out of 35)	**30**	**33**	**33**	**31**	**31**

6.7.2 Written Feedback

Although the interview data collection process for this study was in its final stage when issues with Covid-19 began to emerge, Covid-19 did have an extremely significant impact on the participants in this study over their semester. In reviewing the participants' written feedback, it was clear that the focus of the comments was on the adjustments necessitated by Covid-19 to the exclusion or reprioritizing of many other considerations. Consequently, even though this study did not seek data concerning the impact of Covid-19, it became unavoidable as the majority of comments related to Covid-19. Therefore, in addressing the written feedback, the discussion is presented in two parts; impacts from Covid-19 and responses to the feedback questions.

1. Impacts from Covid-19.

One of the eligibility criteria for participation in this study was the current enrolment in an online unit or units. However, the criterion did not preclude participants who were undertaking a mix of online and in-class study units. Unfortunately for these students, Covid-19 meant the amendment of their enrolment to entirely online, and although these students had committed to some online study before Covid-19, the change was problematic. Although it is still too early to be sure of the full effects of Covid-19 on the education sector, early findings indicate that Covid-19 represents a substantial disruption to students' learning opportunities and academic experiences, delays in graduation timelines and student wellbeing (Aucejo, French, & Zafar, 2020; Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020; Kecojevic, Basch, Sullivan, & Davi, 2020). The participant feedback identified that Covid-19 impacted the participants' study in two broad categories; university and home issues. University issues related to the delivery of unit content and the consequential loss of interaction, including access to feedback.

> **Adam:** The change of delivery for students due to the pandemic response. I rely on the face to face interactions in lectures and tutorials to 'humanize' the content. With all students and lecturers online, engagement (generally) decreased with less questions and side discussions. These are lost learning opportunities.

> **Jane:** I found the lack of any form of live interaction difficult at times, no ability to ask questions in real-time or to participate in discussions. I struggled with what felt like content lacking in actual explanation and teaching, which only seemed to intensify once Covid took hold.

For some respondents, the impact of Covid-19 related to home factors which represented a challenge to the availability of study time rather than an issue with the content or delivery format. As expected, because of the variations in family circumstances, individuals and families differ as to the extent that the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced the reality or perception of family behaviour (Janssen, et al., 2020). However, Covid-19 has had a significant impact on mature-age students as part of the dramatic increase in the care burden for families and women in particular in their role of carer (Neuwirth, Jović, & Mukherji, 2020; Power, 2020).

> **Hanna:** Personally, it was the issues of having to home-school my children, have a toddler at home 7 days a week while the day-care centre was shut while studying my first ever Uni courses and assessments, the pressure cooker of home life with a husband home from work as well.

> **Anne:** This semester, having to home school my son for a few weeks, I had to change my study schedule. I no longer had my Tuesday's free to have a day of study while the children were at school/kindy

Covid-19 was also responsible for massive changes in work arrangements following the enforcement of restrictions and lockdowns. While these sweeping changes significantly affected business operations (Bartik, et al., 2020; Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020), they also affected the participants' familial role and their attitude toward their study. As Fiona noted:

> **Fiona:** The hardest part about online learning this semester was keeping up the motivation to study after working from home all day during lockdown and then needing to sit again and study. That was really hard as the last thing I wanted to do was sit at a desk again!

For Emily, the home impact of Covid-19 resulted in an incredibly difficult time for her over the semester:

> **Emily:** Due to Covid19 impacts on my life (or rather on the mental state of one of my housemates), I have found myself homeless for the last month or two. This made completing last semester's studies incredibly difficult.

There was also a further impact for Emily as the university's closure due to Covid-19 meant restrictions on access to support services, and she felt more isolated than would have been the case before Covid-19. As Emily noted:

> **Emily:** I have found it very difficult to access any form of help because of the campus being, for the most part, closed, and anyway, I doubt that they could assist much due to my age, criminal history and a great big old dog that I'm very attached to. My point here is really that I find it very difficult to confide in (or share my struggles with) a stranger over the computer, and therefore I feel very isolated without person to person meetings etc.

As with many aspects of society, Covid-19 has increased the sense of isolation for students, including mature-age students studying in the online environment, with a significant decrease in the overall interaction with friends and study partners (Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, & Sasangohar, 2020). The sense of isolation is just one of several Covid-19 related factors that are negatively related to mental health (Banerjee and Rai, 2020; Lee, 2020; Loades, et al., 2020). However, although Emily had difficulty in accessing support services, access to support services was still available, and these services proved to be helpful to both Hanna and Jane in dealing with the challenges they faced:

> **Hanna:** The pressure cooker of Covid meant I ended up using the USQ counsellors to just get some perspective on things at home, but from the online point of view, access the counsellors at USQ helped give me some

confidence to keep on with the study. I didn't think I'd need them before I started study.

Jane: During last semester, I, like many others, had to deal with death, illness and the impact both had on Uni, home-schooling and my children. USQ were quick to offer assistance and give extensions when asked, however, it severely impacted my ability to focus and study, and I didn't do as well as I would have liked with one subject.

While the impact of Covid-19 has undoubtedly impacted students in several ways, not all of the effects have been negative. For example, Gonzalez, et al., (2020) note that Covid-19 confinement has changed students' learning strategies to a more continuous habit, improving their efficiency and providing a significant positive effect on student performance. For the participants, it was also apparent that even though Covid-19 had many negative impacts, two positives associated with the onset of Covid-19 reported by participants were an improved content presentation and additional time for study.

Lucy: I think with Covid-19, lecturers and the teachers had to make more of an effort because everyone was online, which I believe only goes to show that normally online students are still slightly disadvantaged because of this.

Anne: One upside to staying at home during the Covid isolation I found was not disappointing friends or family due to my study commitments in declining invitations of a catch up as it could not happen due to restrictions. So having more time at home allowed me to use different times to normal and had previously scheduled to complete the study.

Hanna: The fact that I got to attend the online tutorials this semester was brilliant. I wouldn't have had access to them before Covid as one lecturer had reserved them for his on-campus students, however, I gave the feedback that this should be available to everyone as it was invaluable.

Another positive outcome identified by the participants was a perceived simplification of the online unit requirements as part of the accommodations associated with Covid-19. Of course, the assessments and content likely followed the same pre-Covid-19 requirements for maintaining academic rigour, particularly as online learning is emerging as a "victor ludorum amidst this chaos" (Dhawan, 2020, p. 7). However, it must be recognised that to keep education running, academic institutions have had to adapt and make "an unprecedented push to online learning" (Teras, Suoranta, & Teras, 2020, p. 873). Consequently, there is a potential reality that the somewhat hasty move has, in some way, affected the complexity of assessment tasks and the amount or nature of the content available to students.

An example of this concern is raised by Shetty, Shipla and Dey (2020) who, in discussing the need to use online education in specific circumstances, maintain that the effects and efficacy of online education and the capacity to successfully teach digitally is questionable. This view is supported by several arguments highlighting the challenges online students face, particularly where online study was not the student's preferred enrolment choice (Dhawan, 2020; Ferri, Grifoni, & Guzzo, 2020; Mpungose, 2020). However, although students may initially face challenges in the online digital environment, Gregory and Bannister-Tyrrell (2017) maintain that with careful scaffolding throughout their learning, students have many opportunities to gain and improve their online presence.

> **Hanna:** Also, our lecturers made our exams super easy this semester - so that was a nice end to a stressful Covid semester. One of them was so easy my husband could have done it without much prior knowledge and still passed! They were all open-book online exams and had large time limits.

> **Lucy:** Once I had found out that the alternate assessments were online and were open book, I found that subconsciously I stopped studying as hard, which ultimately led me to not engage in the subject as I would have under normal circumstances.

Emily: I have lowered my expectations re what is 'good enough' to submit as the only subject I failed was due to incompletion, and I feel that anything submitted would have actually earned a pass, thereby saving me the time and cost of repeating a subject.

2. Feedback Questions 1 and 2.

<u>Question 1</u>

With respect to aspects of online learning not directly related to Covid-19 that didn't work well for them this semester, the participants identified two areas: maintaining interaction and motivation.

Hanna: [I missed] the basic conversational style of knowledge that would come from going to a real tutorial, so I could engage in the curriculum more without having to interrupt the lecturer with an official forum post or email. I tried sending emails to lecturers who are completely inundated and can't really engage in extra conversation about linking their content to the bigger picture.

Anne: I had hoped to get onto some Zoom lectures or tutorials when they occurred, however with my schedule and home-schooling children, I was unable to do this. However, I still found online learning to be very successful due to some lecturers posted pre-recorded lectures earlier than normal, which made it easier to fit into a new schedule.

For Hanna, the lack of interaction extended to a complete failure in connecting with other students, particularly other students undertaking the same unit of study. This failure to connect represented lost opportunities and impacted her engagement with that unit.

Hanna: I also joined an online chat (one-on-one) through USQ, and that was nice, but couldn't discuss my specific course content. She [the other participant] suggested to try "Meet-Up", but there are no course-specific ones for my area of study. I really wanted to chat about all the bad news

we were hearing about in my environmental studies class! I tried inviting

students on the online course forum to a free grasslands workshop later

this year hosted by the local council, but no one responded to that.

Emily raised a similar issue, identifying the concern as a mature-aged student in communicating with other unit contributors, particularly students who were not mature-age. This concern aligns with the feelings of frustration (Barclay, 2018), and dislocation that can occur when students are older than the main cohort of students (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018b). There is just as much difficulty for school-leaver students in understanding mature-age students' practices (Mallman & Lee, 2016). As Pearce (2017) points out, to school-leaver students, mature-age students represent a challenge to integration given that they are as old as some of the staff and have school-leaver age children.

> **Emily:** I would describe the current online-only approach as very
>
> challenging, possibly because of age-related preferences. As a mature-
>
> age student in this environment, I feel I may as well be speaking a
>
> different language to strangers in a foreign land all the time!

Question 2

With respect to changes that the participants made to their coping strategy during the semester, the participants identified alterations within their time management and a reevaluation of some perceptions. As noted earlier, while these changes potentially represent changes that a pre-Covid-19 online student could consider, the changes were more reflective of Covid-19 impacts than was the case with responses to Question 1. In line with the interview responses, time management was again a significant issue in seeking a family, work and study balance.

> **Diane:** Personally, it's my time management. I have to make sure I stay on
>
> top of it, it's just with juggling everything.

> **Carol:** So, time management is absolutely vital.

> **Jane:** The biggest changes are about time management, organisation of my work and the structure of our home-schooling day. I hope to be in a better place for success and exams through my changes.

> **Adam:** External influences impacted how I expected and actually coped this semester. Changes to behaviour and attitude occurred to align with new working arrangements, namely, more structured time management.

A more unexpected change occurred in the participants' attitude toward completing their study once the semester had commenced. In reviewing the participants' feedback, it appeared that the reality of undertaking study led to a re-evaluation of what was essential or necessary. This conflicts with the traditional perception of mature-age students as adopting a deep learning style (Lake & Boyd, 2015; Nsor-Ambala, 2020) and returning to study with a value on grades (Waters & Lemon, 2019).

> **Emily:** I have made some changes to what I actually expect from myself and the university. I am more prepared to accept that I might not do as well as I would like.

> **Fiona:** I found that because I felt so deskbound, I was less inclined to do any extra study over and above what was necessary to do my assessments and a lot less extra reading and research around topics and subjects.

6.7.3 Summary of Feedback

The impact of Covid-19 had a significant influence on the respondents' written feedback, and separating this influence was difficult. However, while not as extensive, the feedback issues were in line with the issues previously raised in the interviews, particularly in the areas of content and delivery, interaction, and time management. In part, the restricted range of issues is attributable to the limited number of feedback responses and the fact that in an attempt to maximize the feedback rate, the participants were only asked to provide a brief response. The number of responding participants

also limited the Likert feedback. However, the input received did indicate positive support for the five themes' appropriateness in describing the phenomenon.

6.7.4 Phenomenon Themes

The analysis of the participants' responses identified five themes that represent an authentic description of the phenomenon. This opinion was confirmed by the, albeit limited, feedback from the participants. The first theme considered the student's individuality and the role of the student's characteristics in undertaking their studies. In particular, the participants' responses highlighted that mature-age students benefit from their experience, maturity, and a strong desire to complete the learning opportunity they had not taken when they left school. However, while the participants benefited from their post-school experience, they also faced the reality of being out of touch with study practices and skills and overcoming a degree of self-doubt.

The second theme related to the participants' considerable challenges in trying to achieve a healthy family-work-study balance. In endeavouring to fulfil multiple roles, the participants were time-poor and for most participants achieving this accommodation required a complicated juggling of time and resources. Frequently, only the participants' purpose of will and determination made it possible to establish any manageable level of routine. However, the impact of the participants' drive represented an additional burden for the family, which often left the participant with a sense of selfishness and guilt.

The third theme focuses on the participants' expectations. In committing to complete their studies, participants did so at a high cost to their family-work-study balance. In making this commitment, the participants expected a return on their investment in useable skills and knowledge, facilitating more future opportunities. As part of this upgrade, participants believed that they would receive an appropriate level of interaction and access to quality academic resources. Unfortunately, for many participants, these expectations were not met, and at times the participants felt that they were not engaged.

The fourth theme looked at the level and nature of the engagement that the participants felt they achieved or was available from their studies. While the participants generally expressed satisfaction with the level of engagement in their studies, they were dissatisfied with the quality of the lectures, which were frequently poorly made and failed to hold student interest. Although there was some difficulty identifying the support services, the participants reported a reasonably high positive perception of the university's level of support.

The final theme outlined the value that participants placed on communication with other students and the lecturer. The participants' responses reiterate that interaction significantly affects success in online courses. Unfortunately, it was also clear that many lecturers have been unable to transition to the online format successfully. There was a considerable difference in how lecturers approached the presentation of content but the quality of that presentation. The participants' responses also highlighted that their initial lack of confidence in openly engaging in learning activities was not too difficult to overcome once they were familiar with the online study routine and realised they could make a valuable contribution to the lesson.

6.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented and discussed the findings of a phenomenological study into the nature of online learning regarding the coping strategies and perceptions of engagement held by mature-aged students. In particular, five themes relating to the phenomenon were identified from the participant's description and discussion of their experience with the phenomenon. These themes were discussed against the position outlined in the existing research literature. Member feedback was sought from the participants regarding the themes' relevance against the participants' perceptions of the phenomenon. The next chapter summarises the study findings and outlines the conclusions drawn in answering the research questions. The chapter also discusses the implications for methodology and provides an outline of limitations relevant to the study. Finally, several suggestions are made regarding potential avenues for future research.

7. Conclusion

7.0 Conclusion

As outlined in Chapter 1, the research focus for this study was the consideration of mature-aged students' coping strategies employed during online study and the potential impact on academic engagement, as shown in the intersecting relationships outlined in Figure 1.1. In particular, this study focuses on student descriptions of the phenomenon to understand the student's personal experiences to answer the two research questions established for this study. One of the outcomes of the participant interview data analysis was the identification of five themes. As outlined in Table 6.1, consideration of the two research questions broadly aligned with the allocation of themes 1 – 3 to research question 1 and themes 4 – 5 to research question 2.

The mature-age students within this study displayed a high level of academic resilience derived from the benefit of life experiences, both good and bad, and a strong motivation to undertake their studies. While there were several drivers to this motivation, two of the most significant drivers were the necessity of career change and work progression. These drivers came from the participant's awareness of the need to maintain pace with the changing nature of their work environment and their financial expectations. However, by far, the most significant catalyst behind the decision to commence studies later in their life was a growing awareness or an awakening of their recognition of their academic mortality. For many participants, their inability to initiate studies straight from school because of impediments such as finance, interest, ability, or life circumstances, was a source of regret. Now, taking advantage of the changes in their life and the education environment, participants believed that it was the right time for them to pursue studies. Unfortunately, for most participants, the decision to commence studies resulted in a complicated dance of managing their work-study-family balance. The two most common approaches to facilitating this balance that the participants discussed were opting for online study rather than the traditional in-class format and implementing time management strategies.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the participants indicated a high degree of coping flexibility, with the participants reporting using multiple coping strategies for their studies. However, although the participants used various strategies, it is evident that the participants were not fully aware of the nature of these strategies and were merely responding to an academic stressor based on what their typical reaction would be to any stressor. Indeed, the participants' application of a strategy appeared to be reactive and without any actual level of consideration of the most appropriate strategy in that particular circumstance. Therefore, to facilitate coping resilience, it would be beneficial to promote greater awareness of the benefits of fostering adaptive coping skills and the potential adverse effects of maintaining maladaptive coping approaches.

The necessity for strategy assistance was apparent from the number of participants prepared to persist with a strategy merely because it had worked in the past even though they were aware of its limitations. The participants also made it clear that the persistence with a particular strategy would continue until it became evident that the strategy would not resolve the problem. It was only at this point that participants would seek out an alternative strategy, which given the timeframe, generally meant that the alternative strategy would involve a maladaptive approach in an attempt to minimize the consequences of the situation. For some participants, the reliance on their default strategies was a consequence of their work experience. For others, the necessity of coping with the work and family balance appeared to serve as the proving ground for the challenge of the work-study-family balance. However, in many instances, it was only through a stubborn reliance on their default strategies of time management and planning that the participants could cope with the numerous challenges thrown at them. Ultimately, the participants' high level of motivation, resolve, and the very purpose of their intent appeared to give them the commitment to accept the sacrifices required to complete their studies.

Whatever the foundation behind these strategies, the participants reported significantly high use of a problem-focused approach. This approach appears to tie in with the participants' need to manage and juggle the various aspects of their work and family commitments. As part of the problem-focused approach, many participants recognized that online study was the only possible option because their commitments precluded

on-campus attendance or a commitment to a regulated timetable. The value and attractiveness of the flexibility that online study offers are identified frequently in the literature and the participants within this study reiterated this position. Without the flexibility to complete the tasks and study activities to suit the framework of their own needs, the participants made it clear that they would be unable to progress their studies. This inability is in part because mature-age students are time-poor. However, in considering time management, the participants displayed the ability to extract as much study time from the limited free time available to them by sheer strength of purpose and determined planning. In particular, participant strategies to maximize time included scheduling and organizing their family members' lives around or within the participant's expectation of the time required and available for academic tasks. However, even the best-laid plans were subject to the quirks of life, and a sick child was a common stressor in the mature-aged students' study structure.

Even with all the difficulties in accommodating the requirements of being a mature-age student, the participants generally held a positive attitude toward studying in the online environment. The participants expressed high levels of satisfaction with the structure, lecturers, and the nature of the required activities. Unfortunately, the reality of the disengaged character of online study can quickly overcome the attractiveness of the online study format, and many participants described instances when they did not feel that they were an integral part of the university. Although an argument exists that the nature of engagement in online learning does not differ noticeably from that encountered in the in-class setting, the perception remains that the online structure is not student-driven learning and still revolves around the conventional instructor-centred approach. Unfortunately, as highlighted by the participants, the traditional approach involves instructional presentations that were either a lecture recycled from in-class lectures or a homemade slide show with a simple voice-over, neither of which serve to maintain engagement in the online environment. Participants even reported that the quality of the presentations was so poor at times that they chose not to watch or listen to them.

It is not unreasonable to accept as a general principle that if a student is engaged, they are more likely to use a range of adaptive strategies to cope with a stressful event. If

the student is not engaged, then potentially, they may be disaffected and may struggle academically, leading to a reliance on maladaptive coping approaches to get them through. This premise formed a significant aspect in developing the theoretical framework (Figure 2.1); however, as part of that framework, the argument was advanced that maladaptive coping could still lead to the attainment of educational goals or at least to a reduction of the possible risk of failure. Considering the participants' responses, it is apparent that disengagement and maladaptive coping are not mutually connected, and they do not habitually align with academic failure. Just because students are disengaged does not mean that they will not satisfactorily complete their study, perhaps not to the lofty heights of theoretical perfection, but enough to meet academic demands or career requirements.

7.1 Answering the Research Questions

Research question 1 sought to identify how mature-age students employed and adapted coping strategies within the online line study environment. For many mature-age students, the difficulties associated with work and looking after a family or other domestic commitments mean that studying online is the only available option. Because they are time-poor mature-age students rely heavily on the flexible nature of online study, and to a large extent, this reliance forms part of their coping practice. From the participants' descriptions of their experiences with the phenomenon, it is clear that mature-age students, as part of their coping practices, are reasonably coping-flexible and utilize coping strategies from within the problem-focused and emotion-focused clusters. Similarly, it was also evident that participants employed both adaptive and maladaptive approaches. However, it appears that the participants were not proactive in their coping, displaying little future or action-oriented behaviours; instead, they were resistant or slow to adapt their coping approach, relying more on a practice of perseverance in the face of failure.

Research question 2 sought to identify what impact the employment and adaption of coping strategies had on engagement. Considering the participants' descriptions of their experiences, it is arguable that being engaged increases a student's chances of achieving their educational aims. However, to reach those goals, students need to adopt many cognitive and metacognitive strategies to control, monitor, and adjust their

study practices. To some extent, the participants showed some flexibility in their approach. Unfortunately, this flexibility was limited to time management considerations rather than evaluating the best approach to facilitate their engagement with the learning process. For the most part, the participants' engagement derived from personal motivations rather than inspiration derived from the course content presented to them, which at times only served to disengage the student. Consequently, the employment of coping strategies represented a mechanism to progress rather than enhance their study.

Ultimately while the participants demonstrated a high degree of desire and motivation to complete their studies, it appears evident that these drivers often act as a substitute for the adoption of an alternative and perhaps more appropriate coping strategy. Given the difficulties that mature-age online students' face, it is inevitable that periodically a student's coping resources may be overwhelmed. Providing students with greater familiarity and understanding of their learning styles and coping strategies represents a practical step toward their academic success.

7.2 Contributions to the Field

This study initiated a research dialogue with mature-age students regarding their experiences with coping in the online environment and its impact on engagement. The rich descriptions obtained from the participants' presents a portrait of student experience and develops a foundation of knowledge concerning the challenges of being a mature-age student in the online environment. In addition to improving the understanding of mature-age students in the online setting, the findings specifically contribute to education practice and research methodology.

7.2.1 Contributions to Education Practice

Non-traditional students represent a significant component of higher education student recruitment. However, to attract and retain this distinct student population, universities will benefit from understanding how these students perceive and cope with the challenges of engaging with education activities and opportunities. This study's findings contribute to extending the current understanding of the factors contributing to students adopting and using coping strategies to engage in online study.

Understanding these factors provides several potential benefits for improving educational outcomes, including retention and completion times. However, to realise these benefits, universities must enhance the student learning experience by strengthening the internal and external resources that students can call on, particularly in the online setting. Through active enhancement, institutions can support students in developing positive personal characteristics such as self-esteem, self-regulation and coping resilience. This study identifies two areas of attention that represent important factors in enhancing the educational experience and outcomes, not only for mature-age students but all students in the online setting.

1. Teacher Presence and Capability.

This study's findings highlight several points regarding the delivery of online content and the formation of an academically beneficial student to lecturer relationships. As discussed in this study, teacher presence represents meaningful communication between the lecturer and the student. This interaction creates an environment of visibility where the student feels that they are part of a learning community and actively supported in their learning. As mature-age students in the online environment, the participants expressed reservations about whether the online environment offers the same level of interaction and engagement as the face-to-face setting. In particular, the participants perceived that online interaction, especially with the lecturer, was more limited. Encompassed within the participants' perception of limited interaction was a perception that lecturers relied on additional reading content at the expense of more interactive activities.

In part, this limitation may be attributable to lecturer workload and time pressures. However, as the research literature indicates, not all online lecturers have successfully negotiated the transition from face-to-face to online teaching. As outlined in this study, an essential aspect of successfully making this transition is the lecturer's capabilities in understanding their subject field and their ability to communicate this understanding to their students effectively. Sadly, the failure to make the necessary transition may relate to the lecturer's lack of enthusiasm for accommodating the change in presentation style and a preference for maintaining the status quo as a 'chalk and talk' subject expert rather than an online facilitator. However, as highlighted by the existing

research, especially the research regarding the impacts of the recent Covid-19 pandemic, there is now a greater awareness of what an effective learning environment look like, how it functions, and the consequences of failing to achieve such an environment. This awareness is essential given the correlation between teaching practices and student engagement and enjoyment. In this respect, this study reiterates the call not just for institutions to provide the necessary help in transitioning faculty members to online teaching but also for the lecturers themselves to be more aware of the consequences of a lack of presence in an increasingly virtual world. For example, the participants' within this study identified that although the virtual world provides multiple mediums and opportunities for interaction between the lecturer and students, there was a tendency for lecturers to default to a voice-over PowerPoint presentation with no lecturer visibility. Similarly, the participants felt limited engagement with pre-recorded lectures where the lecturer was again not visible, and the focus was on the class projector screen.

2. Facilitating Student Development.

While it is incumbent on institutions and lecturers to ensure that students remain engaged and can cope with the various challenges they face, students also have a role to play in successful studies. This study's findings highlight the participants' strong motivational desire for committing to study as a mature-age student. Unfortunately, despite choosing to study online for the offered flexibility, the reality is that many mature-age students struggle with achieving a life balance, the requirement for self-regulation, and proactively applying coping strategies when needed.

Consequently, beyond ensuring that online students can access an engaging online learning environment, institutions need to ensure that students are provided with avenues to increase their coping resilience and motivation to engage with the learning process. For example, the participants' highlight that students while aware of other strategies may lack the ability or experience to utilise these alternative strategies. A relatively easy fix could be providing instructional guidance in coping, covering various strategies that would facilitate greater coping resilience. However, it is apparent from the participants' responses that allocating time from an already overstretched schedule to complete extra-curricular activities may not a workable

option for the majority of mature-age students. While recognising the importance of all content within a unit, a more workable option may be to include coping strategies in one of the early generic units accessed by all students in that discipline area. Similarly, in seeking to promote student behaviours that facilitate academic engagement, achievement, and success, there appears to be obvious value in embedding a learning component within the activities covered at the commencement of studies. Specifically, the supporting activities should make students more aware of the importance of interaction and engagement, the availability of support services, and the benefits of developing coping repertoire and resilience.

7.2.2 Contributions to Methodology

This study's research approach was based on the descriptive perception of phenomenology and applied phenomenological principles such as epoche and consistency of method. To ensure that the process was sufficiently trustworthy and could counter criticisms of 'phenomenological vagueness', consideration was given to identifying, justifying and documenting the research decisions. In ensuring this robustness, several artefacts were developed and presented as Appendices to demonstrate adherence to a systematically consistent methodology at all stages of the process. The adoption of these artefacts contributes to phenomenological methodology in that they allow the reader to follow the research process from start to finish and provide evidence of the explicit use of the phenomenological methodology and the implementation of appropriate controls to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. The examples of these artefacts may prove useful for other phenomenological researchers.

The completion of this study provides other benefits for methodology. For example, it became evident that several areas of the investigation contained terms and concepts that required clarification because of the variation in how these terms and concepts were defined or applied in the research literature. It is far beyond this study's ability to provide a definitive position on these terms and concepts. However, the approach taken in adopting a position on these terms and concepts can serve to inform methodology.

1. Defining Mature-Age.

The definition of mature-age student varies considerably in the research literature, partly because 'mature-age student' is often merely a general term to refer to adults who do not enter higher education straight from school. However, factors such as eligibility to mature-age entry programs or government funding also play a significant role in defining mature-age student. The age adopted to describe a mature-age student has also been used inconsistently over time, ranging from 21 to 35. Because of this variation, thirty references sources were identified and detailed in Table 2.2. These sources were used to establish and justify the classification of mature-age student for this study as being 25 years or older. The data in Table 2.2 are, therefore suggested as an informative source for future research projects.

2. Establishing the Number of Participants.

While the quantitative paradigm generally seeks to obtain as large a sample as possible, qualitative samples do not generally reflect 'generalisability' and vary within specific methodologies and studies. In seeking to identify and justify a suitable sample size for this study's phenomenology approach, two factors were considered; the number of participants and saturation. In establishing a sample size precedent, fifty-two phenomenological research sources were identified and detailed as Appendix B. Appendix B was then used to establish and justify a priori sample size of ten participants representing the initial analysis sample. Two additional sets of two participants were identified and included to support the confirmation of data saturation. The data in Appendix B are therefore suggested as an informative source for future research projects.

3. Establishing Interview Duration.

The duration of qualitative interviews varies considerably given the nature of the particular interview approach, the topic covered, the number of interviews per participant, how responsive the participant is, and the interviewer's technique and ability. Consequently, establishing a 'recommended' interview duration would be inappropriate. However, to provide participants with an 'indication' of a proposed interview session, reference was made to the qualitative literature to identify the

various interview durations reported by previous researchers. The review identified ten different durations (or ranges of durations) as identified in Table 3.4, which indicate an expected duration of approximately sixty minutes when analysed. Therefore, the data in Table 3.4 may serve as an informative source for future research projects.

7.3 Limitations

Several factors limit this study. Firstly, boundaries were established to focus the research on a particular facet of the education environment. In seeking to investigate the impact of mature-age student coping strategies on engagement in the online environment, participants were recruited based on pre-set inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria effectively narrowed the target population and in doing so, established a certain level of control over the data obtained from the participants sampled. However, by following and documenting an endorsed research methodology, potential control impacts were minimised.

Secondly, even though the participant recruitment process was advertised widely to online students using three formats, there was a minimal response from students outside of Queensland and almost no response from students enrolled overseas. Similarly, there was a noticeable difference in gender balance with male respondents representing only a quarter of the study participants. Having a broader diversity of participant would have potentially presented a different demographic of ethnicity, or geographic location may have expanded the nature of the data received and ultimately might have yielded different themes.

Thirdly, the onset of Covid-19 meant the amendment of all in-class enrolments to the online format. Although all participants had committed to some online study before Covid-19, the change was problematic for some students. The general social consequences associated with Covid-19 are also likely to have impacted the participants' family and work-life, which may have restricted the availability of time and finances for study, and the participants' ability to access university services and facilities. These impacts undoubtedly influenced the participants' feedback; however, the impact of Covid-19 was not a factor in developing the main themes.

Finally, as discussed, considerable care was taken to follow the process of bracketing and to document that process as part of the protocols for ensuring trustworthiness. Consequently, the themes identified are considered to represent an accurate description of the phenomenon. However, it remains a reality that there is always the potential for the researcher's personal experiences and biases to influence the collection, analysis and consideration of findings within a data set.

7.4 Recommendations for Further Research

This study presents a picture of mature-age student experiences concerning the interaction between coping strategies, engagement and the online study environment from a qualitative perspective. In setting out to describe the students' personal views of the phenomenon, it became evident that 'stage of life' represents an important variable in this perception. Consequently, examining this variable presents an opportunity to delve deeper into specific subsets of 'mature-age student' and how stage of life impacts student perceptions of coping strategies and engagement. For example, because mature-age represents any age over 25 years, the experiences, attitudes and financial position of a 25-year-old will often be significantly different from that of a 55-year-old student. This difference potentially represents an obvious avenue of investigation into the necessity or importance of employment while studying.

It is also evident that there are still considerably different challenges for male and female mature-age students due to traditional family-related gender roles. This study identified a high proportion of participants with restricted access to education because of their family commitments. However, not all mature-age students will have young families to look after, and for these students, the requirements for time management were far less restrictive. Consequently, both gender and family commitment represent potential areas for investigation.

Because this study is a snapshot taken across one semester, there is the opportunity to undertake a more long-term study following student progress through a course and monitoring the adaptation of coping strategies as the student develops familiarity and expertise with online study. A long-term study would also facilitate the opportunity to

study the phenomenon using a more interpretive approach, which would add to the understanding of the phenomenon by moving beyond description to interpretation.

A further recommendation for research would be in the area of lecturer preparedness for online delivery. Despite the considerable research into best practice for online delivery already completed, it is evident that there continues to be a disconnect between what students expect or require from an online unit and what they are receiving. Of particular note are the issues highlighted in the study concerning presentation and interaction, which may represent a significant barrier to the successful completion of an online course and whether a student will choose that delivery format if there is a viable alternative.

7.5 Chapter Summary

This descriptive phenomenology study began with identifying a gap in the current literature regarding the approaches taken by mature-age students in adapting and employing coping strategies in the online line environment, and what impact those approaches have on student engagement. It became evident that the past research undertaken around this area was predominantly quantitative with a limited qualitative perspective. Consequently, the purposes established for this study was the exploration of the approaches taken by mature-age students in employing and adapting coping strategies in the online line environment and the investigation of the impact those approaches have on student engagement.

In seeking to investigate this research area, this study adopted a descriptive phenomenological study of fourteen mature-age students currently enrolled in online units with the University of Southern Queensland. To obtain suitably rich and descriptive data to answer the two research questions, the participants were interviewed using a semi-structured online video interview. The resulting data was coded within NVivo as part of the analysis process. In addition to identifying participant descriptions for coping and engagement, the analysis revealed five themes representing the students' voices regarding the phenomenon; the individual's characteristics, accommodating external factors, facilitating learning, engagement and success, and the value of discourse. Discussion of the themes was supported with

quotations from the participants' narratives and references to the existing research literature. Answers to the two research questions were drawn from the analysis.

Research question 1 sought to identify how mature-age students employed and adapted coping strategies within the online line study environment. The analysis highlights that mature-age students are reasonably coping-flexible using problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies and adaptive and maladaptive approaches. However, while the participants were flexible, they were not proactive and were instead resistant or slow to adapt their coping approach.

Research question 2 sought to identify what impact the employment and adaption of coping strategies had on engagement. The participants showed some coping flexibility. However, this flexibility was generally limited to time management considerations rather than selecting and adopting the best approach to ensure engagement. Typically, the participants' engagement derived from personal motivations rather than inspiration derived from the course content's presentation. In this regard, coping strategy employment represented a mechanism to progress rather than enhance their study.

In considering the responses to the research questions, it is evident that mature-age online students demonstrate a high degree of desire and motivation to complete their studies. However, these students face several challenges attributable to the online environment. Consequently, it is inevitable that periodically a student's coping resources may be overwhelmed where a student cannot call on an appropriate alternative coping strategy to work through the challenge. In these instances, the student's engagement with the unit content and the course itself is at risk.

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Appendices

Appendix A   Bracketing

A significant part of my work experience has been as a lecturer in several areas within construction management at the TAFE, College and University levels. This experience has not only been in the face to face mode but also significantly in the external or online delivery mode. As a natural consequence of this experience, I have encountered some instances where students have raised concerns about their learning experience, particularly regarding course completion and attrition. I recognise that a significant part in selecting this research study relates to my interest in seeking to understand more concerning the impacts and strategies adopted by students in completing online study.

Additionally, I consider that it is also essential to recognise that as a student, I have myself undertaken significant study in both the external and online mode in *Construction*, *Law* and *Education*. As it is particularly relevant to the phenomenon under investigation, I am aware of the potential for influence that my extensive experience from completing several graduate degrees and undertaking this PhD online may bring to the collection and analysis of this study's data. Throughout my online and face to face study, I have encountered periods of doubt and concern regarding my ability; both academically and motivationally, to complete the programs. In endeavouring to understand the potential for influence, I have reflected on these doubts and the fact that irrespective of these doubts I have in these instances continued on to complete these programs.

As the human instrument during this phenomenological study, the consideration, analysis and writing will be through me as the researcher. Without question, my voice runs the risk of being influenced by my past experiences and personal thinking processes, which suggests that participants will face similar doubts and similar solutions. This premise supported by the findings within the existing if albeit more quantitative studies. However, in recognising these influences, I also appreciate the difference in individual students. A recognition of the value of the thoughts feelings,

experience and ultimately, consequences of the participants own experiences and limitations (perceived or actual) to the online study environment. It is in these differences; differences experienced through the lens of personal circumstance that allows me to be confident in overcoming my own personal influences and to be able to bracket myself from the collection, analysis and presentation of data for this study.

Appendix B   Participant Sample Size

Participant Number	Author(s)
6 to 10	Haase (1987)
6	Denzin and Lincoln (1994)
6 to 8	Kuzel (1999)
6 to 10	Morse (2000)
2	Holroyd (2001)
2 to 10	Boyd (2001)
10	Groenewald (2004)
10	Todres (2005)
13	Broussard (2005)
12	Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006)
10	Wojnar (2007)
1 to 10	Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007)
at least 3	Giorgi (2009)
32	Karlsson, Arman, and Wikblad (2008)
10	Johansson, et al., (2009)
3	Polidore, Edmonson and Slate (2010)
8	Penland (2010)
10	Premberg, et al., (2010)
10	Meister (2010)
6	Crust, Keegan, Piggott, and Swann (2011)
at least 3	Englander (2012)
11	Sundström and Dahlberg (2012)
12	Reiners (2012)
up to 10	Bolderstone (2012)
7	Blom, Gustavsson, and Sundler (2013)
up to 10	Creswell (2013)
up to 16	Schuemann (2014)
13	Cordes (2014)
7	Kingswell, Shaban, and Crilly (2015)

10	Lommen, Brown, and Hollist (2015)
3	Patel, Tarrant, Bonas, and Shaw (2015)
3 to 6	Palinkas, et al., (2015)
10	Wyer and Carpenter (2015)
11	Dollarhide, et al., (2016)
11	Webster, et al., (2016)
15	Zeivots (2016)
11	Krantz (2016)
7	Garner (2016)
10	Hall, Chai and Albrecht (2016)
17	Filhour (2017)
10	Muslu, Ardahan, and Gunbayi (2017)
7	Fleck, Kenner, Board, and Mott (2017)
1	Vagle, Clements, and Coffee (2017)
5	Noon (2017)
20	Nunez and Yoshimi (2017)
7	Constantinou, Georgiou and Perdikogianni (2017)
fewer than 10	Moser and Korstjens (2018)
9	Flynn and Korcuska (2018)
13	Walsh, et al., (2019)
14	Chu and Taliaferro (2019)
11	Mendez, et al., (2020)
6	Saddler and Sundin (2020)

Appendix C   Questionnaire to Determine Participant Suitability

Describing Mature Age Student Coping Strategies and their Effect on Engagement in Online University Study

Description

This research will explore and describe how mature age students (those over 25 years of age) cope with online study and in what way students adapt their study approaches following engagement with online delivery. The researcher requests your assistance in obtaining a better investigating how mature age students manage their engagement in university education in the online environment. The aims of this research, titled "Describing Mature Age Student Coping Strategies and their Effect on Engagement in Online University Study" are to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of how mature age students engaged in online study:

1. Perceive online learning in terms of difficulties faced and advantages available. By increasing the awareness of such student perceptions it will allow for a greater alignment of online tasks and student commitment, particularly in regard to the integration of commitment and reward.

2. Adopt and adapt coping strategies in response to the online environment and engagement processes. By increasing the awareness of such student strategies it will allow for a greater understanding of the nature and effectiveness of these strategies in terms of students developing a greater understanding of the study content or merely assisting in achieving a sufficient understanding to meet pass requirements.

This knowledge and understanding will assist in designing more effective content delivery and student support processes for those students who are studying online.

Participation

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary, and your decision as to whether you take part, do not take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will in no way impact the progress of your current study or your future relationship with the University of Southern Queensland.

If you do decide to participate then your participation will involve the completion of two stages, comprising of:

1. The completion of a short online questionnaire which follows this research cover. The questionnaire consists of 10 questions which can be completed in less than 5 minutes. The purpose of the questionnaire is to confirm your suitability for the project and will include general statistical inform such as gender, age and educational background. The survey will also gather information regarding the nature of your enrolment in terms of the number of units being studied and in which environment (e.g. online or in class).

As the project follows a qualitative phenomenological research approach the number of interview participants is limited to a maximum of 15 students and therefore not all students registering their interest by participating in this questionnaire will be successful in being identified for the interview stage. However, all students finishing the questionnaire will be notified and interview details will be forwarded to those identified for the interview stage.

2. The participation in an interview with the researcher that will take approximately 60 minutes of your time. The interview will be undertaken using the Zoom conferencing system between March and April 2020 at a date and time that is convenient to you. The interview will be audio and video recorded using the Zoom conferencing system. As the interview is intended to obtain your thoughts and experiences the interview will be very much driven by your account and therefore the direction of the interview will vary between participants and not all participants will be asked the same questions. While it is not anticipated that all participants will need to be contacted again, some participants will be aksed to complete a brief follow up to the interview of no more than 10 minutes. This follow up is completely voluntary.

Because your time and contribution to this project is appreciated all participants completing the interview stage will receive a $25 gift voucher from the USQ book shop

Expected Benefits

It is expected that this project will not directly benefit you following the completion of the questionnaire or the interview. However, as research considering the influence on engagement from mature age students coping strategies in the online environment is limited the research is intended to benefit future mature age students who commence online university study.

Risks

There are no anticipated risks beyond normal day-to-day living associated with your participation in this research. The questionnaire does not contain any distressing content and the project has been approved by the USQ ethics committee (H20REA011).

Privacy and Confidentiality

All comments and responses will be treated confidentially and any information that you do provide will be completely de-identified to ensure your privacy within the published material. Any published summary of the research results will be available to participants upon their request. To further ensure the privacy of the responses all data collected as a part of this project will be stored securely as per the University of Southern Queensland's Research Data Management policy and only the Principal Investigator will have access to the data.

Questions or Further Information about the Project

Please contact the Principal Investigator using the information below if you have any questions in relation to this research.

Concerns or Complaints Regarding the Conduct of the Project

If you have concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the University of Southern Queensland Ethics Coordinator on (07) 4631 2690 or email ethics@usq.edu.au. The Ethics Coordinator is not connected with this research and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an unbiased manner.

Contact Details of Principal Investigator and Research Supervisor

Principal Investigator	**Research Supervisor**
Desmond Pettit	Associate Professor Petrea Redmond
Email: desmond.pettit@usq.edu.au	Email: petrea.redmond@usq.edu.au

1. In order to be able to contact you regarding further participation in this project your contact details are required. Are you willing to provide your name and USQ email address?

If no - Exit Survey

If yes - proceed to contact details

Name	

USQ email address	

2. Age

- ❑ Under 25
- ❑ 25 or over

If under 25 – Exit Survey

If yes - proceed to next question

3. Gender

- ❑ Male
- ❑ Female
- ❑ Other identification

4. What degree program are you currently enrolled in?

Degree program	

4. What entry pathway did you use in applying for your degree program?

- ❑ University preparation course
- ❑ Year 12 (or equivalent)
- ❑ VET qualification
- ❑ Prior university study
- ❑ Other [ ]

6. How many units have you completed on your degree so far?

- ❑ No units completed so far
- ❑ One or two units completed so far
- ❑ Three or four units completed so far
- ❑ More than four units completed so far

7. How many of your units of your degree have you completed online so far?

- ❑ No units completed online
- ❑ Only one unit completed online
- ❑ Two units completed online
- ❑ Three or more units completed online

8. This semester are you enrolled:

- ❑ Full time (three or more units)
- ❑ Part time (one or two units)

9. This semester are you enrolled:

- ❑ Only in online study
- ❑ Only in on campus study
- ❑ In a mix of both online and on campus study

10. How many units will you be taking online this semester?

- ❑ No units online this semester
- ❑ One unit online this semester
- ❑ Two units online this semester
- ❑ Three units online this semester
- ❑ Four units online this semester

Appendix D   Research Poster

NEED HELP WITH THE COST OF YOUR TEXT BOOKS?

The Department of Education is supervising a PhD research project to investigate and describe how mature age students (over 25 years of age) cope with online study and in what way students adapt their study approaches following engagement with online delivery. By completing the study it will allow a better understanding of how students manage their engagement in university education. This understanding will assist in designing more effective content delivery and student support processes for those students who are studying online.

Your commitment to the research will consist of the completion of an online interview that will take approximately 60 minutes of your time between March and April 2020 at a date and time that is convenient to you. The information that you provide will be completely de-identified to ensure your privacy within the thesis document. Because your time and contribution to this project is appreciated all participants who are interviewed will receive a $25 voucher from the USQ book shop following completion of their interview.

The research team requests the assistance of mature age students who are currently enrolled in their first year of study in any discipline and who have had limited experience in the online learning environment. As the project follows a qualitative phenomenological research approach the number of interview participants is limited to 15 students and not all students registering their interest will be successful in being selected for the interview stage. All students registering their interest will be notified and interview details will be forwarded to who those who are successful.

If you are interested in assisting with this research project please use the following link https://surveys.usq.edu.au/784568 to obtain further details of the project and to complete a short online survey (10 questions) to help identify suitable interview participants.

This research project has received Ethics approval from the University of Southern Queensland (H20REA011) If you would like clarification on any aspect of this project please contact the researcher at the following email address – desmond.pettit@usq.edu.au

USQ

University of Southern Queensland

Participant Information for USQ Research Project
Interview

Project Details

Title of Project: Describing Mature Age Student Coping Strategies and their Effect on Engagement in Online University Study

Human Research Ethics Approval Number: H20REA011

Research Team Contact Details

Principal Investigator Details

Mr. Desmond Pettit
Email: desmond.pettit@usq.edu.au
Mobile: 0411 851 355

Supervisor Details

Associate Professor Petrea Redmond
Email: petrea.redmond@usq.edu.au
Telephone: (07) 4631 2318

Description

This project is being undertaken as part of a PhD research project within the Department of Education at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ).

The purpose of the project is to describe how mature students cope with online study, and in what way students adapt their approaches as a consequence of the experiences gained from engaging with online delivery. By completing the study it will allow a better understanding of learners and the environments in which they manage their engagement in university education. This understanding will assist in designing more effective content delivery and student support processes particularly for those students who are mature age and studying online.

The research team requests your assistance because it has been identified that you fit the profile for the project sample frame and therefore are ideally suited to provide the data required to achieve the projects aims. The sample frame identified for this project consists of University of Southern Queensland students over 25 years of age, who are currently enrolled in their first year of study in any discipline and who have had limited experience in the online learning environment.

As the project follows a qualitative phenomenological research approach the number of participants will be less than 15 students.

Participation

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. You may also request that any data collected about you be withdrawn and confidentially destroyed. If you do wish to withdraw from this project or withdraw data collected about you, please contact the Research Team (contact details at the top of this form).

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Your decision whether you take part, do not take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will in no way impact your current or future relationship with the University of Southern Queensland.

The participation required from you will involve the completion of an interview that will take approximately 60 minutes of your time. The interview will be undertaken online between March and April 2020 at a date and time that is convenient to you, and the interview will be audio and video recorded using the Zoom conferencing system. If you do not wish for video recording to occur please advise the principal investigator who will make arrangements for audio only recording. Unfortunately it is not possible to participate in this project without being audio recorded. While it is not anticipated that all participants will need to be contacted again, some participants will be aksed to complete a brief follow up to the interview of no more than 10 minutes. This follow up is completely voluntary.

The information that you provide will be completely de-identified to ensure your privacy if the data is presented within the thesis document. As the interview is intended to obtain your thoughts and experiences the interview will be very much driven by your account. Because of this intent there is no set questions that will be asked. However to ensure that the conversation remains on track and to provide assistance or prompt to you where needed, a range of questions have been identified. Examples of these questions include:
- Could you please provide a brief overview of the extent of your experience with online learning?
- Did you have to identify any new coping strategies to respond to the online unit as compared to units studied within a classroom?

Expected Benefits

It is expected that this project will not directly benefit you. However, as research considering the influence on engagement from mature age students coping strategies in the online environment is limited the research may benefit future mature age students who commence online university study.

Your time and contribution to this project is appreciated and all participants completing their interview will receive a $25 gift voucher from the USQ book shop which will be forwarded to you following completion of the interview.

Risks

In participating in the interview there are no anticipated risks beyond normal day-to-day living.

While the issues raised in the interview are unlikely to cause distress or discomfort to you, if there is any matter that you do wish to discuss with someone then please contact a USQ Student Relationship Officer who will be an excellent first point of contact. You can contact a Student Relationship Officer on 07 4631 2285 or at usq.support@usq.edu.au. This service is completely free and confidential.

Privacy and Confidentiality

All comments and responses will be treated confidentially unless required by law.

As the purpose of the interview is to seek your individual experience with coping strategies in the online environment it is essential to ensure that an accurate account of your statements is obtained. In order to achieve this the interviews will be recorded using the Zoom conferencing system. However, although the interviews will be audio and video recorded the recording is for transcription purposes only. The transcription of the content will be undertaken by the principal investigator using the transcription facility within the NVivo data analysis software. The actual video and audio material obtained from your interview will not be included within the research project content or used for any teaching or instructional tool.

In accordance with 2.5.2 of the "Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research", research data should be made available for use by other researchers unless this is prevented by ethical, privacy or confidentiality matters. To meet the obligations of this provision the transcribed data obtained will be available for future research purposes involving similar projects. However only the de-identified data will

be available, all information which could identify you as a participant will have been removed from the material available to other researchers. Video and audio files will not be released to any other party.

Any data collected as a part of this project will be stored securely as per University of Southern Queensland's Research Data Management policy.

Consent to Participate

We would like to ask you to sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate in this project. Please return your signed consent form to the Principal Investigator at the email address at the top of this form prior to participating in your interview.

Questions or Further Information about the Project

Please refer to the Research Team Contact Details at the top of this form to have any questions answered or to request further information about this project.

Concerns or Complaints Regarding the Conduct of the Project

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project, you may contact the University of Southern Queensland Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics on +61 7 4631 1839 or email researchintegrity@usq.edu.au. The Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an unbiased manner.

Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

Appendix F   Participant Consent Form for Interview

University of Southern Queensland

Consent Form for USQ Research Project Interview

Project Details

Title of Project: Describing Mature Age Student Coping Strategies and their Effect on Engagement in Online University Study

Human Research Ethics Approval Number: H20REA011

Research Team Contact Details

Principal Investigator Details
Mr. Desmond Pettit
Email: desmond.pettit@usq.edu.au
Mobile: 0411 851 355

Supervisor Details
Associate Professor Petrea Redmond
Email: petrea.redmond@usq.edu.au
Telephone: (07) 4631 2318

Statement of Consent

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this project.   ☐Yes / ☐No

- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.   ☐Yes / ☐No

- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team.   ☐Yes / ☐No

- Understand that the interview will be audio and video recorded.   ☐Yes / ☐No

- Understand that you can participate in the interview without being video recorded by informing the principal investigator.   ☐Yes / ☐No

- Understand that you cannot participate in the interview without being audio recorded   ☐Yes / ☐No

- Are over 25 years of age.   ☐Yes / ☐No

- Understand that any data collected may be used in future research activities related to this field   ☐Yes / ☐No

- Agree to participate in the project.   ☐Yes / ☐No

Participant Name	
Participant Signature	
Date	

Please return this sheet to a Research Team member prior to undertaking the interview.

Appendix G   Steps in the Analysis of the Research Study

Step	Description	Elements
1.	Bracketing and phenomenological reduction	A process of bracketing was undertaken (Appendix A) to identify and check any preconceived beliefs, opinions or notions about the phenomenon to avoid a biased perspective.
		The process of phenomenological reduction involves isolating the phenomenon and separating it from what is already known about it.
		Transcripts of the interviews were produced to enable a working format which can be analysed. The use of the NVivo data analysis software package's transcription feature ensures that the content is ideally formatted for inclusion in the data analysis process.
		Transcripts are anonymized by the removal of names, places, significant events etc. so that the participant cannot be identified from anything recorded in the transcript
		Once transcripts are incorporated into NVivo blocks of text are numbered for ease of reference
2.	Delineating units of meaning from transcripts (and memos)	Saldana's (2016) streamlined 'Codes-to-Theory Model for Qualitative Inquiry' was amended to reflect analysis by NVivo (Figure 4.1) and formed the guide to coding and deriving the significant themes.
		By reading through the transcripts and listening to the participant accounts several times, a feeling for their ideas began to emerge as part of becoming familiar with the data. Undertaking an initial broad-brush coding

process facilitated an overview of what general sections of the overall data looked like and added several nodes to the basic framework already established.

An exploratory word frequency search was run, and a 'word cloud' graphic of the interview responses was produced using NVivo to identify potential nodes. At this point, these did not assist the analysis.

Following the initial coding activity, a more detailed review of the transcripts was undertaken on a line by line basis, and statements that are of direct relevance and seen to illuminate the researched phenomenon are isolated were extracted.

The statements, which ranged from a word or two to several sentences or paragraphs, became units of meaning [referred to as codes by Saldana (2016)] representing aspects related to each other through their content or context.

| 3. | Coding to NVivo Nodes | Given the study's focus and the collateral knowledge gained from the literature review, several data interest areas were already highlighted. It was unavoidable that these areas influenced the basic node framework for the coding process to some extent. However, to minimise their influence, these interest areas were established as 'parent nodes' and units of meaning were not coded to these particular nodes. If data was related to a noted interest, then units of meaning were coded to a child node established under the parent node |

All units of meaning were coded to nodes within NVivo as they were discovered as part of the analysis process of extracting data from the transcripts.

As the coding proceeded and more transcripts were absorbed, additional nodes were discovered or required, which necessitated revisiting all of the previously coded transcripts to recheck the units of meaning. The inclusion of new nodes was not restricted and allowed to be quite broad raging.

In regulating the allocation of units of meaning to nodes with some degree of consistency, definitions or descriptions were established for each node as it was created/encountered. While NVivo makes provision for embedding such descriptions within a node's 'properties' it became evident that having a printed reference sheet was far more practical during the coding process.

The reference sheet was used as a point of reference for the allocation of units of meaning and to minimise the overlap between nodes. As new nodes were established, example units of meaning were included in the reference sheet.

Where logical connections become apparent between nodes, they were linked in a basic hierarchical structure involving loosely designated parent and child nodes. While at this point, 44 nodes had been established with units of meaning allocated, as shown in Appendix I, the nodes were considered to be an initial draft set within fuzzy boundaries.

Upon completing the line-by-line coding process, the reference sheet, now referred to as the 'Coding Reference Guide', was finalised and appended to the thesis as Appendix H to provide a layer of trustworthiness to the coding process.

Using the Coding Reference Guide, all nodes were revisited and the units of meaning rechecked against the particular node against which they had been assigned. Where necessary, the transcripts were consulted to

confirm the relevance of the unit of meaning. In completing this task consideration was given to any question asked leading to the participant's response and the content of the participant's response surrounding the particular unit of meaning.

Where the inclusion of a unit of meaning within a node was questioned, the intent of the participant's actual statement was sought from the interview recording.

4.	Redefining Node structure to rationalise allocation	Following the coding process, the nodes' content and structure were subjected to further analysis to identify the nature of the content and possible options for rationalisation.

Following the coding process, the nodes' content and structure were subjected to further analysis to identify the nature of the content and possible options for rationalisation.

The rigorous examination of the list of units of meaning within the NVivo nodes enabled identifying the essence within a holistic context.

This refinement process is shown in Figure 4.1 and broadly aligned with Creswell's (2015) approach of identifying overlapping and redundant codes.

The refinement process commenced with the consideration of three-node areas; 'Attitudes', 'Definitions' and what was termed 'low hanging fruit' for which a logical argument could be made for their exclusion or collapse.

Following this initial process, the nodes hierarchy was revisited and pulled apart and put back together in more meaningful ways(Creswell, 2018). Working through the data relied on creative insight and judgement to see patterns and context in the data. In facilitating this process, mind maps and project maps were created in NVivo using the Coding Reference Guide as a basis to identify options for a more logical connection of nodes.

Based on relevance and connection, nodes were regrouped and merged together to reduce the number of nodes in line with Creswell's (2015) refinement process. Several options were formulated and considered; however, the structure shown in Appendix J and detailed in Appendix K was considered to be the most appropriate to reflect the participant's description of the phenomenon. (Note – for expediency, the map in Appendix J includes the final structure developed in step 5).

In reforming the nodes, three unique or minority voices were identified: 'Stupid Questions', 'Alcohol' and' Efforts to Develop Social Life'. As these were considered significant differences, they were isolated and discussed within the findings as essential items regarding the phenomenon under investigation.

At this point, the structure now comprised of 16 nodes.

Throughout this process of reviewing the list of nodes, care was taken to ensure that adequate bracketing of presuppositions was maintained to remain faithful to the phenomenon, particularly in remaining open to the meaning of the phenomenon as described by those that experienced it.

| 5. | Revising Node structure to form candidate themes | The 16 nodes were then considered further through a series of reflective analyses of the 153 'descriptors' identified within the sixteen nodes as detailed in Appendix M.

The analysis was undertaken in two stages. The initial stage consisted of analysing the 153 descriptors to collect 'like with like' based on those descriptors with a natural and immediately recognisable connection. After this analysis, the list of 153 descriptors had been reduced to twenty-nine collective descriptors or classifications. |

The second stage involved a similar analysis of the twenty-nine collective descriptors, and the list of descriptors was again reduced by moving conceptually further from the 'real' or 'particular' to the more 'abstract' or 'general' as outlined in Figure 4.1.

As the refinement progressed, a logical and appropriate structure of twelve candidate themes as detailed in Table 4.3 was formed following a deeper understanding of the phenomenon attained from the continual revisiting of the data.

The process of developing a node to a candidate theme and then subsequently on to a theme is conveyed in Appendix N using the 'Engagement' node classification.

| 6. | Extracting themes from data and making a composite summary | In finalising the themes, all emerging candidate themes were subject to a best-fit analysis of the coverage of the phenomenon. The structure of the 12 candidate themes was manipulated in various patterns and combinations of the descriptors subsumed within the candidate theme. |

Each potential 'theme' was subjected to a systematic review using a series of questions about the various data elements identified up to that point. The questions were developed from several sources including Labra, Castro, Wright and Chamblas (2019), Castleberry and Nolen (2018), and Ryan and Bernard (2003); Scharp and Sanders' (2019) and Javadi and Zarea (2016).

In addition to the questioning, the potential themes were also analysed for relevance and appropriateness against the two research questions.

Following these analyses, a set of five themes and fifteen subthemes had been identified

A mind map (Appendix J) identifying the relationship links between the themes and the sixteen candidate themes was produced.

7.	Member Checking	Feedback from participants was sought to assist in assessing whether the theme interpretations accurately represented the participants' experience with the phenomenon.
		A follow up was arranged with participants already involved in the project as part of a member check of synthesised, analysed data.
		The participants were asked to provide short written responses to two questions and to rate the themes' relevance for them using a Likert scale.
		The results were used to identify the level of resonance that the themes had with the participant as descriptors for recounting the phenomenon.
		Any theme consistently reported poorly across the participants' feedback would suggest a poor descriptor, and this theme would be revaluated.
8.	Producing the fundamental structure	The participant feedback was incorporated into the confirmation of the themes
		A full and inclusive description of the phenomenon was established so that it could be communicated to others. This was facilitated within NVivo in a variety of forms, including written descriptions and graphical representations.

The description is condensed down to a short, dense statement that captures just those aspects deemed to be essential to the structure of the phenomenon. This is undertaken following a detailed familiarity with the raw data and the analysis outputs built up over the analysis period.

Note. Steps in the Analysis of the Research Study. Adapted from Groenewald, T. (2004), A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 3*(1), 42-55; and Colaizzi, P. (1978), Psychological research as a phenomenologist views it. In R. Valle, and M. King, *Existential Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Appendix H   Coding Reference Guide

NODE	NODE NAME AND DATA CAPTURED	EXAMPLE OF UNITS OF MEANING CAPTURED BY NODE
1	**Accessing on campus** Reference to an aspect of having/needing some access to attend university for its facilities or delivery	**Carol:** It would be still really handy to get on campus to print, you know, to use that printing facility and all that sort of stuff. **Hanna:** I have contemplated going into the tutorials, but I'm not sure, I haven't actually asked the student representative, whoever, the official people, if I'm allowed to do that as an online student. I did pose the question to a tutor, and he said he'd have to check and I haven't got around to that.
2	**Content and delivery** Reference to the nature of the content or the way that content was delivered	**Fiona:** And I particularly find when the live lectures are delivered, as opposed to one of the subjects I did last semester was a pre-recorded person reading a script and that was really, really hard to engage in. Whereas if it's a live lecture with you, it's just that more personal. You feel more engaged when you get a live lecture. **Jane:** I feel bad for [name] if I say yes it could be delivered better because he seems like a very nice person. I just find his lectures very dry.
3	**Amount of content** Reference to the extent of material (either required or optional) available to the student. Responses could reflect positive or negative feelings to the amount.	**Brian:** You know, the human body is a very complex system of eleven different organs, and do I have to know every little bit? And that's the thing that I find, that there's this overwhelming feeling of, you know, what do I really need to know? Do I have to know right down to the atomic level of how proteins are formed, or do I have to be able to recite off every code and regulation as far as health care goes? **Gail:** There's extras with some of the courses that I have, like extra videos that they offer for you to go and watch. And it's like you don't have to do them, but, you know, they give it to you as an option so you can learn more information about the course.

4	**General interaction** Comments made regarding being able to talk and discuss study matters with other people (generally other students)	**Anne:** But for a general online student, it's pretty much talking to a computer, is how I would deal with that, so yeah definitely more engaged as on campus and would be online. **Diane:** But that's why I take to the forum postings and ask people questions or for help because at least a lot of people can talk to each other that way
5	**Lectures and tutorials** Comments regarding the effectiveness or suitability of the online lectures and tutorials. Often refers to limited access to lecturers or the actual lecture format	**Fiona:** And I particularly find when the live lectures are delivered, as opposed to one of the subjects I did last semester was a pre-recorded person reading a script and that was really, really hard to engage in. Whereas if it's a live lecture with you, it's just that more personal. You feel more engaged when you get a live lecture. **Adam:** The course I did last semester used video lectures which were obviously recorded during a previous semester, so it held less relevance.
6	**Negative** A focus on what is bad or lacking in a situation. Something that is not desirable or optimistic [A subset of Attitudes]	**Anne:** And I'm like, I don't have the confidence, I just can't do it, I can't get my head in the game. **Emily:** I can't seem to stop that or find a way to ask past that **Lucy:** But yeah, I feel like online it's something that I could just read through myself.
7	**Positive** A reflection of a favourable attitude toward something, looking towards the good side of things. [A subset of Attitudes]	**Frank:** I certainly think by doing it the way I do it, I have a lot of advantages **Brian:** Online content is great; the lecturers, their assistants, the library, everyone has been really responsive. **Diane:** So for me, studies like I just love to learn.

8	**Actually Coping** Comments that include a reference to the participant's ability or attitude to being able to cope	**Emily:** At the moment I'm feeling a bit stressed out, but I think I'm coping. **Gail:** I definitely think so because if you do fail something, you can go one of two ways. You can go oh I've failed that I'd better just give up and not try and do that again. Or you can go the other way where you go okay so I failed that, why did I fail? What can I do better to achieve a pass or a distinction? Like what can I do? What can I change in my life to achieve what I want to achieve?
9	**Alcohol** A reference to alcohol whether directly related to study support or distraction activities	**Hanna:** Probably lots of cups of coffee and a bit of alcohol, too. On those days when I just can't be bothered doing the exercise and probably using the alcohol, some stimulant like that **Irene:** So, I guess the seduction of sitting on a couch and having a glass of wine compared to going downstairs to the office and doing your work, you know, making that choice not to have a glass of wine. That's I guess for me has been the biggest difficulty. **Brian:** Alcohol. That's number one. A bad number one, of course.
10	**Approach and attitude** Comments relating to a participant's attitude that identify or discuss the way in which a participant approaches or copes with their study	**Jane:** I'm probably less inclined to reach out through fear of being considered annoying or old, or why couldn't you find it online? **Carol:** I've had a totally different approach this semester than what I had during TPP where it was great to learn all that stuff **Frank:** And I actually find that some, if I can sit somewhere in the quiet and keep going through things. You know the very last thing I always do is give up and have to go and ask somebody.

11	**Coping strategies** An explanation of the things that participants did to cope	**Jane:** I write. It's not a journal, I'm too lazy to journal. So I only ever do it when I hit that rock bottom. But I just purge words. So I write singular words. I just write the raw words of where I'm at what I'm feeling. Yeah. I usually just put all that out there. I don't share it with anybody. I don't. Nobody knows that I do it but it seems that if I do that, it almost unplugs me a little bit. **Anne:** I have used Netflix as a coping mechanism; that's my tune out. So are at night if I go yep I'm done with study I'll go and zone out and watch Netflix for an hour or two and just zone out. **Carol:** So I think time management plays a huge role on my personal coping skills, definitely.
12	**Definition (Coping)** The participant's own explanation or identification of the nature or essential qualities of coping	**Brian:** But coping to me means being both mentally and physically able to do your best. So to me, it means be able to cope. **Gail:** Coping is, I guess, being able to cope and deal with the situation. Whether you cope will deal with the situation, good or bad depends on your environment, I guess, different situations that you may be put into. To be able to cope, I guess you got to be able to time manage very well. **Kate:** Making adaptations to make something work or like behaviourally changing your behaviours.
13	**Effectiveness** Comments in relation to the degree to which a participant felt that their coping approach was successful or not in producing a desired result	**Fiona:** Yes, I think they're effective. I feel calm studying and working. I think over time the studying is going to get harder and more intense. So then, yes, things may need to change. But I don't know exactly, I guess it would just mean putting more hours into the study side of it as you get into second and third years. **Adam:** I'm at a point where I can't afford to spend a lot of time trying to revolutionize my methods just because I've got so many other things I have to juggle in life.

| 14 | **Not coping**
Examples of what the participants' felt not coping was or would be like | **Hanna:** Your marriage going downhill. Yes, and not getting enough time in your personal life to do, you know the other side of life, I guess. What are the signs and not coping? Drinking too much alcohol. So I guess looking to external things to keep you going to prop you up, that might be unhealthy in the long term. So, for instance, if your sleep was being impacted and things like that. So if you're getting so anxious, you know you're not coping, your health declines, getting really cranky

Emily: I'm not sure, not coping would be failing to me or to just not complete stuff

Adam: Falling behind with the study, not being able to keep up and so not understand the content. Feeling stressed about the inability to manage the workload. |
| 15 | **Origin**
Participants' perceptions of where people's coping strategies came from | **Fiona:** So I think there's some innate coping abilities that you learn through life, and some of it's your personality, your style, you know, your work ethic, all of those natural things that some people carry less anxiety and stress than others. So I think that that's one side of coping skills. But I think then the second side of coping skills are very much learned. And some of those learned things are, you know, part of that mindfulness and being in the moment.

Lucy: I think everybody has different coping abilities. I think it's based off, from everything you've had as a child up until your adult life, in my opinion. Because everybody has different trigger points that stress them out that, you know are harder for some than for others depending on their background.

Brian: I think a lot of it is probably in their upbringing. As a mature student, it's probably very much been influenced by your work environment. |

16	**Overcome poor strategies** Whether people can change their strategies, and what participants have done or think can be done about it	**Carol:** I used to rely on cigarettes, I'd be like I'm stressed out I need to have a cigarette. But that's not how smoking works so I try to avoid that.
		Emily: I think so. But within a time frame I'm not so sure, you know like within, twelve weeks to me seems like a very short time to get through a semester in general. So whether you can recognise you're not and then get past it, I'm not sure.
		Kate: Yeah, yeah, I think the more you practice your coping skills, the better you become at it. Yes, I believe that.
		Brian: And so I've really had that bad experience of actually having a routine. And that's the sort of thing I'm trying to re-establish
17	**Planning activities** An indication of the process of making plans for activity, including the rationale for mobilising or identifying resources [A child node of Planning]	**Fiona:** Be organized, be strategic. Kind of look at what you need to do and plan it out. And because it's got to fit in with your work and family or whatever else that you're doing.
		Irene: So we have a shared calendar. So I write in the shared calendar when I want to do my unis and stuff like that. And then it just kind of just works or even he'll go you haven't done it for a couple of days you better get down to it.
		Carol: So nailing down, you know, nailing down. Prioritizing. You know that it just comes down to prioritizing and organizing.
18	**Time allocation and usage** The availability of time to undertake study – how do participants break up their study day/week [A child node of Planning]	**Adam:** I have a set period in the evening, usually about 3 hours a night, perhaps 5 or 6 times a week where I come into this room and just do my study. Sometimes I think that I study too much and become less effective.
		Hanna: I reckon like they said about eight to ten hours per subject a week. I reckon I'm doing eight hours a day, like in a 24 hour period per day, seven days a week, so I'm probably at fifty-six hours at the moment.

| 19 | **Coping adaption or change** Recognition coping strategy or approach not working – and the possible awareness of change needed | **Brian:** And I find that I'll sacrifice time that I should be spending on other subjects to do something that I might have put off subconsciously, but I'm aware of that. So for me, not coping is really the fact that you're putting things off, I'll do that okay yeah that's next week's problem and just sort of put it off to then. And so that's, you know, my way that I realize that, you know that's not an effective coping strategy.

Carol: Like I said, I've changed having that change in attitude towards it, meant that I had changed my coping skills. Definitely academically, but it's worked out a lot better in my personal life as well. So I think that was very beneficial to have that change in attitude. I'm still sarcastic and critical and horrible, but it's, I can hide that a little bit better now. |
|---|---|---|
| 20 | **Take a break** Stopping study activities with the intention of doing some other activity as a short (generally) rest from study | **Fiona:** Having some time out for me.

Anne: What might actually work is you putting it on your phone sticking earphones on and going for a walk might work because it's getting you out of that, maybe the stressful situation that you're in

Frank: If it's at night, during the week it will be the dogs craving me to take them for a walk or something, |
| 21 | **Being engaged** Actively involved and interested. Being fully occupied or paying full attention. | **Emily:** So I find it easier to engage when there's a variety of stuff being thrown at me. I know that learning is kind of serious, but there's got to be something in there that's just quick and makes you feel a little bit better about where you're up to, and hopefully more for the encouragement side of it than anything else.

Gail: I've found them very good, and all relevant, and I find it very interesting, I guess because I'm actually interested in learning it.

Fiona: But certainly, I find the live lectures are engaging. |

22	**Belonging** A connection or association with the university or the community of students (at class or university level)	**Diane:** I'm not really feeling like part of the Uni environment. I kind of feel like I'm going through the motions of just, ok week 2 got to read this, got to do that, yep that's it check it, done. I don't really feel like to part of the Uni life. **Jane:** I think it would depend on what I was getting from it. So if I found that I was learning better, engaged more, I felt I guess more connected with the community, not just the work **Emily:** That is probably what engagement means to me most. Yeah. Being able to access it and enjoy it. Feel like I'm part of whatever was going on.
23	**Benefit** Specifically identified benefits of being engaged	**Anne:** So that engagement between myself and the lecturer is really important because you then don't feel that you're on the outside and that you've been forgotten just because you're online. **Brian:** I see that engagement as being very beneficial for your study because it not only gives feedback to the tutor but it also, you know, you're getting the most out of your time,
24	**Definition (Engagement)** The participant's own explanation or identification of the nature or essential qualities of engagement	**Frank:** I suppose for me, engagement is more to get involved with, to work with. It is working you know with something. **Anne:** Engagement to me means being able to have the access to speak to the lecturer being that I am online and be able to interact with other students **Hanna:** Engaging with the actual content. But what you're actually taking away from what you're learning, I suppose.
25	**Distraction** Something that prevents or directs attention away from concentrating on a study activity such as diversion or interruption	**Emily:** But I'm also really good at, hmm I think today is too good a day to do that, I think we'll do that at night, 8:00 tonight. **Frank:** Some people can have the TV on or whatever, I couldn't do that, it would just distract me.

26	**Engagement methods** Reference to the ways that the participant believed that they could or did interact with the course to engage	**Diane:** So engagement to me looks like emails or online tutorials or the forums. That's pretty much the only way of engaging with anybody at Uni. **Lucy:** To be honest I end up doing a YouTube video for 15 minutes and learn more in the YouTube video that I'm learning in the lecture slides at the moment, which I'm finding quite frustrating. **Anne:** So having been able to engage in 'O week' from an external online point of view was really good, and finding out that information you can chat with the person that was running the course.
27	**Focus** The act of concentrating interest or activity on something, paying attention to that one thing - *concentration, attention.* It does not include motivation which is the drive to do things not the act	**Gail:** And I have a break from work and have a break from study as well to be able to focus and achieve what you need to do instead of burning yourself completely out. **Frank:** I suppose when you get older, you get competent in your field, but when you're out of your field, out of your box sort of thing, out of your comfort zone, it focuses you a little bit more. **Hanna:** So for me, I think yeah, I think it helps, the engagement helps me hone my focus, make sure I'm on the right sort of trajectory, barking up the right tree.
28	**Motivation to study** The drive directing behaviour towards some end. A stated reason or reasons for acting or behaving in a particular way.	**Irene:** I guess because I'm thirty-seven. So I've got my aim that I need to, I want to get it all done by 40. **Anne:** So he's always pushing me, you need to do something more with your life you can't just work for the [name] bank for the rest of your life, because I have been with them for 14 years this year. So I went, you know what, let's do it. **Frank:** Then a colleague told me [the company] was looking at getting most of our engineers chartered, and of course you can't be chartered unless you have a degree. So that was perhaps a bit of an excuse to do what I've wanted to do many years ago

29	**Not engaged** Examples of what the participants' felt not being engaged was or would be like for them	**Diane:** But majority of the time, I just don't even watch the online lectures. I just do the readings and all the activities that they tell you to do **Emily:** You see, the online one is the one I'm having problems with at the moment. And that's what I'm having problems doing, is getting the content engagement because it's confusing me in that it says, the next assignment just isn't clear to me. **Jane:** The work is recordings and slideshows and quizzes and assessments that's it. So they're the ways you go about doing it. So I guess in some ways it lacks a little bit of engagement.
30	**Being mature-age student** The implication for a participant who is a mature student – advantages and disadvantages	**Adam:** I feel that I'm at a point where I can't afford to spend a lot of time trying to revolutionize my methods just because I've got so many other things I have to juggle in life. **Carol:** Definitely what the main struggle is for me is turning those life experiences, and, you know, I've worked in some very high up places and some very high paying roles, converting that into something that's usable at university level. **Frank:** I can't go to the lectures simply because I've got a bank manager who wants me to pay for a house.
31	**Late commencing study** Statements made in relation to why the participants started university study later and not straight from school or at an earlier time	**Hanna:** I was thinking that I was going to start Uni then and then I fell pregnant with another child, so all those plans got put on the backburner. **Gail:** I guess I wanted to further my studies because there's only so much you can do as a dental assistant. There's no other pathways or anything. **Lucy:** I finally realized it was time to do it. I wanted to do it since I left high school. Just life got in the way. I couldn't afford to do it at the time. So I just decided last year that it was just going to make it happen, essentially.

32	**Family and social life** The influence of family and social life on study. The accommodations required to be made	**Anne:** So people are like your absolutely nuts, having two kids at the age of 6 and 3, working three days a week and doing three courses as well in a semester. But I'm like, you know what? I'm prepared.
		Diane: But I guess I haven't really been able to sign up for anything because up with working five days a week and then doing my study and family time, I don't really have any extra time to do anything like extra clubs and that sort of thing. I mean, if I didn't work five days a week, I probably would be able to engage a bit more
33	**University student interaction** The connections (or lack of) with other students in relation to study - which may or may not develop into friendship	**Kate:** Yes, because you don't get that social thing naturally when you're online. You have to kind of get out of your, you have to try to interact with other people.
		Brian: And I think that's the trouble with the online is the lack of social integration with your peers, particularly in relating to a course,
		Jane: So there is no, for me personally, there's no connection with my peers. There's no study group that I can access.
34	**Efforts to develop friends** Attempts by participants to create friendships with other students. [A child node of University Student Interaction]	**Brian:** finding likeminded people is very difficult in today's university. Even though there's a lot of mature students, and I've seen some there that are a lot older than me. But it's sort of, I guess, trying to find the right fit or that, you know, like if I go to the refectory, I'll go and sit by myself.
35	**Difference between In and On** How do participants perceive or know exist between studying on-campus and online	**Emily:** I find it very hard to talk to somebody who I'm in an on-campus class with about the off-campus class, the online lessons, it's just like a different world. It's like two totally different people.
		Diane: Well, I guess, obviously it's that face to face component. If you go into a lecture and then. You're able to if the lecturers around you're able to ask him the questions right after the lecture, whereas being at home, you have to wait for the lecture to be uploaded and then you have to listen to it.

36	**Experience with online** The extent to which participants have studied online either as part of this course of a previous course. Whether that experience helps or not	**Fiona:** I think you have to be a little more determined to make it [online] work **Kate:** Yes, I think it was a lot of adjustment from what my expectations were from before. **Brian:** Online content is great; the lecturers, their assistants, the library, everyone has been really responsive. You know, given more than even what you've asked.
37	**Feelings about online** The perceptions held in relation to completing study online. How do they feel online study impacts on an aspect of study delivery	**Lucy:** I still need to work in order for our family to survive; we can't live off just one income. So that was a big, big factor that at this stage in our lives if it wasn't offered online, I just wouldn't be able to study. It was as simple as that. **Brian:** But as far as online goes, I don't have a problem with it works for me. I'm a night person. You know, I can sleep in till lunchtime and work till 4:00 in the morning, and that's how I work, which works great for online start because you can do it at your own pace and own time.
38	**Flexibility** The availability to modify or customise study times duration and environments to suit individual needs	**Adam:** I like the flexibility that online study gives me as I work full time and I have a family, so it's tight for time **Kate:** Like I said before, I really like that I can do everything as it fits into my schedule **Diane:** So it's up to me whether I want to learn, so my pace is my own pace
39	**Limitations** The circumstances can be considered as a restriction associated with online study—examples of how and where online study fails.	**Fiona:** So, I think, probably not being able to just have a chat to your lecturer face to face in person at the classroom. It's kind of monitoring on your own that you're on track. **Jane:** Unfortunately, because we're external we miss the opportunity to actively engage so we can hear our students ask questions, we can hear other students give answers, but that's all.

40	**Preference for in-class** An expressed position in relation to how or why one method of study is / would be preferable to the other	**Emily:** When you're in-class right, you're there and you definitely attended to and you've got these other people with all their energy or whatever, you know, just helping with that **Fiona:** I think it's easier to be engaged in-class because you're physically present and engagement happens more naturally.
41	**Suitability** An aspect of online learning that sits as a specific connection as to why online learning is right for that person	**Frank:** It has yes, I find it very good actually. It suits my sort of way of learning I guess **Brian:** So the learning online hasn't been an issue for me just because of the industry that I've come from.
42	**Personal Confidence** Examples of how well a participant believes they can complete or are completing their study. The level of trust in their own ability	**Anne:** But I've now discovered now doing, you know what you probably could have easily done this eleven years ago now. But I mean, in hindsight I wasn't in myself, I wasn't mentally prepared. **Emily:** There was some group tasks that we had to do, and one of which I remember feeling really daunted by at the start because I just didn't know how to organize a group for any of that sort of thing, or how are we going to get in touch **Diane:** But study wise, it's going really well so far.
43	**Stupid questions** Comments including some reference to asking a stupid or silly question. Not wanting to (or being allowed to) ask a question Feeling foolish or silly about not knowing something. Shy or reserved [A child node of Personal Confidence]	**Gail:** And I guess, you know, them speaking up and saying what they wanted, and then I'm like, okay, it's okay if I ask something and it might be a silly question or whatever. No one's there to judge you, **Lucy:** but I feel that's just a bit awkward, I don't really want to have to email a lecturer a stupid question. So I'd prefer to just YouTube it and find out the answer like that. **Hanna:** So you sort of missing out on that informal conversational stuff where you can ask the really silly questions and not be afraid to ask that or ask your peers

| 44 | **Support services available**
Whether students are aware of and utilise the support services offered by the University of Southern Queensland. Do they know how to find them? How easy is access? | **Lucy:** And I do know the Uni offers like a lot of other support services, but I haven't really looked into them. I haven't had the time to see what else they have.

Brian: But as a mature person, you know, I've realized that you're not expected to carry the whole load by yourself. You know, there is support there. And I'm absolutely been amazed at the support that USQ has for learning, for mental health, for financial support.

Emily: I mean, I live near the Uni so I also use the campus for things like printing and for the library and for all the other student counsellors and doctors and whatever else, that I could see me being quite happy just settling online. |

Node Structure and Examples after Initial Coding Process

ACADEMIC INTERACTION

1. Accessing on campus   *11 Files*   *20 Units of Meaning*

- Benefit   **Diane:** I mean, I probably if I could, I'd probably do at least one subject where I'd go on campus. I feel like I'd be more of a student, more part of the environment

- Access issues   **Adam:** I think having the benefit of attending a lecture would be good, but with work and family I don't think I would be able to commit to that, not at the moment anyway,

2. Content and delivery   *13 Files*   *55 Units of Meaning*

- Availability   **Kate:** I wish we had an option to vote for, like what time would fit the best for students, lecture wise. Or I wish alternatively, I wish all of them uploaded them on a Monday morning so that you could make it work, you know, throughout the week.

- Quality   **Anne:** But yet the other course where it's going to record it on the weekend when I am at home, and you can hear all the extra background noise, you can tell when they've stopped and started the lecture. It's very disengaging

3. Amount of content   *9 Files*   *18 Units of Meaning*   (Child node of Content and delivery)

- Clarity   **Emily:** It's just not clear, it's not really clear, there's lots of lots of it, it's just this barrage of, it's not yeah I really don't know what the end result is. And there's a whole lot of talking through. I don't know I can't explain.

- Volume   **Hanna:** But yeah, they've definitely got all the information there, they've got too much information, they've got information overload

4. General interaction	*14 Files*	*67 Units of Meaning*

Student - lecturer	**Carol:** Going back to TPP days, I loved those coffee mornings. That was the one thing, and you could actually talk with lecturers from other disciplines, so that was really handy. That was very, very handy. I think that's the only thing that we haven't got.
Student - student	**Diane:** So it still really felt like, you know, this is my Uni, but I don't really feel like all the other students do because they go in and get to talk to each other, whereas I feel like I'm only talking to a computer all the time

5. Lectures and tutorials	*16 Files*	*88 Units of Meaning*

• Being Involved	**Carol:** I think it would make the study better if we could contribute,
• Content	**Emily:** You see the online courses go straight into the course, teaching what they supposed to be teaching. I think that maybe the online courses, if I could change one thing, I'd give us a week of just working our way around the course online, you know, just checking up on access.
• Delivery	**Frank:** The only reason I use the recorded one is because of the time difference between the two countries which means the lectures would start at eleven at night or something like that, and I've got to be up at sort of six
• Interaction	**Fiona:** So you don't have that interaction to just, you need the impromptu stuff that you lose by being online. It's nobody's fault, but I think that that is a distinct disadvantage. And as I said at the time, and again, it just comes back to that personal interaction, not being able to or when it was a recording of a pre-recorded reading a script as opposed to a personal interaction. I think that those are the two things that are a disadvantage online.

ATTITUDES

6. Negative	*14 Files*	*103 Units of Meaning*	*(examples)*

• Confidence	**Anne:** And I'm like, I don't have the confidence, I just can't do it, I can't get my head in the game.

6. Negative *(cont)*	
• Content	**Jane:** I don't enjoy the subjects at all. I found it really, really heavy reading. It was hard, it was a really hard slog to drag myself through it. I mean, I did. But without the addition of all the little YouTube clips and things like that, I honestly don't think I would have dragged myself through it.
• Engagement	**Diane:** Probably I'd say no, I don't feel like I'm engaged.
• Flexibility	**Kate:** So that's a bit disappointing as I thought it would be at night
• Forums	**Jane:** But you wouldn't know that there's one hundred and twenty people in our course because the forums aren't active.
• Interaction	**Brian:** But it still has been a, I wouldn't say disappointing, but I was expecting to have more interaction with other people with whatever their age ranges.
• Online study	**Lucy:** But yeah, I feel like online it's something that I could just read through myself
7. Positive *15 Files* *177 Units of Meaning* *(examples)*	
• Confidence	**Hanna:** But yeah it's sort of, I mean I can probably launch into study and just throw 100 per cent into this and absolutely love it.
• Content	**Gail:** I can definitely see how it's relevant and definitely can see how everything's happened, like why you do certain things
• Engagement	**Irene:** Yes, I do. I think it gives me context to put some of this stuff, particularly when I'm doing business, especially having done quite a bit of real-world stuff. And also, it just makes me a little bit more determined. And I can also see where it can take me further, like I see the practicalities of where it can take me.
• Flexibility	**Kate:** It's good. Like I said before, I really like that I can do everything as it fits into my schedule.

7. Positive *(cont)*	
• Forums	**Fiona:** Fine, absolutely fine. I really enjoy some of the extra bits and pieces that get put up there because funnily enough, you look at one thing and then that will take you off down a path of learning and all of a sudden, you know, your five different talks, but they're all related, and that just expands your learning experience.
• Interaction	**Emily:** But I like people, I like them up close, you know. I like individuals. I like the different perspectives that I get at a university when I'm discussing things with other student
• Online study	**Adam:** And I'm actually looking forward to doing future online courses as well
COPING	
8. Actually Coping *4 Files* *5 Units of Meaning*	
• Coping	**Emily:** At the moment I'm feeling a bit stressed out, but I think I'm coping. **Fiona:** But from the day to day courses, I'm feeling I feel okay.
9. Alcohol *9 Files* *12 Units of Meaning*	
• Use	**Irene:** So, I guess the seduction of sitting on a couch and having a glass of wine compared to going downstairs to the office and doing your work, you know, making that choice not to have a glass of wine. That's I guess for me has been the biggest difficulty.
• Wary of	**Carol:** And stop drinking. Drinking is bad. I had had my years of that, and I would ordinarily cope by doing that. But I think just removing that 24 hours, just do it without alcohol. Now, it's a lot better.

10. Approach and attitude	*9 Files* *33 Units of Meaning*
• Personal qualities	**Emily:** So coping is I think it's about enthusiasm more so than health. Health is important, and motivation and enthusiasm and encouragement maybe. These are all things that just allow me to cope.
• Study practices	**Anne:** I think it's more starting to find that routine because being online it's not like, oh, I have to go to class or I have to be here by a certain time. So it's putting it in that routine of your life and making sure that you do actually get it done, and I think once you've found that routine and what's going on, it then becomes second nature
11. Adaptation and change	*16 Files* *64 Units of Meaning*
• Implemented	**Brian:** So for me, I'm really conscious of that, of spending a little bit of time, don't leave it till the last minute. That's how I'm trying anyway, but, you know, old habits die hard as they say.
• Recognition	**Carol:** Yeah, I'm probably still an appalling procrastinator, terribly. I'll log on to news, and I'll sit there for 45 minutes and then go, hang on a minute get back to what I was doing. So I think I class that as getting carried away with what's going on at the time
12. Coping strategies	*14 Files* *97 Units of Meaning*
• Approach	**Diane:** So if you ignore the lectures when you're there, you don't get anything out of it. I guess being an online student if I have to put in that extra effort to make sure I do all the readings and if I don't understand, I ask the question
• Avoidance	**Anne:** And even though like last week I didn't feel because of what's going on [Covid-19], I was like, the last thing I want to do is study. So there were a few nights where I'd normally go okay, 7:30 I'm in the study, going to watch lectures, going to do this and that, but I just went I don't want to, I can't be bothered.

12. Coping strategies (cont)	
• Behavioural	**Carol:** It's a little bit hard over the last two weeks [Covid-19] seeing that we are working like 40 hours a week. I used to rely on cigarettes, I'd be like I'm stressed out I need to have a cigarette. But that's not how smoking works so I try to avoid that
• Cognitive	**Irene:** I definitely going to be pretty choosy on the next subjects that I choose. And look at asking more questions of how it's delivered and everything like that. And maybe, maybe spend the next two semesters or maybe three semesters about choosing something that's really kind of geared to how I like to learn and everything like that knowing that this is available
• Emotional	**Jane:** So I begin to begin to turn on myself a little bit, and then it just sort of builds from there. From there then comes the, I wouldn't use the word meltdown, because that's not correct, but I do sort of internally fall
• Institutional	**Irene:** But one thing that I've been really, really adamant about is really bringing myself up to date with the support that the university has. So sometimes, as I said, you know, about the consistency of sitting down and doing it, sometimes it's literally just going through the USQ website and just go, oh, I didn't realize they had that, oh they have that, you know.
• Physical	**Emily:** if I think I'm not coping as it just I'm not coping, and it's, and I'm too stressed out to actually achieve something, I actually don't sit down there and torture myself if I'm not thinking at all ... I take the dog for a walk, we go for drive, go for a swim, just stuff.
• Rational or time	**Carol:** So I think time management plays a huge role on my personal coping skills, definitely.
• Self-management	**Hanna:** Trying to work out where to save everything so you can open it again was a really big thing and organizing my folders on the computer. So that like got it all there, but just for me to have a really quick point to go back to, to make it more accessible for my reviewing, I guess.
• Social	**Frank:** As far as the coping I'm reasonably lucky at home because I've got twenty-five year old still at home who'll sometimes say, 'well have you looked here? 'Have you looked there?' And he tutors other kids so it's quite handy.

13. Definition	*13 Files* *16 Units of Meaning*
• Academic	**Adam:** Coping is the delivery of what you need to do academically to pass a subject.
• Accommodation of life	**Diane:** Coping to me is being able to juggle my work life, student life and mum life because I'm doing three subjects a semester and I work 30 hours a week.
• Being proactive	**Kate:** Making adaptations to make something work or like behaviorally changing your behaviours.
• Health	**Brian:** So it's more when I think of coping, I think you self-care, you know, looking after yourself physically and mentally is the most important thing in coping.
• Motivation or enthusiasm	**Emily:** So coping is I think it's about enthusiasm more so than health. Health is important, and motivation and enthusiasm and encouragement maybe.
• Stress management	**Anne:** Trying to make sure it doesn't get on top of you, things don't get on top of you
• Time management	**Gail:** To be able to cope, I guess you got to be able to time manage very well.
14. Effectiveness	*13 Files* *26 Units of Meaning*
• Recognition	**Anne:** You've got to be aware that there are going to be times where it's just not going to work. And you've got to understand that mentally first, because if you don't understand that, then things once again are going to come on top. So it's just finding that coping mechanism on how what works for you
• Working	**Emily:** I think so. So far, I think it's sufficiently working for me. And every little struggle I have, every time I go, oh, God, what am I going to do here, at this point, I haven't failed any classes, I haven't failed any units that I've done at all. It seems to be working

15. Not coping	*15 Files 40 Units of Meaning*
• Failing	**Hanna:** I guess once I do get to the end of my first semester and get my results, then that will be really interesting because if I had done bad, well what is bad? So if I failed and put all that effort in then, I definitely wouldn't be coping well. So yeah, that would definitely come into play once I start getting results. Yeah. That's a huge one.
• Family	**Lucy:** That frustration tends to pan out to my family life, unfortunately. I try not to let it, but I do find that when I'm getting frustrated with the concept that I get very frustrated with my family when they're not giving me time to, I suppose you know, sit down and work it out or when I've got to get up and do something else, I sort of snap a little bit because I guess I'm just frustrated that I can't understand that, and then trying to do that at the same time is just quite annoying.
• Health	**Jane:** So when I begin to not cope, I begin to, my anxiety becomes really, really high. And then when my anxiety becomes really, really high, I find that I, the little things start to suffer. So I cook less, I may only do bare minimum of things, I find that I almost turn a blind eye to little things.
• Keeping up	**Kate:** Yesterday, like for instance, I completed an assignment based on another assignment's marking criteria. I started crying. That happened yesterday, just maybe because there's more assignments and more quizzes and whatnot right now right before the midterm break, and I'm finding my anxiety level is definitely rising.
16. Origin	*14 Files 18 Units of Meaning (main factors)*
• Developed	**Irene:** I guess, I guess as a mature-age student, for me it's something that's developed.
• Experiences	**Brian:** Everyone's wired differently, and we're all shaped by our experiences
• Genetics	**Hanna:** I think, I mean, I guess it is in your genes how you cope with things

16. Origin *(cont)*

• Parents	**Jane:** To be honest, I think of a lot of it is learned skills when we're young. I think a lot of it we learn from how our parents cope and all our family. So I grew up with a single full-time working mother, and I guess, to some degree a lot of it was no-nonsense. So there was no falling apart. There was no wallowing in self-pity. There was no woe is me I'm a victim
• Personality	**Fiona:** So I think there's some innate coping abilities that you learn through life, and some of it's your personality, your style, you know, your work ethic, all of those natural things that some people carry less anxiety and stress than others.
• Social	**Emily:** And I've got a lot of support, and I have you know, the kids have all moved out. They're all on my team, and I've got this share house, but they're all on my team. And at the Uni they're all on my team. I'm pretty good on my own, but it's better when you don't have to be—coping maybe a social thing.
• Taught	**Hanna:** When I did the Steps course through Central Queensland Uni that did have a study skills course which spoke about coping, and I've got sort of stuff stuck all around. I'm doing a succeeding in science course through USQ at the moment which they have obviously put at the beginning because that talks about how the mind works and coping, yeah how to cope.
• Upbringing	**Frank:** I suppose a lot of it depends on your upbringing, I guess.
• Work	**Gail:** things that you've learned throughout your working life.

17. Overcome poor strategies   *13 Files*   *33 Units of Meaning*

• Adaption	**Carol:** I think I've made huge steps in limiting my procrastination. And it's been nearly a year battle. Nearly a year battle. And yes, we hear about it at Uni, and yes, we heard about it on campus. Until you've actually like suffered because of your procrastination that you might make those little changes,

17. Overcome poor strategies (cont)	
• Recognition	**Brian:** But it really has shown me that the university is conscious of these are the sort of problems, and there's promoted facilities there, which as a bloke in the past, I wouldn't have allowed myself to. I would just tough it out. You know, you can handle it, stop being such a woose sort of thing. But now it's really is something I think yeah, you know, that's something that will benefit me.
• Activity	**Adam:** To help with the break, I do yoga to relax. I'm not an expert, but I believe that it helps and as I get better I think that I will be able to cope better too.
PLANNING	
18. Planning activities *13 Files* *80 Units of Meaning*	
• Concept	**Anne:** So if you just let it all pile up and don't have a plan in place, then you're not going to cope, and you're going to, the first thing to come off the bandwagon would be study.
• Function	**Fiona:** I think the first one I was just so timetabled with myself, if that makes sense, I have got to have this done by here, got to have that done by there. As I've got more comfortable with the online environment I've added more flexibility into what I created, so this is critical for this week, I need to make sure I've got that, that and that done this week, but I can leave that and pick that up next week.
19. Time allocation and usage *13 Files* *46 Units of Meaning*	
• Accommodate family	**Lucy:** So generally, once I've finished work, kids in bed I normally have a couple of hours in the night to go over everything, and then on the weekends I try as best I can to do while the kids are resting or, you know, while the kids are off playing essentially.
• Routine	**Gail:** So I usually get three days off a week. So I try and do at least two of those dates to study.

20. Take a break	*13 Files* *23 Units of Meaning*
• Break	**Kate:** I do a little bit of, like a five-minute break, ten-minute break and then go back to what I am supposed to be doing.
• Distraction	**Brian:** Online I can be there, I might watch the lectures, do a little bit of an assignment, oh look the X box is just there so I might have a little break, you know. Three hours later, so yeah, that's the problem. In the online environment even though I've had to work from home for so long, if I hadn't been a person who had a home office, I would be extremely worried about doing online courses
ENGAGEMENT	
21. Being engaged	*13 Files* *53 Units of Meaning*
• Content	**Jane:** I find pathology actually sparks more engagement through, I find I Google a lot with pathology, so things will pop up or she'll say this is only present in young children, well I'll want to know why.
• Delivery	**Irene:** I've found that instead of just having a book or just having a lecture or whatever, having the whole mix of things, and then also the way that the literature is presented, that's what engages me.
• On-campus	**Fiona:** I think it's easier to be engaged in-class because you're physically present and engagement happens more naturally.
• Personal attitude	**Gail:** So far I haven't done anything that I'm like, oh, this is boring or anything like that. It's all been very interesting. And I can look at it and go, well, that's relevant. I can see how that will help me later in life, deal with situations or cope with different places and situations.
22. Belonging	*9 Files* *18 Units of Meaning*
• Class	**Fiona:** You have a set time to be there, and you're part of a group that are going through it together. So you have a cohort. You have others that are that are sharing your journey. So that just naturally fosters friendships, relationships, shared experiences, someone to talk to.

22. Belonging (cont)	
• Faculty	**Brian:** But you see someone with nursing student [points to badge], you know, they're a nurse, you know they're doing nursing. So straight away you've got some commonality with that person. And it breaks down that social barrier as well. So I've certainly found that just that simple act has really helped to engage with other people who are doing a similar course, even if they are different year or whatever.
• University	**Diane:** I'm not really feeling like part of the Uni environment. I kind of feel like I'm going through the motions of just, ok week 2 got to read this, got to do that, yep that's it, check-up, done. I don't really feel like to part of the Uni life.
23. Benefit	*2 Files 3 Units of Meaning*
• Benefit	**Brian:** I see that engagement as being very beneficial for your study because it not only gives feedback to the tutor but it also, you know, you're getting the most out of your time
24. Definition	*14 Files 21 Units of Meaning*
• Belonging	**Emily:** Being able to access it and enjoy it. Feel like I'm part of whatever was going on.
• Communication	**Diane:** Engagement, I guess for me as an online student will be like communication with either my lecturers on my moderators or possibly the people that is in the course as well.
• Comprehension	**Jane:** Engagement for me means, so academically it means understanding the work. Having the work presented in a way that is not easy to grasp, but that you can track and inspires you to branch off in and look at things, investigate things,
• Content	**Fiona:** Engagement with the other students is probably not as important to me at this point in time as engagement with the course content.

24. Definition *(cont)*	
• Delivery approaches	**Irene:** I've found that instead of just having a book or just having a lecture or whatever, having the whole mix of things, and then also the way that the literature is presented, that's what engages me.
• Exclusion	**Brian:** I think that to me, engagement is a very, very important point, because what it does for me is you're basically shutting out the rest of anything else, you know, whatever's going on in your life,
• Interaction	**Kate:** Engagement means participation and interacting on a consistent level.
• Lecturers	**Lucy:** I guess watching the lectures, actually for me it would be speaking to the lecturer them self or actually seeing the lecturer, to actually visually see the concepts that we're learning in the labs or in the lecture with little things like drawings and what not.
• Peers	**Adam:** Engaging with your peers irrespective of life experience or age or expectations of the course.
• Tasks and activities	**Frank:** I suppose it's for me, engagement is more to get involved with, to work with. It is working you know with something.
25. Distraction *10 Files 30 Units of Meaning*	
• Avoidance	**Gail:** You can be like, oh, I'll do that another day. But when you say I'll do that another day, that pushes that another day behind and then you become weeks behind, and then you say all my assignments due I can't forget about that.
• Loss of focus	**Carol:** I'll log on to news, and I'll sit there for 45 minutes and then go, hang on a minute get back to what I was doing.
• Maintain focus	**Emily:** I tend not to go out, I probably turn down more outings online because I'm forever feeling like I should be studying

26. Engagement methods	*12 Files 32 Units of Meaning*
• Course material	**Irene:** So you might have like a piece of writing, then you may have like a video or something that demonstrates that along with the lecture that puts it into a context. So there are all the ways of how I feel like that is engagement in my studies.
• Forums	**Anne:** So or even if you don't necessarily ask the questions like just reading the forums possibly might be just your type of engagement that you like.
• Study attitude	**Gail:** So I feel I guess I'm in the right course because I'm actually interested in what I'm learning and wanting to learn more about it, so I engage in all the online activities. I try and post on the forums when, you know, whenever it's necessary or if there's someone asking questions and I know that I already know the answer to because I've already watched the tutorial with one of the lecturers and I'll try and reply to someone else saying that
• Lecturer interaction	**Frank:** Yeah, you can see him doing the working…And then he went backwards and went back through the stages, which again made it that little bit easier.
• University	**Lucy:** And I do know the Uni offers like a lot of other support services, but I haven't really looked into them. I haven't had the time to see what else they have. So I suppose that would also be engaging, I suppose.
27. Focus	*6 Files 19 Units of Meaning*
• Concentration	**Anne:** And as it was the TPP was at home and sitting there going through all the work, and I found myself like just drifting away a little bit, not having that focus even though I did really well. I thought no, I'm not going to focus.
• Direction	**Hanna:** So for me, I think yeah, I think it helps, the engagement helps me hone my focus, make sure I'm on the right sort of trajectory, barking up the right tree.
• Effort	**Jane:** I get bored. I get distracted. I find it really, really hard to focus. And I find it really, really hard to care.

28. Motivation to study	*13 Files 85 Units of Meaning*
• Interest or satisfaction	**Gail:** I'm quite passionate about health being in a health environment already. So I find it really interesting and I want to learn more about it. So I feel I guess I'm in the right course because I'm actually interested in what I'm learning and wanting to learn more about it, so I engage in all the online activities
• Financial benefit	**Hanna:** Then also the reason I'm doing three subjects, I probably should have really done two with what I've got going on at home. But doing three means, I can access the AUSstudy as well, which is why I'm pushing myself to try and do that. So the financial side of it comes into it because if I said to my husband I know three is going to be more stressful, but if I'm bringing that AUSstudy that's going to relieve a bit of the pressure of him having to earn as much money.
• Self-drive	**Kate:** But as far as my student behaviours, I feel definitely like I'm way more committed to it. And my hope for passing everything and getting good grades is a lot higher than when I was younger.
• Right time	**Lucy:** So that was, I suppose more on me that I was like, I don't want to put it off anymore, I want to actually do this now for me, especially so I can study online, I can make it work, but I need everybody's help to do so essentially
• Work or career required	**Frank:** Then a colleague told me [the company] was looking at getting most of our engineers chartered, and of course you can't be chartered unless you have a degree. So that was perhaps a bit of an excuse to do what I've wanted to do many years ago
29. Not engaged	*14 Files 55 Units of Meaning*
• Do my own thing	**Diane:** But I mean, if I didn't have to do that, I wouldn't really go out of my way and search for all of their forum postings and then see which one I want to write on. So if it wasn't part of my marking, I probably would just leave them, leave the forum postings and just do my own thing and go along with the study schedule. Probably I'd say no I don't feel like I'm engaged.

29. Not engaged *(cont)*		
	• Fall behind	**Fiona:** Then I think you get left behind, you lose the nuances of feeling part of the course. Each skipped week is then harder and harder to make up. If you lose that time to do it. And yeah, I just think you lose, you would lose track of your progress if you don't remain engaged.
	• Lack of connection to unit	**Jane:** Whereas with chemistry, I just find it very overwhelming and I find there's no live lecture, so we just get recordings and the recordings are simply the slideshow with a voice. And I find it very hard to connect with, so I find myself avoiding those lectures over the other ones that have that live aspect.
	• Lack of interest or motivation	**Lucy:** I think based on the lectures that I'm watching it would be to be able to watch the lecturer. Just to be a little bit more engaged, I suppose, in that. So that way we can see them, they can explain things as they're going along. I feel like it should be a bit more 'teaching' I suppose, I don't feel like I'm being 'taught' things, I feel like I'm just being 'told' things.
	• Underperform	**Carol:** I just do what's required, and that's sad. And that will reflect in further essays and stuff like that. We've got an exam today, and I think if I just read the content that was on there, just watched the videos, and didn't correspond with any other students or the lecturers I would feel disadvantaged now.
MATURE-AGE		
30. Being mature-age student *15 Files* *88 Units of Meaning*		
	• Experience	**Irene:** And so that made me decide, you know what, now I understand, I really understand business, and I really understand all that sort of stuff, and I have real-world experience
	• Juggling	**Adam:** I feel that I'm at a point where I can't afford to spend a lot of time trying to revolutionize my methods just because I've got so many other things I have to juggle in life.
	• Lack of recency	**Fiona:** As I said, my first course was a struggle, but that was potentially a struggle from the distance of time between when I last studied and what the expectations were then and what is expected now
	• Values	**Jane:** And I think to a degree mature-age students have a busyness that some younger students don't have, and there's an issue with perhaps relating the two worlds.

31. Late commencing study	*13 Files* *29 Units of Meaning*
• Career change	**Carol:** Change of career path, I'd had enough of retail at the time. I was management in the retail setting just in the supermarket, and it was time to stop doing that because I'd stopped loving it.
• Life	**Hanna:** I was thinking that I was going to start Uni then and then I fell pregnant with another child, so all those plans got put on the backburner.
• Re-think	**Diane:** But then I wanted to do business and marketing last year, which is what I enrolled in and then I'm like, no, there's no joy there, and I'm like, I love teaching let me do teaching.
• Work or career required	**Adam:** I work for a bank and went straight in from school, so I didn't need a degree. However, I have now reached a ceiling where I cannot go further without one.

NON-ACADEMIC

32. Family and social life	*15 Files* *101 Units of Meaning*
• Accommodating family	**Diane:** So I try to prepare for my exams or my assignments to the best of my ability, but there have been times where I've had to do it the night before because like last year I had a newborn and I was trying to prep for an exam. So that was that's a bit different. But now she's a bit older. I have more time to prepare for exams.
• Accommodating life	**Emily:** It would take a simple thing like for some reason the house has to go up for sale, and we would have to split up, then all of a sudden probably not cope with a course or two and start coping with life
• Routine family	**Irene:** Yeah. So we have a shared calendar. So I write in the shared calendar when I want to do my Uni's and stuff like that. And then it just kind of just works or even he'll go you haven't done it for a couple of days you better get down to it.
• Routine life	**Gail:** But I try and do a work-life and friend balance, even if I had to do the mornings say on a Saturday to do my assignment or watch some tutorials or lectures or whatever. And then going out to dinner I'd have to make sure you know, I plan what I need to do and what I need to complete.

33. University student interaction *13 Files* *39 Units of Meaning*	
• Social	**Kate:** Yes, because you don't get that social thing naturally when you're online. You have to kind of get out of your, you have to try to interact with other people.
• Study	**Anne:** I'm finding that as an online you don't have access to like the tutorials and meetups as you would if you were on campus
34. Efforts to develop friends *2 Files* *3 Units of Meaning* (Child node of University student interaction)	
• Friendship	**Brian:** finding likeminded people is very difficult in today's university. Even though there's a lot of mature students, and I've seen some there that are a lot older than me. But it's sort of, I guess, trying to find the right fit or that, you know, like if I go to the refectory, I'll go and sit by myself. I am a very social person, so I can actually go and talk to people. But it's still not, you know, is still sort of you know, it might be a personal thing, but I feel like a bit of a creep [going up to younger students].
ONLINE	
35. Difference between In and On *13 Files* *40 Units of Meaning*	
• Content	**Hanna:** I know they all [in-class and online] have the same amount. So I guess I'm just talking in general. They would still have access to all the same links and all the same reading. But in two of the subjects that they get extra tutorials, which we don't get. In one subject they record the tutorials and we can watch them, in the other two subjects they don't.
• Delivery	**Emily:** But the online learning was easier time-wise, much easier because they were already designed to be online courses, the lecturers and everybody was already, this is how we're gonna be doing it. It was really well set up. I thought it was really well organized. I enjoyed the forums, though I miss having the people around.

35. Difference between In and On *(cont)*

- Distractions

    Lucy: Whereas I feel if you were in the classroom, you still obviously learning the same things, but that time is designated for you to actually learn those things. You know, you're much more engaged. There's no sort of distractions of family or TV or friends or husbands or anything like that. It's just that you're there to actually learn, which should be easier.

- Effort

    Brian: So I think online is the one you really need to put more effort in, personally, to make sure that you're keeping up with the content.

- Engagement

    Hanna: So there is more potential for an online student to disengage I guess, maybe get wrapped up in what you need to do at home as well.

- Flexibility

    Adam: I haven't done in-class study, but I like the online format and the freedom to fit in the amount of study when I have the available time. I think having the benefit of attending a lecture would be good, but with work and family I don't think I would be able to commit to that, not at the moment anyway,

- Lecturer contact

    Diane: Well, I guess, obviously it's that face to face component. If you go into a lecture and then. You're able to if the lecturers around you're able to ask him the questions right after the lecture, whereas being at home, you have to wait for the lecture to be uploaded and then you have to listen to it.

- Motivation

    Jane: So we get all our slide shows and all our work, and if you're not able to grasp it there's no class time to put your hand up and ask a question or to engage in someone else's question or to be able to catch the lecturer to sort of say can you point me in the right direction. It's very, if you're not self-motivated to go and find another way of having it explained to you, then it's going to be a very big struggle.

- Student interaction

    Anne: Some meet up routinely purely on campus, and they just post questions, so you don't get to hear the conversation. So sometimes I feel like that conversation would be good to hear so that you would be getting on campus versus you don't get online.

36. Experience with online	*13 Files 34 Units of Meaning*
• What was required	*More effort, commitment, preparation, time management, family accommodation, adjustment of expectations, communication and upskilling.*
	Brian: But in particular, in the online environment, it's I find it a lot more demanding as far as you know, you've got to actually work all those things out.
	Emily: Getting over the fear of what I don't know. Things like setting up a Zoom meeting or trying to run a group session with a group online that you've never even met or not likely to meet.
• What it lacked	*Engagement, interaction, access to content, quality of lectures and awareness of peers*
	Diane: You can hear in the tutorial that they are writing something on the whiteboard and it's like well I've got no idea what you're doing because I can't see and that can make it challenging.
	Hanna: Maybe because of my first attempt, which had no engagement except for the residential school, I just gave up.
• What it offered	*Flexibility of delivery, content and time*
	Emily: Online especially, I like that I can access all that stuff when I feel like it, as opposed to having to be up and at eight o'clock in the morning on a Thursday or, you know there's a particular meeting.
	Frank: What I tend to do is because you can do it online, I can re-listen and re-listen to the lectures. If I'm not getting what I want from the lectures, I'll go on to the tutorials and have a listen to them and see what I can find.
• What was perceived	*Good experience becomes easier, it works for me, comfortable with it and be more selective*
	Adam: I think that things may become easier the more I do study online, as I become more familiar with the whole study thing.
	Irene: I'm definitely going to be pretty choosy on the next subjects that I choose, and look at asking more questions of how it's delivered and everything like that.

36. Experience with online *(cont)*

- What assisted   *Work experience and previous study*

Anne: I suppose with work a lot of our content is online. So something new, a new product comes out or new policy and procedure, everything is online.

Jane: So this is not my first go at it, but this is my first go of enjoying it and feeling successful. I would not have started this [the degree], and I don't think I could have really done this without completing the TPP

37. Feelings about online   *14 Files   57 Units of Meaning*

- Academics   *Workload, demanding, structure, support and self-directed*

Brian: But in particular, in the online environment, it's I find it a lot more demanding as far as you know, you've got to actually work all those things out.

Frank: Maybe a little bit impatient, tried to sort of do perhaps two units every semester, but I've finally come to the conclusion that perhaps just one subject at a time is, you know is better. It was too big a bit to chew with work and everything else.

- Delivery   *Lecturer contact, tutorials, engagement, facilities, guidance, flexibility, course options*

Emily: I could see where it would be very easy to just become accustomed to online studying on its own. You know, once I got the swing of study and not coming into campus for classes very much at all.

Jane: However, I think online could, I think certain subjects could probably engage a bit better.

- Perceptions   *Attitude, ability, routine, approach, difficulty and interaction*

Brian: So the online study for me is not an issue because I'm very computer literate,

Fiona: And I was quite prepared to sign up for semester one that I did and go that's not for me, but what I've learned has been valuable. So I, yeah to be perfectly honest, I think I went in without expectations.

37. Feelings about online *(cont)*	
• Emotions	*Anxiety, excitement, expectation, desire, belonging, daunting, nervousness, good, comfortable, overwhelmed and not confident*
	Carol: I think I'm comfortable with online study now. Short of any IT issues that are usually solvable with an email, I'm comfortable with connecting and with the programs I need to enrol in.
	Kate: You have to be sure that you're in a space that's you know, that I have everything technologically connected correctly and everything like that. Yes so that's been anxious, you know, that's been causing me a bit of anxiety, but not terrible
• Outside influences	*Family, finance, work background and distractions*
	Lucy: Well, mainly, I suppose work. I still need to work in order for our family to survive; we can't live off just one income. So that was a big, big factor that at this stage in our life, if it wasn't offered online, I just wouldn't be able to study.
	Irene: So, I guess the seduction of sitting on a couch and having a glass of wine compared to going downstairs to the office and doing your work, you know, making that choice not to have a glass of wine. That's I guess for me has been the biggest difficulty.
38. Flexibility	*14 Files 35 Units of Meaning*
• Accommodations	*Make allowance for work and family*
	Anne: I like the flexibility of it. So, if the kids are busy playing and enjoying themselves I can come online and go okay I'll just do this quick thing of looking at the IT bit that I'm doing, do this section, come back to it, finish that I'll come back to the lecture later when I've done dinner, and the kids are in bed.
	Fiona: To fit it in with my life. Yeah. So that I can study and learn and do something, learn something new and still balance that with work and family.

38. Flexibility *(cont)*	
• Participation	*Availability of time, self-direction and routine*
	Emily: Online especially, I like that I can access all that stuff when I feel like it, as opposed to having to be up and at eight o'clock in the morning on a Thursday or, you know there's a particular meeting.
	Kate: but it's been really good having it all in my control, like I can do what I want when I want, and if I want to take extra time to submit something, I can think ahead and start you know, weeks ahead. So that's what I like about it.
• Adaptability	*Course offerings, ability to review, assessments and access to materials*
	Fiona: The value of online is that I can study where I couldn't study in a classroom because of the limited availability to study a psychology course on a part-time basis.
	Adam: I like the openness of the hours for getting things submitted in by, the way it was run, the difference in the types of quizzes and the types of assessments that would do because there is a difference in what they actually want to achieve online.
39. Limitations	*12 Files 45 Units of Meaning*
• Delivery issues	*Quality and access to lectures/tutorials, incorporating practical content and lack of physical content*
	Adam: The course I did last semester used video lectures which were obviously recorded during a previous semester, so it held less relevance.
	Lucy: So I did have a residential school this next week, actually to do. But that's been actually was cancelled. Now they'll do it online, so we won't actually get to go into the lab anymore, we'll just be essentially watching it on a video.

39. Limitations *(cont)*	
• Communication	*Delayed information or responses, less information, IT issues and communication problems*
	Emily: But it did take a lot of communicating, and I found that difficult online, I think it's a learned thing
	Anne: You might be told more information about the course because they are addressing the lecture theatre rather than I'll just sit at home and prerecord. So that is probably the one challenge I have found.
• Lack of interaction	*Limited study and social interaction with lecturers and other students and a lack of belonging*
	Brian: I was sort of hoping for more of social interaction. And I guess that's one thing that the online environment does not provide.
	Diane: So it still really felt like, you know, this is my Uni, but I don't really feel like all the other students do because they go in and get to talk to each other, whereas I feel like I'm only talking to a computer all the time
• Study expectations	*Self-discipline, more time, more commitment and study resources*
	Brian: But it's just sometimes you feel overwhelmed with the actual quantity of the material, and that's what I felt with the online.
	Frank: I think the biggest challenge is the discipline of sitting down there at night and doing it and getting yourself into that routine
40. Preference for in-class	*12 Files 34 Units of Meaning*
• Delivery	*Physical and practical nature of content, the routine and focus offered, and facilities*
	Anne: And that anxiety of I feel I need to be in a classroom to learn, I need that focus.
	Gail: Where it's like, you know sometimes it's hard to communicate exactly what you want online, you know, without physically having the piece of paper or document in front of you to go this is the part that I don't understand.

40. Preference for in-class *(cont)*	
• Interaction	*Communication between students, students and lecturers and community connection*
	Diane: Whereas if you're face to face, you can see how they're saying it like their body language and all that sort of stuff. And it makes it easy to understand. So I would definitely say in-class is a lot easier.
	Jane: I felt I guess more connected with the community, not just the work that I may feel I need to solely study on campus,
• Perception	*More engaging, accessible, natural, easier and preferred*
	Fiona: But you get a lot of just, innate learning from being physically in the classroom, I think.
	Lucy: But I feel like that would make just my learning a lot easier, especially as, you know, after watching the lecture content, you can actually go into the lab and learn what you've been learning in more of a visual sense, which I think would help quite a bit.
41. Suitability	*4 Files 5 Units of Meaning*
• Specific reasons	*Accommodates carer role, suits way of learning, dislike early starts, similar to work arrangement, provides various exit points*
	Jane: I can't go to Uni everyday as I full-time care for my 16-year-old autistic son.
	Frank: I find it very good actually. It suits my sort of way of learning I guess
PERSONAL CONFIDENCE	
42. Personal Confidence	*15 Files 301 Units of Meaning*
• Ability	**Hanna:** A bit nervous because I haven't had any results yet, so I don't know, you know, I sort of launched into it, but I don't know if my effort is good enough yet

42. Personal Confidence (cont)	
• Anxiety	**Jane:** I'm learning the stuff that I've never learned that I've got no clue on. So it's hard, and it freaks me out a little bit
• Attitude	**Kate:** Yeah, I think so. I think because I'm older. When I was younger, I probably would have quit. But now that I'm older.
• Belonging	**Diane:** but I don't really feel like all the other students do
• Commitment	**Emily:** And this feeling of aw I should be able to do it, but I am too scared to let things get to the point where I'm taking on too much
• Confidence	**Fiona:** So then I went I'm too old for Uni
• Coping	**Anne:** So I think now into week five I'm starting to get the hang of it.
• Interaction	**Lucy:** But I do know that at the start they always say, you know come to them, email them, do all of that, but I still feel that's a bit, I just don't feel comfortable doing that.
• Knowledge	**Irene:** I feel like as if I have the like jargon in the language skill a little bit more bedded down and stuff like that. So that's kind of helped me with my confidence and be able to do that.
• Preparation	**Gail:** And I really liked the TPP, and I feel like it gave me good grounds to be able to continue on and so far so good.
• Study	**Frank:** I suppose I'm not naturally that academic
43. Stupid questions *7 Files* *16 Units of Meaning* (Child node of Personal confidence)	
• Inhibited	**Lucy:** I have their email address, I'm supposed to email them but I feel that's just a bit awkward, I don't really want to have to email a lecturer a stupid question. So I'd prefer to just YouTube it and find out the answer like that.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND SUPPORT	
44. Support services available *13 Files* *39 Units of Meaning*	
• Knowledge of	**Hanna:** But yeah, they've definitely got all the information there, they've got too much information, they've got information overload.
• Use of	**Emily:** Oh, well, I have already sought support from the university for practically everything because I got out of prison before my first semester there. So my first port of call was to come in and just see sort of what's available where I'm living and settle down and kind of go you know, this is, just even talk to them about is this even worth my while?
• Access	**Brian:** And I'm absolutely been amazed at the support that USQ has for learning, for mental health, for financial support. All those things that they have it's far beyond, you know when I went to university 32 years ago since I finished at university. So, yeah, it's a long time. But it really has shown me that the university is conscious of these are the sort of problems, and there's promoted facilities there, which as a bloke in the past, I wouldn't have allowed myself to.

Appendix J   Mind Map of Node Restructure to 16 Nodes

Not Engaged
Being Engaged
Definitions of Engagement

Avenues to Engagement

Commence Study Late

Being Mature Age

Flexibility of Online Study
Limitations of Online Study

Perception of Online Study

General Interaction

Lectures and Tutorials

Family and Social Life

Not Coping
Coping Strategies

Effectiveness of Coping

Student Support Services

Perception of Coping

Definition of Coping
Origins of Coping
Approach and Attitude

Belonging

University Student Interaction
Efforts to Develop Social Life

PHENOMENON

Amount of Content

Content and Delivery

Focus
Alcohol
Take a Break

Distraction

Motivation to Study

Time Allocation and Usage

Planning Activities

Difference Between In and On

Experience with Online Study
Preference for On-Campus
Accessing On-Campus

Overcome Poor Strategies

Coping Adaption or Change

Personal Confidence

Stupid Questions

Appendix K **Justification for Node Restructure to 16 Nodes**

Appendix K

Node	Node Name and Nodes Captured	Justification for Node Formation (drawing on the Coding Reference Guide)
1	Content and Delivery • Amount of content	This node considers the nature and the extent of material (either required or optional) available to the student, and the way that this content was delivered.
2	Lectures and Tutorials • General interaction	Comments regarding effectiveness, suitability or access to the online lecture and tutorial format and the access afforded to students to talk and discuss study matters with lecturers and other students.
3	Effectiveness of Coping Strategies • Coping strategies • Not coping	The degree to which a participant felt that their coping approach was successful or not in producing the desired result and how the participants' had experienced not coping or considered that not coping would be like for them.
4	Overcome Poor Strategies • Coping adaption or change	A recognition that a particular coping strategy or approach was not working and if it was possible to change or adapt that approach what would be required to make that change.
5	Perceptions of Coping • Approach and attitude • Definitions of coping • Origins of coping	The approaches and attitudes adopted by participants to cope with the impacts of the stresses associated with the intersection of study, family and work aspects based on their understanding of coping.
6	Time Allocation and Usage • Planning activities	The process of making plans to accommodate study activities, including the mechanisms for allocating and monitoring time to undertake study allowing for daily life.
7	Avenues to Engagement • Being engaged • Definition of engagement • Not being engaged	Comments outlining the participant's perception of their engagement with the content material and delivery methods adopted for their courses, including reference to the ways that the participant believed that they could or did interact with the course to engage based on their understanding of engagement.

Node	Node Name and Nodes Captured	Justification for Node Formation (drawing on the Coding Reference Guide)
8	Belonging • Efforts to develop a social life • University student interaction	The connections made by students with other students concerning study or friendship, or connection or association with the university or the community of students (at class or university level).
9	Distraction • Alcohol • Focus • Take a break	Being able to concentrate on study or being distracted from that study activity either as a short respite to improve study outcomes or as a means of temporarily avoiding a particular study activity.
10	Motivation to Study	The participant's reasons for participating in study and the drive to direct their behaviour towards a particular end or goal.
11	Being Mature-age • Commencing study late	The implications for a participant as a mature student concerning the advantages and disadvantages of commencing studies later in life.
12	Family and Social Life	The accommodations made within family and social life in undertaking study and the distractions of family and social life on study.
13	Difference Between Online and On-Campus • Accessing on-campus • Preference for on-campus • Experience with online study	The extent to which students perceive the differences between studying online and on-campus based on any previous online studies, including their preference to attend on-campus or at least have some access to attend university for its facilities or delivery.
14	Perceptions of Online Study • Limitations of online study • Flexibility of online study	The circumstances associated with online delivery that students perceive to be disadvantageous or beneficial to their ability to study particularly relating to study times, duration, environments and format.
15	Personal confidence • Stupid questions	The extent of a participant's belief in their self and their abilities to successfully complete their study including indications of their discomfort in asking questions in a forum concerning feeling that their question may be considered stupid or silly.
16	Student Support Services	The participant's awareness and utilisation of the USQ support services

Appendix L   Participants' Personal Coping Strategies

PARTICIPANTS' PERSONAL COPING STRATEGIES		
Strategy	**Description**	**Examples**
Approach coping strategies	Actively focusing on the problematic event or situation including considering several alternatives, logical analysis, positive reappraisal, seeking guidance, effort, repetition or problem-solving.	**Frank:** But once you've got into it and you have done it a few more few times, and you get through the course, and I keep going back if I don't understand something, keep going back and going through it and going back and going through it until the penny drops. **Fiona:** If you take the time to read it properly and to read all the aspects of it, and I actually go, you know, if it's an assignment I will actually print out the requirements of the assignment, the marking criteria if there is an exemplar or anything provided. I will print all of those out, and I will actually have them with me when I'm sitting, typing mine [notes] up and referring back and forward to them.
Avoidance coping strategies	Avoiding addressing the problem directly by disengaging from the situation such as diverting attention or effort away from the problem and engaging in a task not related to the stressor, by extensive procrastination or by deferring tasks to complete another task which is overdue.	**Anne:** Another coping strategy I have is procrastination. So if I've got to put in an assessment pace in two weeks' time, oh, that's two weeks' time, don't even have to think about this now, don't even think about it. Next thing you know, two weeks go by, and suddenly it's an urgent thing. **Emily:** Never at the time. Not if I've decided that's what I'm going to do. Never. But that didn't stop me from waking up the next morning and going aww hell I really shouldn't have done that, I should be in here doing this.

Strategy	Description	Examples
Behavioural coping strategies	Modifying of actions such as adjusting customary activities or engaging in routines that do not require thought, like housework, eating and drug-taking (e.g. alcohol, tobacco, caffeine)[53]	**Anne:** So, just changing my routine up a little bit and not being disappointed if something doesn't go the way I want it to go. **Hanna:** Probably lots of cups of coffee and a bit of alcohol, too. On those days when I just can't be bothered doing the exercise and probably using the alcohol, some stimulant like that.
Cognitive coping strategies	Mental activity such as positive thinking, acceptance, setting realistic expectations, putting things into perspective pragmatism, and blocking the negative.	**Carol:** But the crisis was the exam. And although it turned out okay I learnt a lot from that, how to cope better during this semester, so it's not a crisis when they get to exam time and don't have any anxiety about exams. It's just how I treated it in my mind, you know I'll worry about that the day before. **Gail:** I guess I think about my end goal a lot. I think that once I complete this, I can go on and achieve the goals that I want to achieve and my time managing what I need to do. And I guess I'm motivated to do and achieve what I want. And I've been thinking about it for a while.
Emotional coping strategies	The involvement of an emotional response or reaction to a stressor, including the use of venting, crying, light-hearted attitude, self-deprecation or a capacity to laugh at themselves	**Kate:** And I think like venting sometimes my partner is a coping strategy. **Jane:** So I begin to begin to turn on myself a little bit, and then it just sort of builds from there. From there then comes the, I wouldn't use the word meltdown, because that's not correct, but I do sort of internally fall apart if everything falls apart externally for me. Like if I fall apart externally, then I've hit bottom, and then I just take a break.

[53] The use of drug-taking in the behavioural strategy was identified in the context of a 'relaxant' and is differentiated from the context outlined by Jensen, Forlini, Partridge and Hall (2016) as a problem-focused strategy where the purpose of the substance use was for the specific purpose as a study aid to enhance performance.

Strategy	Description	Examples
Institutional coping strategies	The human and system-related strategies involving drawing on the University's support services (or other organisation) or talking to and learning from other students completing the same or similar program	**Irene:** But one thing that I've been really, really adamant about is really bringing myself up to date with the support that the university has. So sometimes, as I said, you know, about the consistency of sitting down and doing it, sometimes it's literally just going through the USQ website and just go, oh, I didn't realize they had that, oh they have that, you know. It's just kind of, it's about being in the university's right headspace, even if I'm not doing the university work because I've learned so much, even just from the from the website and stuff like that. **Emily:** I have asked for extensions before because I was just too busy and I just couldn't get them done. And they have been granted in a day or two. But that's a strategy.
Physical coping strategies	Non-study activities engaged in to wind down and relax to recharge batteries and not for avoidance purposes. Includes 'active' activities such as recreation, sport and general exercise, and 'passive' activities such as listening to music, watching TV, reading or simply relaxing.	**Anne:** I have used Netflix as a coping mechanism, that's my tune out. So are at night if I go yep I'm done with study I'll go and zone out and watch Netflix for an hour or two and just zone out. **Brian:** I've certainly found that a little bit of light exercise, like I take the dogs for a walk and mentally that really helps. I'm walking along, and I'm thinking about whatever I've learned during a lecture during the day, you know, online or whatever. It's a good thing to get out of the zone of where you're doing the online courses, that's my coping strategy. So if I'm sitting at my desk doing an online course, getting out of there, take the dog for a walk. They appreciate it, and you're thinking about it at the time, but getting out of that physical environment, that seems to be quite good for me.

Strategy	Description	Examples
Rational or time organization coping strategies	The allocation of time to activities in relation to clearly defined priorities for study, work and free time and includes elements such as downtime, timetabling or time management and control	**Lucy:** I'm not sure, to be honest. I try and sort of limit what I'm doing per day so that it doesn't feel like this massive thing. I'm only studying two subjects which has definitely been good doing it part-time, but I feel full time just would have been way too much for me to do. **Gail:** So I usually get three days off a week. So I try and do at least two of those dates to study. So I'm doing two subjects, and it's only part-time, so I focus on trying to allocate my time to those days and then also try and attend the online tutorials as well. But I try and do a work-life and friend balance, even if I had to do the mornings say on a Saturday to do my assignment or watch some tutorials or lectures or whatever.
Self-management coping strategies	The reliance on existing or new abilities concerning activities such as preparation, planning and organizational procedures'	**Hanna:** Trying to work out where to save everything so you can open it again was a really big thing and organizing my folders on the computer. So that like got it all there, but just for me to have a really quick point to go back to, to make it more accessible for my reviewing, I guess. **Anne:** I'm a list person, that is also another coping strategy of mine. I like making lists so you'll find a list here, list there and then eventually do like one big list. I've even tried to like from because the first few quizzes have now come out I've gone okay I'm gonna take all that information to do with that quiz I've got all bundled up ready to take to Officeworks to get it blinded so that way it's my revision component when it comes to the end of semester revision

Strategy	Description	Examples
Social coping strategies	The use of social networks such as family, friends and work colleagues in times of crisis or only for conversation and reflection[54]. Includes both social distractions such as Involvement in social events such 'partying' or general socialising or seeking advice re study or other issues (from family and friends, etc.).	**Frank:** So I'm a great lover of Google, I try to Google things if I can't find the answers and then if I can't find the answers then I'll wait until I get to work and ask there for some help. I suppose again in that sense, you know, having people who have really done it quite recently can be helpful. And if all else fails, I would probably go on to the forums and try and use them. **Carol:** I do have a brother who works at the minister's office, so we do have a lot of contact there, and he's [a department] this term, so that's a little nicer than the [a department] that he's had previously. So we do have a lot of you know, and we'll barter now because I am focusing on journalism as I've progressed through the degree. But, you know, he'll say don't read that and don't read that so we do barter a lot.

[54] While social contacts may not be able to assist in resolving a specific problem they may provide the boost of spirit needed to be able to handle the situation better

Appendix M   Unit of Meaning Descriptors within the 16 Node Structure

ACADEMIC INTERACTION	
1. Content and Delivery	*14 Files 71 Units of Meaning*
• Availability	**Kate:** I wish we had an option to vote for, like what time would fit the best for students, lecture wise. Or I wish alternatively, I wish all of them uploaded them on a Monday morning so that you could make it work, you know, throughout the week.
• Engagement	**Anne:** But I just find that if a recorded lecture is a live record of lecture, it's more engaging
• Clarity	**Emily:** It's just not clear, it's not really clear, there's lots of lots of it, it's just this barrage of, it's not yeah I really don't know what the end result is. And there's a whole lot of talking through. I don't know I can't explain.
• Study practices	**Lucy:** I'm Frustrated at that. Because that was essentially my one chance to actually get in a lab and actually do the things we're supposed to be doing to learn it a bit more visually, especially as I'm a visual learner.
• Quality	**Anne:** But yet the other course where it's going to record it on the weekend when I am at home, and you can hear all the extra background noise, you can tell when they've stopped and started the lecture. It's very disengaging
• Volume	**Hanna:** But yeah, they've definitely got all the information there, they've got too much information, they've got information overload
2. Lectures and tutorials	*17 Files 146 Units of Meaning*
• Being Involved	**Carol:** I think it would make the study better if we could contribute,

2. Lectures and tutorials *(cont)*	
• Content	**Emily:** You see the online courses go straight into the course, teaching what they supposed to be teaching. I think that maybe the online courses, if I could change one thing, I'd give us a week of just working our way around the course online, you know, just checking up on access.
• Delivery	**Frank:** The only reason I use the recorded one is because of the time difference between the two countries which means the lectures would start at eleven at night or something like that, and I've got to be up at sort of six...
• Interaction	**Fiona:** So you don't have that interaction to just, you need the impromptu stuff that you lose by being online. It's nobody's fault, but I think that that is a distinct disadvantage. And as I said at the time, and again, it just comes back to that personal interaction, not being able to or when it was a recording of a pre-recorded reading a script as opposed to a personal interaction. I think that those are the two things that are a disadvantage online.

COPING	
3. Effectiveness	*16 Files 134 Units of Meaning*
• Failing	**Hanna:** I guess once I do get to the end of my first semester and get my results, then that will be really interesting because if I had done bad, well what is bad? So if I failed and put all that effort in then, I definitely wouldn't be coping well. So yeah, that would definitely come into play once I start getting results. Yeah. That's a huge one.
• Family	**Lucy:** That frustration tends to pan out to my family life, unfortunately. I try not to let it, but I do find that when I'm getting frustrated with the concept that I get very frustrated with my family when they're not giving me time to, I suppose you know, sit down and work it out or when I've got to get up and do something else, I sort of snap a little bit because I guess I'm just frustrated that I can't understand that, and then trying to do that at the same time is just quite annoying.

3. Effectiveness *(cont)*

- Health

  Jane: So when I begin to not cope, I begin to, my anxiety becomes really, really high. And then when my anxiety becomes really, really high, I find that I, the little things start to suffer. So I cook less, I may only do bare minimum of things, I find that I almost turn a blind eye to little things.

- Keeping up

  Kate: Yesterday, like for instance, I completed an assignment based on another assignment's marking criteria, I started crying. That happened yesterday, just maybe because there's more assignments and more quizzes and whatnot right now right before the midterm break, and I'm finding my anxiety level is definitely rising.

- Recognition

  Anne: You've got to be aware that there are going to be times where it's just not going to work. And you've got to understand that mentally first, because if you don't understand that, then things once again are going to come on top. So it's just finding that coping mechanism on how what works for you

- Working

  Emily: I think so. So far, I think it's sufficiently working for me. And every little struggle I have, every time I go, oh, God, what am I going to do here, at this point, I haven't failed any classes, I haven't failed any units that I've done at all. It seems to be working

- Approach

  Diane: So if you don't pay attention to the lectures when you're there, you don't get anything out of it. I guess being an online student if I have to put in that extra effort to make sure I do all the readings and if I don't understand, I ask the question

- Avoidance

  Anne: And even though like last week I didn't feel because of what's going on [Covid-19], I was like, the last thing I want to do is study. So there were a few nights where I'd normally go okay, 7:30 I'm in the study, going to watch lectures, going to do this and that, but I just went I don't want to, I can't be bothered.

- Behavioural

  Carol: It's a little bit hard over the last two weeks [Covid-19] seeing that we are working like 40 hours a week. I used to rely on cigarettes, I'd be like I'm stressed out I need to have a cigarette. But that's not how smoking works so I try to avoid that

3. Effectiveness *(cont)*	
• Cognitive	**Irene:** I definitely going to be pretty choosy on the next subjects that I choose. And look at asking more questions of how it's delivered and everything like that. And maybe, maybe spend the next two semesters or maybe three semesters about choosing something that's really kind of geared to how I like to learn and everything like that knowing that this is available
• Emotional	**Jane:** So I begin to begin to turn on myself a little bit, and then it just sort of builds from there. From there then comes the, I wouldn't use the word meltdown, because that's not correct, but I do sort of internally fall
• Institutional	**Irene:** But one thing that I've been really, really adamant about is really bringing myself up to date with the support that the university has. So sometimes, as I said, you know, about the consistency of sitting down and doing it, sometimes it's literally just going through the USQ website and just go, oh, I didn't realize they had that, oh they have that, you know.
• Physical	**Emily:** if I think I'm not coping as it just I'm not coping, and it's, and I'm too stressed out to actually achieve something, I actually don't sit down there and torture myself if I'm not thinking at all ... I take the dog for a walk, we go for drive, go for a swim, just stuff.
• Rational or time	**Carol:** So I think time management plays a huge role on my personal coping skills, definitely.
• Self-management	**Hanna:** Trying to work out where to save everything so you can open it again was a really big thing and organizing my folders on the computer. So that like got it all there, but just for me to have a really quick point to go back to, to make it more accessible for my reviewing, I guess.
• Social	**Frank:** As far as the coping I'm reasonably lucky at home because I've got twenty-five year old still at home who'll sometimes say, 'well have you looked here? 'Have you looked there?' And he tutors other kids so it's quite handy.

4. Overcome Poor Strategies	*17 Files* *82 Units of Meaning*
• Adaption	**Carol:** I think I've made huge steps in limiting my procrastination. And it's been nearly a year battle. Nearly a year battle. And yes, we hear about it at Uni, and yes, we heard about it on campus. Until you've actually like suffered because of your procrastination that you might make those little changes,
• Activity	**Adam:** To help with the break, I do yoga to relax. I'm not an expert, but I believe that it helps and as I get better I think that I will be able to cope better too.
• Implemented	**Brian:** So for me, I'm really conscious of that, of spending a little bit of time, don't leave it till the last minute. That's how I'm trying anyway, but, you know, old habits die hard as they say.
• Recognition	**Brian:** But it really has shown me that the university is conscious of these are the sort of problems, and there's promoted facilities there, which as a bloke in the past, I wouldn't have allowed myself to. I would just tough it out. You know, you can handle it, stop being such a woose sort of thing. But now it's really is something I think yeah, you know, that's something that will benefit me.
5. Perceptions of Coping	*15 Files* *60 Units of Meaning*
• Academic	**Adam:** Coping is the delivery of what you need to do academically to pass a subject.
• Juggling	**Diane:** Coping to me is being able to juggle my work life, student life and mum life because I'm doing three subjects a semester and I work 30 hours a week.
• Being proactive	**Kate:** Making adaptations to make something work or like behaviorally changing your behaviours.
• Developed	**Irene:** I guess, I guess as a mature-age student, for me it's something that's developed.
• Experiences	**Brian:** Everyone's wired differently, and we're all shaped by our experiences

5. Perceptions of Coping *(cont)*

- Genetics

  Hanna: I think, I mean, I guess it is in your genes how you cope with things

- Health

  Brian: So it's more when I think of coping, I think you self-care, you know, looking after yourself physically and mentally is the most important thing in coping.

- Motivation or enthusiasm

  Emily: So coping is I think it's about enthusiasm more so than health. Health is important, and motivation and enthusiasm and encouragement maybe.

- Parents

  Jane: To be honest, I think of a lot of it is learned skills when we're young. I think a lot of it we learn from how our parents cope and all our family. So I grew up with a single full-time working mother, and I guess, to some degree a lot of it was no-nonsense. So there was no falling apart. There was no wallowing in self-pity. There was no woe is me I'm a victim

- Personality

  Fiona: So I think there's some innate coping abilities that you learn through life, and some of it's your personality, your style, you know, your work ethic, all of those natural things that some people carry less anxiety and stress than others.

- Social

  Emily: And I've got a lot of support, and I have you know, the kids have all moved out. They're all on my team, and I've got this share house, but they're all on my team. And at the Uni they're all on my team. I'm pretty good on my own, but it's better when you don't have to be—coping maybe a social thing.

- Stress management

  Anne: Trying to make sure it doesn't get on top of you, things don't get on top of you

- Study practices

  Anne: I think it's more starting to find that routine because being online it's not like, oh, I have to go to class or I have to be here by a certain time. So it's putting it in that routine of your life and making sure that you do actually get it done, and I think once you've found that routine and what's going on, it then becomes second nature

5. Perceptions of Coping *(cont)*	
• Taught	**Hanna:** When I did the Steps course through Central Queensland Uni that did have a study skills course which spoke about coping, and I've got sort of stuff stuck all around. I'm doing a succeeding in science course through USQ at the moment which they have obviously put at the beginning because that talks about how the mind works and coping, yeah how to cope.
• Time management	**Gail:** To be able to cope, I guess you got to be able to time manage very well.
• Upbringing	**Frank:** I suppose a lot of it depends on your upbringing, I guess.
• Work	**Gail:** things that you've learned throughout your working life.
PLANNING	
6. Time allocation and usage *15 Files* *110 Units of Meaning*	
• Concept	**Anne:** So if you just let it all pile up and don't have a plan in place, then you're not going to cope, and you're going to, the first thing to come off the bandwagon would be study.
• Function	**Fiona:** I think the first one I was just so timetabled with myself, if that makes sense, I have got to have this done by here, got to have that done by there. As I've got more comfortable with the online environment I've added more flexibility into what I created, so this is critical for this week, I need to make sure I've got that, that and that done this week, but I can leave that and pick that up next week.
• Accommodate family	**Lucy:** So generally, once I've finished work, kids in bed I normally have a couple of hours in the night to go over everything, and then on the weekends I try as best I can to do while the kids are resting or, you know, while the kids are off playing essentially.
• Routine	**Gail:** So I usually get three days off a week. So I try and do at least two of those dates to study.

ENGAGEMENT	
7. Avenues to Engagement	*14 Files* *131 Units of Meaning*
• Belonging	**Emily:** Being able to access it and enjoy it. Feel like I'm part of whatever was going on.
• Communication	**Diane:** Engagement, I guess for me as an online student will be like communication with either my lecturers on my moderators or possibly the people that is in the course as well.
• Comprehension	**Jane:** Engagement for me means, so academically it means understanding the work. Having the work presented in a way that is not easy to grasp, but that you can track and inspires you to branch off in and look at things, investigate things,
• Content	**Fiona:** Engagement with the other students is probably not as important to me at this point in time as engagement with the course content.
7. Avenues to Engagement (*cont*)	
• Course material	**Irene:** So you might have like a piece of writing, then you may have like a video or something that demonstrates that along with the lecture that puts it into a context. So there are all the ways of how I feel like that is engagement in my studies.
• Delivery	**Irene:** I've found that instead of just having a book or just having a lecture or whatever, having the whole mix of things, and then also the way that the literature is presented, that's what engages me.
• Do my own thing	**Diane:** But I mean, if I didn't have to do that, I wouldn't really go out of my way and search for all of their forum postings and then see which one I want to write on. So if it wasn't part of my marking, I probably would just leave them, leave the forum postings and just do my own thing and go along with the study schedule. Probably I'd say no I don't feel like I'm engaged.
• Exclusion	**Brian:** I think that to me, engagement is a very, very important point, because what it does for me is you're basically shutting out the rest of anything else, you know, whatever's going on your life,

7. Avenues to Engagement (*cont*)

- Fall behind

  Fiona: Then I think you get left behind, you lose the nuances of feeling part of the course. Each skipped week is then harder and harder to make up. If you lose that time to do it. And yeah, I just think you lose, you would lose track of your progress if you don't remain engaged.

- Forums

  Anne: So or even if you don't necessarily ask the questions like just reading the forums possibly might be just your type of engagement that you like.

- Interaction

  Kate: Engagement means participation and interacting on a consistent level.

- Lack of connection to unit

  Jane: Whereas with chemistry, I just find it very overwhelming and I find there's no live lecture, so we just get recordings and the recordings are simply the slideshow with a voice. And I find it very hard to connect with, so I find myself avoiding those lectures over the other ones that have that live aspect.

- Lack of interest or motivation

  Lucy: I think based on the lectures that I'm watching it would be to be able to watch the lecturer. Just to be a little bit more engaged, I suppose, in that. So that way we can see them, they can explain things as they're going along. I feel like it should be a bit more 'teaching' I suppose, I don't feel like I'm being 'taught' things, I feel like I'm just being 'told' things.

- Lecturers

  Lucy: I guess watching the lectures, actually for me it would be speaking to the lecturer them self or actually seeing the lecturer, to actually visually see the concepts that we're learning in the labs or in the lecture with little things like drawings and what not.

- Limitation

  Carol: I think the other week one of our lectures malfunctioned on the site. I said I'm not actually going to deal with this, I've emailed, and I'm now going away from it.

- On-campus

  Fiona: I think it's easier to be engaged in-class because you're physically present and engagement happens more naturally.

- Peers

  Adam: Engaging with your peers irrespective of life experience or age or expectations of the course.

7. Avenues to Engagement (*cont*)	
• Personal attitude	**Gail:** So far I haven't done anything that I'm like, oh, this is boring or anything like that. It's all been very interesting. And I can look at it and go, well, that's relevant. I can see how that will help me later in life, deal with situations or cope with different places and situations.
• Study attitude	**Gail:** So I feel I guess I'm in the right course because I'm actually interested in what I'm learning and wanting to learn more about it, so I engage in all the online activities. I try and post on the forums when, you know, whenever it's necessary or if there's someone asking questions and I know that I already know the answer to because I've already watched the tutorial with one of the lecturers and I'll try and reply to someone else saying that
• Tasks and activities	**Frank:** I suppose it's for me, engagement is more to get involved with, to work with. It is working you know with something.
• Underperform	**Carol:** I just do what's required, and that's sad. And that will reflect in further essays and stuff like that. We've got an exam today, and I think if I just read the content that was on there, just watched the videos, and didn't correspond with any other students or the lecturers I would feel disadvantaged now.
• University	**Lucy:** And I do know the Uni offers like a lot of other support services, but I haven't really looked into them. I haven't had the time to see what else they have. So I suppose that would also be engaging, I suppose.
8. Belonging *13 Files 53 Units of Meaning*	
• Class	**Fiona:** You have a set time to be there, and you're part of a group that are going through it together. So you have a cohort. You have others that are that are sharing your journey. So that just naturally fosters friendships, relationships, shared experiences, someone to talk to.
• Faculty	**Brian:** But you see someone with nursing student [points to badge], you know, they're a nurse, you know they're doing nursing. So straight away you've got some commonality with that person. And it breaks down that social barrier as well. So I've certainly found that just that simple act has really helped to engage with other people who are doing a similar course, even if they are different year or whatever.

8. Belonging *(cont)*	
• Friendship	**Brian:** finding likeminded people is very difficult in today's university. Even though there's a lot of mature students, and I've seen some there that are a lot older than me. But it's sort of, I guess, trying to find the right fit or that, you know, like if I go to the refectory, I'll go and sit by myself. I am a very social person, so I can actually go and talk to people. But it's still not, you know, is still sort of you know, it might be a personal thing, but I feel like a bit of a creep [going up to younger students].
• University	**Diane:** I'm not really feeling like part of the Uni environment. I kind of feel like I'm going through the motions of just, ok week 2 got to read this, got to do that, yep that's it, check-up, done. I don't really feel like to part of the Uni life.
• Social	**Kate:** Yes, because you don't get that social thing naturally when you're online. You have to kind of get out of your, you have to try to interact with other people.
• Study	**Anne:** I'm finding that as an online you don't have access to like the tutorials and meetups as you would if you were on campus
9. Distraction *16 Files 80 Units of Meaning*	
• Alcohol	**Irene:** So, I guess the seduction of sitting on a couch and having a glass of wine compared to going downstairs to the office and doing your work, you know, making that choice not to have a glass of wine. That's I guess for me has been the biggest difficulty.
• Avoidance	**Gail:** You can be like, oh, I'll do that another day. But when you say I'll do that another day, that pushes that another day behind and then you become weeks behind, and then you say all my assignments due I can't forget about that.
• Break	**Kate:** I do a little bit of, like a five-minute break, ten-minute break and then go back to what I am supposed to be doing.

9. Distraction *(cont)*	
• Concentration	**Anne:** And as it was the TPP was at home and sitting there going through all the work, and I found myself like just drifting away a little bit, not having that focus even though I did really well. I thought no, I'm not going to focus.
• Direction	**Hanna:** So for me, I think yeah, I think it helps, the engagement helps me hone my focus, make sure I'm on the right sort of trajectory, barking up the right tree.
• Distraction	**Brian:** Online I can be there, I might watch the lectures, do a little bit of an assignment, oh look the X box is just there so I might have a little break, you know. Three hours later, so yeah, that's the problem. In the online environment even though I've had to work from home for so long, if I hadn't been a person who had a home office, I would be extremely worried about doing online courses
• Effort	**Jane:** I get bored. I get distracted. I find it really, really hard to focus. And I find it really, really hard to care.
• Loss of focus	**Carol:** I'll log on to news, and I'll sit there for 45 minutes and then go, hang on a minute get back to what I was doing.
• Maintain focus	**Emily:** I tend not to go out, I probably turn down more outings online because I'm forever feeling like I should be studying
10. Motivation to study *13 Files* *68 Units of Meaning*	
• Financial benefit	**Hanna:** Then also the reason I'm doing three subjects, I probably should have really done two with what I've got going on at home. But doing three means, I can access the AUSstudy as well, which is why I'm pushing myself to try and do that. So the financial side of it comes into it because if I said to my husband I know three is going to be more stressful, but if I'm bringing that AUSstudy that's going to relieve a bit of the pressure of him having to earn as much money.

10. Motivation to study *(cont)*	
• Interest or satisfaction	**Gail:** I'm quite passionate about health being in a health environment already. So I find it really interesting and I want to learn more about it. So I feel I guess I'm in the right course because I'm actually interested in what I'm learning and wanting to learn more about it, so I engage in all the online activities
• Right time	**Lucy:** So that was, I suppose more on me that I was like, I don't want to put it off anymore, I want to actually do this now for me, especially so I can study online, I can make it work, but I need everybody's help to do so essentially
• Self-drive	**Kate:** But as far as my student behaviours, I feel definitely like I'm way more committed to it. And my hope for passing everything and getting good grades is a lot higher than when I was younger.
• Work or career required	**Frank:** Then a colleague told me [the company] was looking at getting most of our engineers chartered, and of course you can't be chartered unless you have a degree. So that was perhaps a bit of an excuse to do what I've wanted to do many years ago

MATURE-AGE	
11. Being mature-age student *15 Files* *100 Units of Meaning*	
• Career change	**Carol:** Change of career path, I'd had enough of retail at the time. I was management in the retail setting just in the supermarket, and it was time to stop doing that because I'd stopped loving it.
• Experience	**Irene:** And so that made me decide, you know what, now I understand, I really understand business, and I really understand all that sort of stuff, and I have real-world experience
• Juggling	**Adam:** I feel that I'm at a point where I can't afford to spend a lot of time trying to revolutionize my methods just because I've got so many other things I have to juggle in life.
• Lack of recency	**Fiona:** As I said, my first course was a struggle, but that was potentially a struggle from the distance of time between when I last studied and what the expectations were then and what is expected now

11. Being mature-age student (cont)	
• Life	**Hanna:** I was thinking that I was going to start Uni then and then I fell pregnant with another child, so all those plans got put on the backburner.
• Re-think	**Diane:** But then I wanted to do business and marketing last year, which is what I enrolled in and then I'm like, no, there's no joy there, and I'm like, I love teaching let me do teaching.
• Values	**Jane:** And I think to a degree mature-age students have a busyness that some younger students don't have, and there's an issue with perhaps relating the two worlds.
• Work or career required	**Adam:** I work for a bank and went straight in from school, so I didn't need a degree. However, I have now reached a ceiling where I cannot go further without one.
NON-ACADEMIC	
12. Family and social life *15 Files 102 Units of Meaning*	
• Accommodating family	**Diane:** So I try to prepare for my exams or my assignments to the best of my ability, but there have been times where I've had to do it the night before because like last year I had a newborn and I was trying to prep for an exam. So that was that's a bit different. But now she's a bit older. I have more time to prepare for exams.
• Accommodating life	**Emily:** It would take a simple thing like for some reason the house has to go up for sale, and we would have to split up, then all of a sudden probably not cope with a course or two and start coping with life
• Engagement	**Brian:** I think that to me, engagement is a very, very important point, because what it does for me is you're basically shutting out the rest of anything else, you know, whatever's going on your life, everyone has things going on in their life, whatever being focused on that**.**
• Routine for family	**Irene:** Yeah. So we have a shared calendar. So I write in the shared calendar when I want to do my Uni's and stuff like that. And then it just kind of just works or even he'll go you haven't done it for a couple of days you better get down to it.

12. Family and social life (cont)	
• Routine for life	**Gail:** But I try and do a work-life and friend balance, even if I had to do the mornings say on a Saturday to do my assignment or watch some tutorials or lectures or whatever. And then going out to dinner I'd have to make sure you know, I plan what I need to do and what I need to complete.
• Study practices	**Frank:** Sometimes if my son has people around on the weekend I'll just go to work with my wife because there's only a few of them at work and I'll sit in their coffee room, set up my laptop and hot spot it. And I sit there again in my own world. I like to shut myself away to study,

ONLINE	
13. Difference between In and On *14 Files* *103 Units of Meaning*	
• Access issues	**Adam:** I think having the benefit of attending a lecture would be good, but with work and family I don't think I would be able to commit to that, not at the moment anyway,
• Benefit	**Diane:** I mean, I probably if I could, I'd probably do at least one subject where I'd go on campus. I feel like I'd be more of a student, more part of the environment
• Community interaction	**Jane:** I felt I guess more connected with the community, not just the work that I may feel I need to solely study on campus,
• Content	**Hanna:** I know they all [in-class and online] have the same amount. So I guess I'm just talking in general. They would still have access to all the same links and all the same reading. But in two of the subjects that they get extra tutorials, which we don't get. In one subject they record the tutorials and we can watch them, in the other two subjects they don't.
• Delivery	**Emily:** But the online learning was easier time-wise, much easier because they were already designed to be online courses, the lecturers and everybody was already, this is how we're gonna be doing it. It was really well set up. I thought it was really well organized. I enjoyed the forums, though I miss having the people around.

13. Difference between In and On (cont)

- Distractions

  Lucy: Whereas I feel if you were in the classroom, you still obviously learning the same things, but that time is designated for you to actually learn those things. You know, you're much more engaged. There's no sort of distractions of family or TV or friends or husbands or anything like that. It's just that you're there to actually learn, which should be easier.

- Effort

  Brian: So I think online is the one you really need to put more effort in, personally, to make sure that you're keeping up with the content.

- Engagement

  Hanna: So there is more potential for an online student to disengage I guess, maybe get wrapped up in what you need to do at home as well.

- Familiarity

  Anne: I suppose with work a lot of our content is online. So something new, a new product comes out or new policy and procedure, everything is online.

- Flexibility

  Adam: I haven't done in-class study, but I like the online format and the freedom to fit in the amount of study when I have the available time. I think having the benefit of attending a lecture would be good, but with work and family I don't think I would be able to commit to that, not at the moment anyway,

- Focus

  Anne: And that anxiety of I feel I need to be in a classroom to learn, I need that focus.

- Lecturer interaction

  Diane: Well, I guess, obviously it's that face to face component. If you go into a lecture and then. You're able to if the lecturers around you're able to ask him the questions right after the lecture, whereas being at home, you have to wait for the lecture to be uploaded and then you have to listen to it.

- Motivation

  Jane: So we get all our slide shows and all our work, and if you're not able to grasp it there's no class time to put your hand up and ask a question or to engage in someone else's question or to be able to catch the lecturer to sort of say can you point me in the right direction. It's very, if you're not self-motivated to go and find another way of having it explained to you, then it's going to be a very big struggle.

13. Difference between In and On *(cont)*

- Online requires

  Brian: But in particular, in the online environment, it's I find it a lot more demanding as far as you know, you've got to actually work all those things out.

- Online lacks

  Diane: You can hear in the tutorial that they are writing something on the whiteboard and it's like well I've got no idea what you're doing because I can't see and that can make it challenging.

- Online offers

  Emily: Online especially, I like that I can access all that stuff when I feel like it, as opposed to having to be up and at eight o'clock in the morning on a Thursday or, you know there's a particular meeting.

- Perception

  Adam: I think that things may become easier the more I do study online, as I become more familiar with the whole study thing.

- Student interaction

  Anne: Some meet up routinely purely on campus, and they just post questions, so you don't get to hear the conversation. So sometimes I feel like that conversation would be good to hear so that you would be getting on campus versus you don't get online.

14. Perceptions of Online Study   *15 Files   115 Units of Meaning*

- Academics

  Brian: But in particular, in the online environment, it's I find it a lot more demanding as far as you know, you've got to actually work all those things out.

- Accommodations

  Fiona: To fit it in with my life. Yeah. So that I can study and learn and do something, learn something new and still balance that with work and family.

- Adaptability

  Adam: I like the openness of the hours for getting things submitted in by, the way it was run, the difference in the types of quizzes and the types of assessments that would do because there is a difference in what they actually want to achieve online.

- Communication

  Emily: But it did take a lot of communicating, and I found that difficult online, I think it's a learned thing

14. Perceptions of Online Study *(cont)*

- Delivery

  Emily: I could see where it would be very easy to just become accustomed to online studying on its own. You know, once I got the swing of study and not coming into campus for classes very much at all.

- Delivery issues

  Lucy: So I did have a residential school this next week, actually to do. But that's been actually was cancelled. Now they'll do it online, so we won't actually get to go into the lab anymore, we'll just be essentially watching it on a video.

- Emotions

  Kate: You have to be sure that you're in a space that's you know, that I have everything technologically connected correctly and everything like that. Yes so that's been anxious, you know, that's been causing me a bit of anxiety, but not terrible

- Lack of interaction

  Diane: So it still really felt like, you know, this is my Uni, but I don't really feel like all the other students do because they go in and get to talk to each other, whereas I feel like I'm only talking to a computer all the time

- Outside influences

  Irene: So, I guess the seduction of sitting on a couch and having a glass of wine compared to going downstairs to the office and doing your work, you know, making that choice not to have a glass of wine. That's I guess for me has been the biggest difficulty.

- Participation

  Kate: but it's been really good having it all in my control, like I can do what I want when I want, and if I want to take extra time to submit something, I can think ahead and start you know, weeks ahead. So that's what I like about it.

- Perceptions

  Fiona: And I was quite prepared to sign up for semester one that I did and go that's not for me, but what I've learned has been valuable. So I, yeah to be perfectly honest, I think I went in without expectations.

- Study expectations

  Frank: I think the biggest challenge is the discipline of sitting down there at night and doing it and getting yourself into that routine

PERSONAL CONFIDENCE	
15. Personal Confidence	*14 Files 266 Units of Meaning*
• Ability	**Hanna:** A bit nervous because I haven't had any results yet, so I don't know, you know, I sort of launched into it, but I don't know if my effort is good enough yet
• Anxiety	**Jane:** I'm learning the stuff that I've never learned that I've got no clue on. So it's hard, and it freaks me out a little bit
• Attitude	**Kate:** Yeah, I think so. I think because I'm older. When I was younger, I probably would have quit. But now that I'm older.
• Belonging	**Diane:** but I don't really feel like all the other students do
• Commitment	**Emily:** And this feeling of aw I should be able to do it, but I am too scared to let things get to the point where I'm taking on too much
• Confidence	**Fiona:** So then I went I'm too old for Uni
• Coping	**Anne:** So I think now into week five I'm starting to get the hang of it.
• Interaction	**Lucy:** But I do know that at the start they always say, you know come to them, email them, do all of that, but I still feel that's a bit, I just don't feel comfortable doing that.
• Knowledge	**Irene:** I feel like as if I have the like jargon in the language skill a little bit more bedded down and stuff like that. So that's kind of helped me with my confidence and be able to do that.
• Preparation	**Gail:** And I really liked the TPP, and I feel like it gave me good grounds to be able to continue on and so far so good.
• Study	**Frank:** I suppose I'm not naturally that academic

15. Personal Confidence *(cont)*	
• Inhibited	**Lucy:** I have their email address, I'm supposed to email them but I feel that's just a bit awkward, I don't really want to have to email a lecturer a stupid question. So I'd prefer to just YouTube it and find out the answer like that.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND SUPPORT	
16. Support services available *13 Files* *38 Units of Meaning*	
• Assist in life	**Emily:** Oh, well, I have already sought support from the university for practically everything because I got out of prison before my first semester there. So my first port of call was to come in and just see sort of what's available where I'm living and settle down and kind of go you know, this is, just even talk to them about is this even worth my while?
• Contact	**Adam:** Academically, I feel that it's been communicated quite well and the channels have been quite open with being able to contact the ESRO's and the lecturers and the tutors and so on and so forth. With regards to non-academics as in the stresses that may come in life, probably less so.
• Knowledge of support	**Hanna:** But yeah, they've definitely got all the information there, they've got too much information, they've got information overload.
• Use of support	**Emily:** Oh, well, I have already sought support from the university for practically everything because I got out of prison before my first semester there. So my first port of call was to come in and just see sort of what's available where I'm living and settle down and kind of go you know, this is, just even talk to them about is this even worth my while?
• Access to support	**Brian:** And I'm absolutely been amazed at the support that USQ has for learning, for mental health, for financial support. All those things that they have it's far beyond, you know when I went to university 32 years ago since I finished at university. So, yeah, it's a long time. But it really has shown me that the university is conscious of these are the sort of problems, and there's promoted facilities there, which as a bloke in the past, I wouldn't have allowed myself to.

Appendix N   Development of 'Engagement' Categorisation to Themes

ENGAGEMENT			
Initial Nodes and Descriptors	**Descriptor Refinement**	**Candidate Themes**	**Themes**
21. Being engaged			
• Content	Content	Content	Facilitating Learning
• Delivery	Delivery	Delivery	Facilitating Learning
• On-campus	Perceptions	Perceptions	The Individual's Influence
• Personal attitude	Personality	Personality	The Individual's Influence
22. Belonging			
• Class	Interaction	Interaction	The Value of Discourse
• Faculty	Interaction	Interaction	The Value of Discourse
• University	University	Interaction	The Value of Discourse
23. Benefit			
• Benefit	Benefit	Motivation	The Individual's Influence
24. Definition			
• Belonging	Personality	Personality	The Individual's Influence
• Communication	Communication	Communication	The Value of Discourse
• Comprehension	Content	Content	Facilitating Learning

Initial Nodes and Descriptors	Descriptor Refinement	Candidate Themes	Themes
• Content	Content	Content	Facilitating Learning
• Delivery approaches	Delivery	Delivery	Facilitating Learning
• Exclusion	Study practices	Study practices	Engagement and Success
• Interaction	Interaction	Interaction	The Value of Discourse
• Lecturers	Interaction	Interaction	The Value of Discourse
• Peers	Communication	Communication	The Value of Discourse
• Tasks and activities	Study practices	Study practices	Engagement and Success
25. Distraction			
• Avoidance	Avoidance	Not performing	Engagement and Success
• Loss of focus	Motivation	Motivation	The Individual's Influence
• Maintain focus	Motivation	Motivation	The Individual's Influence
26. Avenues to engagement			
• Course material	Content	Content	Facilitating Learning
• Forums	Forums	Communication	The Value of Discourse
• Study attitude	Study practices	Study practices	Engagement and Success
• Lecturer interaction	Interaction	Interaction	The Value of Discourse
• University	University	Interaction	The Value of Discourse

Initial Nodes and Descriptors	Descriptor Refinement	Candidate Themes	Themes
27. Focus			
• Concentration	Study practices	Study practices	Engagement and Success
• Direction	Study practices	Study practices	Engagement and Success
• Effort	Effort	Study practices	Engagement and Success
28. Motivation to study			
• Financial benefit	Life influences	Life influences	Accommodating External Factors
• Interest or satisfaction	Motivation	Motivation	The Individual's Influence
• Right time	Life influences	Life influences	Accommodating External Factors
• Self-drive	Motivation	Motivation	The Individual's Influence
• Work or career required	Work-related	Life influences	Accommodating External Factors
29. Not engaged			
• Limitation	Delivery	Delivery	Facilitating Learning
• Do my own thing	Study practices	Study practices	Engagement and Success
• Fall behind	Not performing	Not performing	Engagement and Success
• Lack of connection to course	Motivation	Motivation	The Individual's Influence
• Lack of interest or motivation	Motivation	Motivation	The Individual's Influence
• Underperform	Not performing	Not performing	Engagement and Success