THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL:
A STUDY OF ADULT LEARNERS TRANSITIONING INTO THE ONLINE LEARNING SPACE

PATRICIA POWERS

There is a light at the end of every tunnel.
Some tunnels just happen to be longer than others.

ADAMS, 2012. RE-AWAKENED
[ANGEL CREEK SERIES #2]

A thesis to meet the requirements
of the Doctor of Philosophy

Torrens University, Australia
May 2021

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis is my own work, and to the best of my knowledge, it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, and no materials that have been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Torrens University Australia or any other institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. I acknowledge that the copyright of published work contained within this thesis resides with the copyright holder(s) of those works. Any contribution made to the research by others is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis. However, it is important to note that some participants incorporated illustrations into their reflective journals of their own volition. Some of these images were hand-drawn, and some may have been taken from another source. In the main, the participants did not cite the sources of their journal images. Therefore, while every effort has been made on my behalf to identify each image as an original contribution before inclusion, it is difficult to definitively identify every image as such.

Signature: _____

Date: 10th May 2021

AUTHORITY OF ACCESS STATEMENT

I authorise Torrens University Australia, and any library with which it has a formal agreement, the right to archive and to make available through the Library hardbound and digital copies of my thesis, in whole or in part, for loan or copying or communication, in all forms of media, whether currently or later known, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. I retain the right to use all or part of this thesis in future works.

Signature: _____

Date: 10th May 2021

ETHICAL CONDUCT STATEMENT

The research associated with this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007, updated 2018).

Signature: _____

Date: 10th May 2021

ABSTRACT

Adults aged 25+ currently make up a growing number of students at Australian universities. The majority of them are enrolled in online study which in this case refers to online delivery covering at least 80% of subject content. A higher first year attrition rate among this cohort compared to that of younger students, highlights the need to better understand the transition of older students into the online study space. Past research has provided important information regarding the first-year experience of university students across the board. However, the literature is limited with regard to the lived experience of adult students in the early 'make-or-break' period of the first trimester, including the important formation of student identity, self-efficacy and the intrinsic motivation to persist.

Using an approach informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, this study examines the experiences of twenty-four adult participants. It accompanies them as they transition into the higher education online study space during their first twelve-week trimester at an Australian university. Data consists of a reflective journal and two semi-structured interviews. While the journals were ongoing, the first interview was conducted within the first three weeks and the second was conducted at the end of the trimester.

The data were transcribed and analysed through a systematic process of coding, categorisation and the development of themes focusing upon the students' lived experience. During analysis, the data was further filtered by the application of three characteristics of the Threshold Concepts Framework: liminality, troublesome knowledge and transformation. The Threshold Concepts Framework was employed in two ways. Firstly, it was used to illuminate the affective dimension of the multiple and complex challenges, upheavals, hurdles and achievements experienced by those involved. Secondly, it provided a framework by which to examine for evidence of an experiential threshold concept.

The findings show that to 'become' a new adult online student can be problematic, exciting, troubling and humbling. So often not understanding the meaning of what they are doing, some adult online learners are unable to tolerate the uncertainty they experience, while others embrace it. Their resilience is incremental and fragile, not only in an academic sense, but also as their identity as independent learners develops. Despite the levels of computer integration into everyday life, adult students can be ill equipped technologically and emotionally for online study and its academic and time management demands. Circumstances involving financial considerations, isolation, and even unprecedented opportunity, can further disrupt their transitional journey.

This study offers a deep understanding of the ontological and conceptual shifts experienced by these adult students during their initial transition to the online space and their negotiation of the troublesome knowledge inherent to this space. In terms of retention policy and curriculum development, it informs online educational practice and policy so as to better identify learning support to counteract the specific issues faced by this cohort. Finally, it contributes to the scope of research into the Threshold Concept Framework and its relevance to the experiential domain.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and express my heartfelt thanks to key people who have supported me throughout my doctoral journey.

My grateful thanks go to the adult students who participated in this research study with me. I would like to acknowledge their honesty, their generosity and their willingness to share their fascinating and compelling stories and reflections. I am very grateful to each of them, and I feel privileged to have known them.

My deep gratitude goes to my supervisors, Professor Mick Grimley and Professor Tim Moss. I could not have had a more committed and dedicated pair of experts to guide me. These two have provided the perfect combination of skill, experience, and personality. Thank you for your feedback, guidance, support, and questions, and for putting up with my endless flow of 'last drafts'. My thanks also to Professor Sarah O'Shea and Associate Professor Sarah Howard who helped me begin my journey.

Thanks too, to many colleagues, past and present. I have been so lucky to be able to draw on your combined expertise. To Dr Angele Jones and Dr Carol Aeschliman who have both been so patient, enthusiastic and supportive with friendship and advice. To Professor Eddie Blass, my thanks for wise and valuable feedback. To Dr Louise Townsin and Dr Athena Vongalis-Macrow, whose calm words of encouragement and advice have offered me essential motivation along the way.

To my wonderful husband, John. Thank you for enabling me to have the time and space to do this. Your faith in me has kept me strong throughout. Thank you so much for everything. Adrian, Antonia, Jessica and Luke, thanks for your encouragement and support. I love you all more than you know. I couldn't have completed my journey without you.

Lastly, this thesis is dedicated particularly to my mother, Joan Maher, an amazing woman who left school at fourteen to be the breadwinner for her family, but who knew more about the world than I ever will. She is my inspiration, and her belief in me has always meant so much. I have missed her through this journey, but I know she was watching.

This is for you, Mum.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACODE	Australian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ASQA	Australian Skills Quality Authority
CTEC	Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission
DEET	Department of Employment, Education and Training
DESE	Department of Education, Skills and Employment
DET	Department of Education and Training
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LMS	Learning Management System
ORA	Official Retirement Age
PC	Productivity Commission
TEQSA	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency
TCs	Threshold Concepts
TCF	Threshold Concept Framework
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

They came.
And for a while they shared
a time, a place, a journey.

(Anonymous, 1993)

This is a study of adult students (25 years +) transitioning into higher education as online learners at an Australian university and their challenges, experiences and reactions to this transition. Unlike research into the first-year experience, which includes focus on younger traditional university students, here the focus is exclusively on adults and the changing roles and identities they face in their affective journey into and during the first trimester (twelve weeks) of their study.

The existence of liminal learning spaces is the overarching concept that drives this research. As E.L. Doctorow (cited in Moser-Wellman, 2002, p. 12) says, "It's like driving a car at night. You never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." Transitioning through a liminal space is like navigating that car in the dark; the headlights represent the beacon, the hope and the possibility that light the way. Evidence from the existing scholarship, as well as anecdotal evidence around issues with perseverance and attrition in adult students beginning study in the online space, indicates this as being a deeply unsettling time requiring extensive adjustment (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Mezirow, 2000; Salmon, 2011, 2013). For adult students, taking an opportunity to pursue higher education within the online space, the transitionary process can be inspiring, challenging, even intimidating. They need help with their headlights.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as the methodology and the Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF) as a conceptual lens, the study explores the three stages of liminality experienced by a group of twenty-four participants in an Australian context and investigates the application of the traditionally discipline-based TCF in an

experiential capacity. In this introductory chapter, I explain how my interest in both adult transition into online higher education study and threshold concepts developed, discuss the context of the study, give a brief outline of the conceptual and analytical frameworks on which the study drew, and outline the chapters in the thesis.

1.1. The Background to the Study

My interest in the transition of adult students into online studies at an Australian university is grounded in my own experiences as an adult student studying online and later as a facilitator of online subjects. Completed in 2011, online study for my Master's in Education was an easy choice for me. I attended a university that has an excellent reputation for distance learning in the faculty of Education. I never took more than two subjects in a semester, had access to equipment and several excellent online libraries and was encouraged by my family and by my place of work, another Australian university, to complete my studies. In short, I was supported. While it took a lot of work, I negotiated my online study with very few crises.

However, in later years, as an online facilitator of a growing number of adult students, I could not shake my feeling that many experiences of older students transitioning into the online space for the first time were to some extent qualitatively different to mine, and to those of younger, traditional students. I saw in my online adult students, dramatic evidence of what Illeris (2010, p. 397) termed the "emotional or psychodynamic dimension (i.e., emotional, motivational or attitudinal)", and Schwartzman (2010) described as a transformative state of liminality in which there is a reformulation of a learner's meaning frame, involving both a conceptual and an ontological shift in identity. I also saw something not part of my own experience as an online student: the high attrition rate of those adult students who were not able to negotiate early online study successfully.

It cannot be assumed that the needs of adult students are the same as the needs of traditional students. In a system that is still adapting to meet the divergent needs of its

learners, adult students as a cohort are officially coming to be recognised as having specific benefits and facing specific challenges (Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency [TEQSA] (2017; 2018; 2019; 2020). Practical costs of study, new equipment, the need for skills with technology when using that equipment, and issues with time management and preparation around managing families and work, distinguish the adult student transition into the online study space. Stone and O'Shea (2019) suggest that while adult students often bring rich personal and employment experiences to the classroom, many may struggle to support multiple roles and responsibilities above and beyond those of traditional learners. As a result, significant adjustments in terms of their learning styles, needs, and abilities may be required. Indeed, from my own observation, with adult students, the curriculum content seems to account for only a relatively small aspect of negotiating the online learning process successfully.

This observation led me to ask myself two questions. First, the literature demonstrates clearly that for adults, the early tangible and extrinsic hurdles of interacting online are, if not universal, then certainly widespread. Why, then, do some adult students persist and others attrite? Secondly, what do we need to know about their very early experiences, both practical and affective, in order to focus on supporting them well before attrition becomes their favoured solution? My original goal for this research, therefore, was to support the persistence of the growing cohort of online adult students by better understanding their early transitional experiences. As my next step, I made a thorough investigation into the literature concerning the persistence and retention of adults studying online in higher education courses.

My reading of the literature suggested that studies concentrating on the extra challenges faced by this cohort can be found in two main locations. Firstly, government departments – for example, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), and the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) – and think-tanks –

for example, the Grattan Institute – regularly report on the status of higher education in Australia. In addition, there are a number of very important studies on mature students in Higher Education. Examples include studies of the first-year experience and Transition Pedagogy (Kift, 2009, 2015), studies into mature age students in further education (Hardiman, 2012), the engagement, retention and success of mature-age students (Kahu, 2014; O'Shea, 2020a; O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015; Stone & O'Shea, 2018), and first-in-family and educational equity studies (Groves & O'Shea, 2019; Stone & O'Shea, 2013, 2019; O'Shea, 2015, 2018, 2020b). A review of the relevant literature, however, revealed a paucity of research into the importance of understanding the earliest experiences of adult students during the initial transition period of the first twelve-week trimester.

Plato (c.375 BC) tells us that 'beginnings' infuse and colour the remainder of the educational experience. In the online university context, these 'beginnings' may impact persistence, retention and attrition, yet the significance of the initial transition period upon adult students has remained a low priority in terms of specific study. I therefore came to believe that the emotional aspects of how these students negotiate their early transition into online higher education, and how they cope with student identity formation during this time, are often neglected. Observations indicating this gap in the literature, along with my personal experience observing adults as online students, subsequently led to the specific aim of this study: to develop a deeper understanding of the liminal stages of the journey taken by adult students during their initial transition to the higher education online study space; those early liminal stages described by Schwartzman (2010) as involving a transformation and reformulation of their identity and their framework of meaning.

It can be argued that such research has much to contribute to our understanding of phenomena, through a focus on the particular that can help illuminate the universal (Smith & Eatough, 2017). It is not the purpose of this study, therefore, to generalise, but rather to focus on the possible transferability of findings from group to group. I also seek to achieve

what Smith, Flowers and Larkin, (2009) refer to as “theoretical generalisability” in order to enable the reader to “assess the evidence in relation to their existing professional and experiential knowledge” (p. 4). As such, the current study will make a contribution to both the research and institutional understanding and support of adult students in their initial transitional journey into the online space.

1.2. The Overall Context for the Study

1.2.1. The ‘Non-Traditional Adult Learner’ in Australia

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2017) notes that an older student in Australia embarking on any education programme in adult education, further education and/or higher education is referred to by a variety of designations. These terms include ‘non-traditional student’, 'mature student ', ‘adult student’, and ‘adult learner’. These terms further refer to those who fit into one or more of several groupings of students:

- having dependents;
- being a single parent;
- being employed part or full time;
- having additional roles and responsibilities that directly impact their time, finances, self-esteem and expectations;
- being financially independent;
- attending part-time;
- not having a high school qualification;
- possessing life or work experience external to educational institutions; and
- entry to higher education delayed by at least one year following high school.

Adult students are thereby differentiated from those ‘traditional’ students who have enrolled into tertiary education immediately after they have completed their secondary school education, or those who have taken a ‘gap year’ away from study directly after leaving school. While both adult learners and younger learners are studying full-time, part-

time and/or online, older ‘non-traditional’ students are more disposed to study part-time and online within higher education than are the younger ‘traditional’ age groups, not the least reason being their need to work while studying (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2017a). The scope of digital online facilitation has subsequently emerged as a popular alternative to on-campus lectures for both adult students and educational institutions (Kahu, 2013, 2016; O’Shea, 2016; O’Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015; Stone & O’Shea, 2013, 2019; Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009).

Cross first included older students under the umbrella term ‘non-traditional’ in 1981. In addition, these adult students are often also categorised as a smaller subset of ‘non-traditional adult learners’ by the ABS (2017, 2020a, 2020b). Baptista (2013) provides a definition of the term ‘non-traditional adult learner’ as being adults being traditionally under-represented in higher education. There is some disagreement in the literature, however, regarding the use of the term ‘non-traditional’ as an umbrella term for adult students. Falasca (2011) argues that there is no obvious clarification as to why all adult students over 25 years of age are still considered as belonging within the non-traditional category and, as such, designated as being under-represented.

Among this predominantly online cohort, however, particularly at undergraduate level, are numbers of students who are from the government-identified higher education equity categories, designated as being under-represented in higher education (DESE, 2017c; Cardak et al., 2017; Kent, 2015; Pollard, 2018; Stone, 2017; Stone, O’Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016). The Australian Government’s student-equity program covers students who fit into one or more of several categories. These include:

- adult students 25 years of age and older (although this designation is not consistently applied in the literature);
- those first in their family to attend university;
- indigenous peoples of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) descent;

- disabled individuals;
- regional and remote students; and
- those within the low socio-economic sector (SES) (ABS, 2017; Baptista, 2013; Kenner & Winnerman, 2011; Plageman, 2011; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Stone, 2017).

This classification is used particularly in government reports that have sections focused on 'disadvantaged' or 'marginalised' adult learners, where a range of socio-economic factors are seen to contribute to the difficulties faced by the people included in this category (ABS, 2017, 2020a, 2020b; DET, 2017). Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) argue that such categorisation tends to continue the penchant to place students in oppositional categories or to tag these groups of students as "deficient", consequently persistently sizing them up against something better. Chen (2009; 2017) argues that this is still an under-researched issue and additional investigation is warranted to examine this gap.

While not to suggest that all adult students are similarly identified by complex equity considerations, the literature leaves no doubt that some overlapping characteristics cover both adult students and other non-traditional equity groups, and that they may share similar issues when enrolling in a higher education institution (O'Shea, 2015b; Stone, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). However, none of these groups are homogenous. Rather, research shows us that Australian adult learners are a diverse group of assorted ages, abilities, characteristics, and circumstances (Kahu, 2013a; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kahu, Picton, & Nelson, 2019; Kahu, Stephens, Zepke & Leach, 2014; Kearney, Stanley & Blackberry, 2018; Roddy et al., 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2019).

1.2.2. Higher Education in Australia

In the World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action and Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development in Higher Education, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1998, p. 1) defines higher education as "all types of studies,

training, or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments". According to documentation released by Australia's independent national quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) (2018), in Australia, the terms *higher education* and *university* are often seen as being synonymous. Institutions under both banners are authorised by TEQSA to award qualifications graded from a diploma to a doctorate. However, according to the DESE (2018b), universities are a specific type of higher education provider. While educating the majority of higher education students, the universities constitute the minority of higher education providers in Australia, being 43 of the 169 institutions operational in mid-2018. The other 123 institutions are known as Non-University Higher Education Providers (aka NUHEPs) and include colleges, institutes, and schools that are accredited with TEQSA to present higher education qualifications (TEQSA, 2018 p. 74).

Education statistical surveys (Harvey et al., 2016; Grattan Institute, 2018) indicate that in Australian universities, the tertiary admissions centres process most applications, however escalating numbers of people apply directly to the HE provider/s with, for example, more than 124,000 doing so in 2017. Notably, for this study, the research data shows that adults most often apply directly. According to the DESE Higher Education Statistics Collection (2018a; 2019b; 2020b), reasons behind this direct application include:

- having only one course or institution preference;
- entering postgraduate courses, by-passing the admission centres by taking advantage of early admission opportunities;
- extra pathways via selection criteria including experience and personal attributes; and
- ease of the process.

Also of particular interest with regard to the current study is the burgeoning choice of enrolment into external study, where the delivery is, for the most part, online via the Internet. TEQSA (2019) reports that Australian universities are increasingly using sophisticated digital technologies supported by widespread access to high-speed broadband services to deliver new and innovative content. This delivery includes discovery platforms and learning programs to improve students' navigation and use of information and their ability to create and disseminate information digitally. Reports by the Grattan Institute (2018) highlight that studying off-campus has become easier and more available for Australian higher education students as a result. These reports indicate that learning online by means of computers and other digital devices incorporating the Learning Management Systems (LMS), including Moodle, Blackboard and Canvas, has actually replaced physical attendance in on-campus classes among various student cohorts. For older learners, however, enrolling in an online higher education course is a considerably different proposition to that of the 'traditional' school-leaver, many of whom have grown up with technology. The escalating numbers of adult students enrolling into the online learning space in higher education, and then attriting prior to completion, requires further investigation (DESE, 2018a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b).

1.2.3. Policy Changes

The distinguishing nuances of the adult student experience in Australian universities need to be positioned and contextualised by the substantial national developments seen in higher education in the early 21st century. Reports and papers tabled by both government and national think-tanks record that these developments substantially affected both the levels and diversity of enrolment in higher education. Three such government-induced policy changes actually set the context for the future of higher education in Australia, and in so doing, brought this adult learner cohort into the public consciousness as a distinct population.

The first of these changes was The Review of Higher Education in Australia (aka The Bradley Review), initiated by the Australian Government in March 2008 and adopted as government policy in 2009. The second was the 2010 Federal Budget, in which it was announced that from 1st July 2017, the qualifying retirement age for both men and women would progressively rise from 65 to 67 years by 2023. The last was the proposal by the Productivity Commission, the Australian Government's principal advisory body on microeconomic policy, on November 22, 2013, to lift the pension-age to 70 years.

1.2.3.1. The Review of Higher Education in Australia (The Bradley Review)

The introduction of the Demand-Driven System of university enrolment was implemented on the findings of the *Review of Higher Education in Australia* [aka The Bradley Review] (Australian Government, 2008; Gillard, 2009). This review was initiated by the Australian Government in March 2008, led by Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley AC, and adopted as government policy in 2009 (Parliament of Australia, Budget Review, 2009/2010). The purpose of the Bradley Review was to examine and recommend reform and continuing improvement to the higher education sector. The report compiled from the review and entitled *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* was released by the Australian Government in December 2008. According to the report (2008, p. 19), increased investment in education within the Australian higher education sector was critical to Australia's overall progress. The Australian Labor Government of the day accepted the strategy for increasing participation in higher education to previously underrepresented groups, including adults, then implemented two targets based on the Bradley Review: increasing the number of 25-to-34-year-old Australians with undergraduate degrees to 40%, but delaying the original date of 2020 for achieving the goal to 2025; and raising the number of students from equity groups, including mature age, remote/regional, primary caregivers, students holding low socio-economic status, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students with a disability, to 20% of the

undergraduate cohort (Australian Government, 2008; Birrell, Rapson & Smith, 2010; DET, 2015; Gillard, 2009; Norton, 2016, p. 21).

While Demand-Driven funding itself ended in 2017, public university funding policy changes had already led to the establishment of increased student places, particularly in online courses (Grattan Institute Report, 2018). Reports from DET (2015), TEQSA (2017), and DESE (2016, 2017b) reveal numbers of domestic students embarking on Australian higher education by enrolling in a wholly external program increased from 17.5% in 2010 to 21.9% in 2015. Data for the whole of 2016 demonstrated further increases, with one-in-five domestic students studying off-campus, 22.8% (93,905) of the 411,228 of the newly enrolled students choosing to study in a fully online mode, 45% of students who were enrolled on-campus reporting doing half or more of their study online and 13% of students enrolled in a multi-modal delivery combining online and on-campus study.

It is obvious from the literature (for example, Bradley et al., 2008; Grattan Institute Report, 2018; Kemp & Norton, 2014) that subsequent to the 2008 Bradley Review of Higher Education, the demographics of students entering universities in Australia shifted. The Productivity Commission (PC), the Australian Federal Government's principal advisory body on microeconomic policy, released a report in 2019 entitled *The Demand Driven University System: A Mixed Report Card*. According to the PC report, universities have amended their admissions procedures since the Bradley Review in order to facilitate an increase in student numbers. The information and experiences considered appropriate for enrolment have been expanded, leading to an increase in overall student numbers and greater support for equity groups, including adult students. Direct applications for enrolment, the vast majority of which are made by adults, more than doubled between 2009 and 2018, and in the same timeframe, tertiary admissions centres (the traditional route of secondary school graduate admission) saw a growth of 17%.

1.2.3.2. Changes to the Official Retirement Age (ORA) in Australia

As previously mentioned, adults are defined by the ABS (2017; 2020a; 2020b) as being aged 25 years +. It is apparent from the government reports that a second factor impacting changes to higher education enrolment, and one particularly involving and affecting adult learners, is the change to the Official Retirement Age (ORA) in Australia. In the 2010 Federal Budget, the Australian Treasurer announced that from 1st July 2017, the qualifying retirement age for both men and women would progressively rise from 65 to 67 years by 2023 (Parliament of Australia, Budget Review, 2010). It was then proposed by the Productivity Commission, on November 22, 2013, to lift the pension age to 70 years, thereby saving the taxpayer $150 billion in health and welfare spending and providing social, political, and economic benefits for the broader society (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [AIHW], 2018; Australian Skills Quality Authority [ASQA], 2019). Two principal reasons for this proposal were the findings that by 2057 over eight million people, or 22% of the population in Australia, will be 65 and older (AIHW, 2018, 2019), and that by 2063 the number of Australians aged 75 years + will have increased by 4 million (ABS, 2017, 2020a, 2020b; AIHW, 2018). This growth, and the expeditious pace of technological change, are resulting in an aging and increasingly diverse population returning to or beginning online study in order to cope with and/or take advantage of the constantly shifting demands of the workplace. Indeed, subsequent to the Bradley Review and the changes to retirement and pension eligibility, the demographics of students entering universities in Australia have shifted considerably (ABS, 2017, 2020a, 2020b; Chen, 2017; Moore & Greenland, 2017; Nelson, Creagh, Kift & Clarke, 2014; Stone & O'Shea, 2019).

1.2.4. The Evolution of Online Learning in Australia

Data demonstrate that adult students in Australia – often people with significant work and family responsibilities – typically choose more online studies than on-campus

studies. Not having to travel to campus has made study easier in many ways for these groups (DESE, 2020). According to Bailie (2014), the online mode of study has provided an effective and accessible method of reaching the adult learner, thereby providing access to higher education for this quickly growing demographic. Consequently, there has been an exponential and continued growth in enrolment into this mode of facilitation, making higher education accessible to a much larger population and oftentimes older population (Roddy et al., 2017; Kahu & Nelson, 2017, 2018; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Indeed, online education has evolved to revolutionise the higher education sector in Australia.

Hamilton (1990) reports that distance education evolved due to the advent of the same determinants that gave rise to adult education: the demands of the Industrial Revolution for an educated workforce and the resulting escalating literacy among adults, the enterprising growth in the use of the printing press and the resulting burgeoning publishing industry, and cheap, mass-produced pens. In addition, as Blainey (1966) and Northcott (1984) tell us, correspondence study – an early variant of distance education – benefitted from the growth of a low cost and reliable mail system, an organised transportation system and, in countries such as Canada and Australia, the challenges presented by the tyranny of distance over vast, sparsely populated areas.

The Department of Employment, Education and Training (1993), and Cunningham et al. (1998), note that the University of Queensland (UQ) in 1911 became the first university in Australia, and one of the first globally, to offer external correspondence study at degree level. This mode of delivery was then offered by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 1919 and by the University of Western Australia in 1921 (Guiton & Smith 1984). Northcott (1984) relates that following World War II, Sydney and Melbourne universities set up an external system especially for study for service and ex-service men and women. However, as Eastcott and Small (1984) note, this did cause concern at the time among the Professional Board of the University of Sydney. Board members doubted

the academic credibility of this mode of delivery. In 1951 they concluded with conviction that external studies being so inferior to internal studies, the setting up of a specialised department of external studies should not and would not be recommended.

Despite this conviction, it is obvious from Clarke's history of the Internet in Australia (2004) that the universities nevertheless led the way in Australia's exploitation of the Internet. Email was made available to computer scientists in the late 1970s via the Universities of Melbourne, Sydney and Wollongong pre-internet dial-up system, ACSNet. Introduction to the user-pay Internet, again under the auspices of the universities in the late 1980s, and widespread access to Internet connectivity in Australia by the 1990s, were powerful catalysts for the delivery of external study beyond geographical perimeters, and the rapid growth of online education delivery across Australia generally. Both government and think tank reports indicate that by the end of the 20th century, colleges and universities in Australia offered courses and entire degree programs online, and online education was the largest sector of distance higher education (Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (Australia) [CTEC], 1986; DESE, 2017b; Norton, 2016; Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Grattan Institute's annual reports on Higher Education in Australia have indicated student numbers have increased. This increase has occurred alongside advances in the development of accessible Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), post Bradley Review changes in demand for online learning, and the number of Australian universities that have the capacity to facilitate courses online. The COVID19 pandemic has resulted in a sizable increase in online facilitation in the higher education sector, among others. Most of the intended classroom delivery has now moved online in Australia and globally. While too early for a full assessment, initial data and anecdotal evidence point to this trend continuing in some form. The crisis has both revealed the potential of online learning to expand the learning

opportunities for adults and highlighted evidence of key limitations to this form of delivery.

The evolution of modes of delivery and indeed the evolution of higher education providers are resulting in a proliferation of the scope and extent of available online higher education services in Australia (Grattan, 2017; Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). It is obvious from the reports released from the Higher Education Statistics Collection, Department of Education, Skills and Employment, (2017c; 2017d; 2018a; 2019; 2020a; 2020b), and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020a; 2020b), that technology is redesigning how education is bought, experienced, engaged with, and ultimately used. Through the use of digital materials and delivery, online education has provided a convenient alternative delivery mode for increasing numbers of urban-based students choosing the convenience of not having to visit a university campus. Students from diverse backgrounds, disparate support systems and dissimilar life experiences from those of traditional students are enabled to enrol in university. Many of these students are adult learners (Kahu & Nelson, 2017, 2018).

1.3. The Conceptual Framework for this Study

The conceptual framework for this study is informed by the Threshold Concepts Framework (Meyer & Land, 2003a; 2003b). My interest in the Threshold Concept Framework (TCF) was first stimulated by Professors Erik Meyer and Ray Land's presentation about their project, 'Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses', at the 10th *Improving Student Learning* conference in Brussels in 2002. Meyer and Land (2003a; 2003b) suggest that a threshold concept is a transformative idea traditionally bounded within a specific discipline. They label such concepts as 'threshold' because "… once understood … [they] occasion a significant transformative shift in the perception of a subject, or part thereof" (2003a, p. 4). It is also suggested that threshold concepts (TCs) have various characteristics by which they may be identified. I

will return to these in greater detail in Chapter 3, 'The Conceptual Framework', but briefly, these characteristics are the following:

- Liminality: a 'fluid' space, synchronously undergoing transformation and in turn transforming the learner as he or she transitions through it (Turner, 1967);
- Troublesome knowledge: the more difficult knowledge to grasp; alien, "troublesome or counter-intuitive concepts within a curriculum" (Meyer et al., 2008, p x);
- Transformation: a significant change in learners' understanding, values or attitudes that radically changes their appreciation of themselves and their knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2005; Timmermans & Meyer, 2017);
- Discourse: the integration of new and specific verbal and/or mental formal or symbolic language (Flanagan, 2016);
- Reconstitution: "a shift in learner subjectivity, which is implied through the transformative and discursive aspects already noted" (Smith, 2006);
- Integration: the revelation of interrelatedness between concepts or ideas in ways that were previously hidden or unclear (Meyer & Land, 2006a; 2006b);
- Irreversibility: once understood and adapted, concepts and ideas cannot be reversed or unlearned without considerable effort; and
- Boundedness: helps to define what a discipline is and what it is not, what is critical and what is peripheral, and what may be required to work in or with other disciplinary spaces (Barradell & Fortune, 2020).

In order to shed light on the experiences of adults in the transition process into the online space, however, I required a conceptual framework unfettered by a purely disciplinary context. The TCF is a transformative learning-centred approach (Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015). Social constructivist in nature, it encompasses emotion, social learning perspectives and motivation as core dimensions of learning (Burchmore, Irvine &

Carmichael, 2007; Meyer & Land, 2005; Timmermans, 2010). The TC characteristic of liminality and its inextricably linked co-characteristics of troublesome knowledge and transformation critically entail both conceptual and ontological shifts. Subsequently, these three *sine qua nons* characteristics central to threshold concepts research presented the potential for me to reconceive the Threshold Concepts Framework for use as a lens within an online learning space, rather than a discipline-based one. Supported by the remaining five TC characteristics during the analysis process, they form the principal conceptual framework scaffolding this study of the transition of adult students into the online space. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth discussion of both the Threshold Concept Framework and the conceptual framework used in the current study.

1.4. The Analytical Framework for this Study

The analytical framework for this study is informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). As already mentioned, my intention at the outset of this research was to develop a deeper understanding of the liminal stages of the journey taken by adult students during their transition to the higher education online study space. This required, to use Kuhn's (1970, p. 175) metaphor, a “revolutionary paradigm shift” in my own thinking. Working out how to go about creating and laying the foundations for this research initially led to a rather tumultuous reflection on my own epistemological beliefs. If the “complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 221) was truly to be investigated, capturing the ‘reality’ of the adult students transitioning into online learning was critical.

In selecting a suitable methodology, it was essential to take into consideration the aim of the study, development of the research questions, and how these would best be served. A qualitative approach that would also align well with the use of my re-conception of the Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF) was needed (as discussed in Chapter 3). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), developed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin

(2009), focuses deeply on the gathering and understanding of subjective meanings given to an experience by those experiencing it, and the significance of that experience (Finlay, 2011). The researcher and the research process are inextricably connected, and the contact between researcher and participant is typified by a hermeneutic reciprocal candidness and connection. As such, IPA represented the flexible pathway I envisioned for this study.

IPA uses hermeneutic, idiographic and contextual analysis to interpret an individual's personal experiences and cultural position by means of an "insider's perspective" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 53). In IPA, it is the role of the researcher to be immersed in both the process and the outcome at an idiographic level (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). There is a double-hermeneutic process of interpretation involved, in which the participant makes sense of their own experiences, while the researcher is, in turn, making sense of the participant's sense-making (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 4; Smith et al., 2009). By means of inductive and iterative analysis, IPA researchers endeavour to understand the participants by taking their side, from their perspective (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In order to provide transparency, engagement in a process of reflexivity is essential, and of crucial importance in acknowledging the role of the researcher in the study. As an insider-researcher (Trowler, 2011), I was aware of the necessity to maintain a "delicate and reflexive balancing act" (Reinharz & Chase, 2002, p. 234) in terms of bias throughout the research process (Creswell, 2014).

Semi-structured qualitative interviews and reflective participant journals were used in this study. These data collection tools have been equated to "wandering together with" the interviewee as "travelling companions" engaging in dialogue in the context of a conversation trying to construct his or her "stories of the lived world" (Kvale, 1996, p. 4). Smith et al. (2009) tell us that "interviewing allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of participants'

responses, and the investigator is able to enquire after any other interesting areas which arise" (p. 57).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) also contends that facts and values are inseparable (Smith, 2011). The researcher, therefore, is involved with making possible both the appearance of meaning and its interpretation (Smith et al., 2009, p. 23). One primary and four sub-research questions were evolved in order to enable a better understanding of the participant's transitional journeys by revealing and interpreting the nature of the lived experience of each one:

Primary Research Question:

How do adult learners (25 years +) experience the transition to online degree studies in higher education?

Sub-Questions:

1. How does one group of adult learners describe their first weeks of study in an online environment?
2. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?
3. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?
4. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

Chapter 4 provides an in-depth discussion of the research methodology and methods employed in this study.

1.5. Outline of the Thesis

Chapter 1: In this chapter, I have outlined the development of my interest in adult students transitioning into the higher education online study space, particularly during their first trimester, and explained my aim for the study; provided background information about

adult learners and the higher education scene in Australia; and introduced the conceptual framework, methodology and research questions used in the study. Following this introduction, the thesis is presented in a further nine chapters and is organised as follows:

Chapter 2: The Literature Review reviews and contextualises the relevant literature in light of the thesis aim. The chapter sections deliver an outline of the aims and strategies employed in searching and appraising the literature; the participation of adult students within higher education and the factors impacting their persistence, retention and attrition; their identity as students and their engagement as students; the definition of online learning and its impact on adult learners, modes of course delivery, self-regulation, and flexibility of delivery; the evolution of online higher education in Australia; and finally the gaps in knowledge, and justification for the focus of this research. However, it is important to note here that the integration and examination of relevant literature is continually woven throughout the thesis in order to best inform the focus of the study.

Chapter 3: This chapter is an account of the conceptual framework used in this study. It includes a rationale for the choice of the Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF) as the stimulus for the conceptual framework and how the three *sine qua non* Threshold Concept (TC) characteristics of liminality, troublesome knowledge, and transformation align with and support the structure of the study; the origins and the foundational pedagogical characteristics of the TCF and TCs; and my variations to the traditional application of the TCF. Criticism of the TCF approach is also discussed.

Chapter 4: The analytical framework of the study is presented in this chapter. Firstly, the interpretivist tradition is positioned in relation to axial, epistemological and ontological considerations. The decisions around the qualitative approach to the study follow. The data collection methods: semi-structured interviewing techniques and journaling, data collection, and transcription are then outlined. Finally, the methodology of

the study is examined: the journey to the choice of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), criticism of the approach, and handling of the data.

Chapter 5: This chapter presents the research design for the study and an explanation of the ethical requirements and procedures, before setting the scene by looking at an overview of the participants, their recruitment and their pathways to study.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8: These three chapters present the findings using the three sections of the liminal journey: pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal. The chapters have been separated in order to highlight the diversity in the stages of the participants' liminal journey. Chapter 6 presents a detailed insight into the variation in the participants' perception and experience of their early pre-liminal encounters with the online liminal space. Chapter 7 presents comprehensive coverage of the variation in the participants' negotiation of the online liminal space – how they made sense of their later experiences. Chapter 8 illustrates variations in the participants' journey, including, for some, the passage out of the liminal space and into a post-liminal "new conceptual space" (Meyer, Land & Davies, 2008, p. 68). This chapter also proposes an experiential threshold concept relevant to the participants' transition into the online higher education space.

Chapter 9: In the manner of IPA methodology (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999), the discussion of the findings is presented in this chapter. It presents an analysis and discussion of key themes within the wider context of the literature, in response to the main research question: How do adult learners (25 years +) experience the transition to online degree studies in higher education?

Chapter 10: Again, in the manner of IPA methodology (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999), this concluding chapter draws the threads of the study together. The strengths and limitations of the research process are summarised. Implications for practice arising from the findings are suggested. Finally, reflections on the research process lead to recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2:
ENGAGING WITH THE LITERATURE

Seek the counsel and expertise of those who have been there before you.

(Anonymous, 1993)

While the first chapter explains the background and the overall context to the study, this chapter positions that context of adult learners aged 25+ years who are transitioning into the higher education online learning space in Australia, within the wider research literature. Undertaking this literature review was both challenging and revealing for me. Challenging because two big questions I asked myself before conducting this research were, "So what?" and "Why does this research matter"? Revealing because it's a bit like looking for pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. It is also an ongoing revelation because it is part of an ongoing conversation, situating my research within my discipline. As Creswell (2014), and Creswell and Poth (2018), tell us, a literature review formalises the study within the context of subject knowledge.

2.1. Aims and Strategies of the Literature Review

2.1.1. Aim of the Review

The main aim of this chapter is to illustrate how the current research can inform understanding of adult students aged 25 years + experiencing their first trimester of online higher education. The literature will be synthesised in order to position the current study within the relevant wider scholarly discourse. By establishing gaps in this literature, it will also show how the current study can advance this field of research (Snyder, 2019). In order to fully ground the data analysis and discussion in following chapters, current viewpoints concerning who the adult student is, what online learning is, and the related topics of attrition, persistence, retention, and engagement will be highlighted. This chapter, however, presents only one stage in this endeavour, with the integration and examination of relevant literature woven throughout the thesis.

2.1.2. The Structure of this Chapter

The review is structured into three main sections. The first sets out the aims and strategies employed in searching and appraising the literature. The examination of the adult learner will then make readily apparent the contradictions related to the factors impacting their persistence, retention and attrition, their identity as students, their engagement as students, and the leading theoretical rationales for these factors. In order to provide a background to the various issues experienced by this adult cohort, the paucity of consistent representation within the research relating to adult students is also noted. The third section examines the literature about online learning itself, its impact on adult learners, its definition, modes of course delivery, self-regulation, flexibility of delivery, Learning Management Systems and the evolution of online higher education in Australia. These frames of reference, together with the final section consolidating the gaps in knowledge and justification for the focus of this research, inform the main thesis of this chapter. The chapter sections are formatted in order to achieve three outcomes: to direct the review of the literature toward the justification of the research focus by establishing an evidence base, to put that knowledge into perspective, and to reveal a gap in empirical knowledge.

2.2. Search and Review Strategy

When reviewing a body of empirical work, Creswell and Poth (2018) maintain that a literature review should be carried out using a planned, ordered procedure. In addition, Booth, Papaioannou and Sutton (2012) emphasise that the literature review must be rigorous. The SALSA (search, appraisal, synthesis, analysis) review framework was applied as the umbrella approach in order to guide this exploration of the literature (Booth et al., 2012).

2.2.1. Search Tools

I began and continued the collection of data throughout the study, with thorough searches on the catalogues, electronic databases, search engines and websites, and the

tables of contents – including electronic table of contents alerts and journal feeds – of the key journals publishing both online education and adult learning articles. These included the educational e-databases Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), SAGE Journals Online, Science Direct, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online Journals, ProQuest, Education Research Complete and Web of Science, as well as Libraries Australia Search and the Threshold Concepts website and Bibliography. Prior to undertaking searches, I consulted each database directory to ensure the use of these operators was employed efficiently (Ridley, 2012). A blend of free text and thesaurus searching as recommended by Booth et al. (2012), was applied as relevant to each database searched.

The use of Google Scholar and Bing search engines also provided me with access to a wide range of sources. These included primary research, secondary and tertiary materials. Grey literature, including book reviews, literature reviews, meta-analysis studies, editorials and conference proceedings, professional body reports, and popular media, provided access to additional studies focused upon the topic area. The reviewed data concerning the nature of higher education in Australia and adult learners transitioning into online learning, including content regarding attrition rates among this cohort, came predominantly from Federal Government reports. These reports were instigated by departments including the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which is the national statistics agency. These data were not always particularly forthcoming nor easy to locate, so I also contacted the governmental organisations in person in order to assist the searches. Further data came from reports and research by public policy think tank, the Grattan Institute, an organisation funded by government, higher education and industry.

2.2.1.1. Search Terms and Parameters

Inclusion criteria were incorporated into the search strategy by crafting the identification of the key concepts to be considered and choosing initial search terms (Cooke, Smith & Booth, 2012). I initially employed a snowballing technique to review (a) appropriate search terms and keywords and (b) reference lists in order to refine the search parameters and reveal additional relevant search terms and literature (Booth et al., 2012; Ridley, 2012). The preliminary critical appraisal of data then involved an assessment of each initially chosen article using the SQ3R system. This reading comprehension method incorporated five steps: survey, question, read, recite, and review, enabling a general overview of each text's focus to 'screen in' studies of particular relevance and 'screen out' those that were not relevant.

The process of critical appraisal of the chosen data involved a further systematic review – this time involving each article in depth. This was achieved by using a derivation of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist (Singh, 2013; CASP, UK, n.d.). During the first reading, I checked the relevance of each text by asking questions covering a critical review of aims, methods, focus and contexts, and results. The factors taken into consideration that enabled me to reach conclusions regarding applicability to this study included validity and reliability, or trustworthiness and authenticity (as relevant) (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once each text was deemed relevant, I read it again carefully. Comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965) was then used to compare, contrast and integrate similarities and differences in the studies. I noted the key points and reviewed the text again to ensure that all salient points had been identified.

2.2.1.2. Keywords

The comprehensive search of individual keywords was undertaken in three broad areas. The first search area covered the adult student in higher education, their needs, the internal and external challenges they face, and potential approaches to addressing these

needs from an institutional viewpoint. Initial search keywords included: *adult learner, adult transition to higher education, first year experience, adult student, andragogy, attrition, persistence, retention, dropout, higher education, transition to higher education, obstacles faced by adult learners.* The second area involved investigating higher education in Australia. Initial search keywords included *higher education, Australian higher education, Bradley Review, Australian universities, Grattan Institute, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Department of Education and Training*. Use of technology in the online higher education context was the third area of investigation and the terminology used included: *online learners, online learning, e-learning, e-learners distance education, role of technology in higher education, using technology in higher education, technology and adult education, Learning Management Systems* and *digital tools*. This approach permitted me to capture extensive literature using the chosen terms and resulted in both relevant and irrelevant material. To strengthen search efficiency, I then applied Boolean logic to allow specificity resulting in identification of relevant literature for review. This process permitted a more focussed search enabling more definition.

2.2.1.3. Inclusion

Sources concerning Australian studies were given precedence in light of the participants being investigated; however, international sources relevant to the adult learner and online learning in higher education were also considered and used when applicable. The principal inclusion criteria were the (a) studies that reported the findings from government reports concerning the historical enrolment of adult students (b) online education programs offering higher education academic degrees, (c) the definition of an adult student, (d) the challenges and experiences faced by adult learners transitioning into and studying in, online higher education, and (e) the body of knowledge of ‘how learners learn’.

To be relevant to the review, studies needed to define adult learners either by categorical statement of age, or specific identification or classification fitting the designation of an adult learner. Since the focus of this literature review explores adult learners' transitional journey into and within online higher education and their challenges, experiences and reactions therein, I used qualitative, mixed methods, or descriptive studies as the predominant sources. However, quantitative journal articles and government reports researching the reasons for the behaviour of adult learners concerning attrition and persistence were also included in the review.

In light of expeditious technological developments over the last decade and the resulting vigorous evolution of online education, studies published in the twenty-first century were typically used in the review. Some earlier resources published during the twentieth century were included, particularly with reference to distance learning and the early developments in online learning and delivery. As a rule, however, the dates were decided upon in order to demonstrate currency in two main areas: the attitudes and practices of adult learners, and towards adult learners; and attitudes toward technology and the uses of technology within higher education contexts.

2.2.1.4. Exclusion

Exclusion criteria included (a) content unrelated to adult student online persistence and attrition rates, (b) lack of original data, (c) content unrelated to academic online study at an undergraduate bachelor level (studies concerning corporate training and non-academic adult education were excluded from the study) and (d) text not written in English. While this last criterion could be argued to be potentially limiting, several of the included studies did contain research that had been conducted by researchers from around the world, and this included a number of countries in which English was not a first language. This parameter was, therefore, not felt to diminish the review.

2.2.1.5. COVID19 and Threshold Concepts literature

Several sources discussed in this review cover the 2020 academic year and include the pandemic. However, as the pandemic did not directly impact the participants in this study, and their reasons for enrolling in online study were completely different to many of those students forced into studying online during the global crisis, I have not targeted these sources for their COVID19 content per se. Rather, these sources were included for current data of a general nature concerning online delivery modes. Addressing these exigences presents opportunities for further research into advancing the growth and inclusivity of online learning in the post-COVID period. The COVID19 pandemic itself is, however, briefly discussed in the final chapter in terms of its impact upon the online learning environment. Similarly, literature pertaining to the Threshold Concepts Framework is included only briefly in this review as it is thoroughly covered in Chapter 3, which concerns the Conceptual Framework used in this study.

2.2.1.6. Limitation

Once saturation point in the search was reached, when the same authors and the same articles and reports were consistently found, I concluded the search and then categorised and critically reviewed the selected studies and research. While the search for the relevant literature was extensive and systematic using the SALSA (search, appraisal, synthesis, analysis) review framework to find as much relevant literature as possible, this review is not exhaustive but limited to the chosen databases and the aforementioned keywords. This must have limited the findings and results that emerged. It is sensible to assume there are other pertinent sources of data in the literature that did not emerge and were therefore not included in this review.

2.2.2. The Research Questions

There was a symbiotic relationship between the scholarly literature and my research questions. The selection criteria for this literature review were based on the

study's research questions, and as I investigated and evaluated the literature, the original research questions evolved based on what I learned.

Primary Research Question:

How do adult learners (25 years +) experience the transition to online degree studies in higher education?

Sub-Questions:

1. How does one group of adult learners describe their first weeks of study in an online environment?
2. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?
3. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?
4. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

This chapter will now offer a sequence of contextualised sections. As the chapter proceeds, these sections focus ever more closely on the locus of this study: the negotiation of adult students' transition into the higher education online space. In a study such as this, it is important to know what the literature says about who the Australian adult student enrolling into higher education online is, what has led to their numbers increasing, and what is affecting their engagement, persistence, attrition and retention. In order to present a comprehensive setting for the upcoming data analysis chapters, the data regarding the adult learner in the Australian higher education context is therefore reviewed first.

2.3. The Adult Learner in Australian Higher Education

The importance of online learning to adult students' choice of format when enrolling in higher education has been established in the literature globally. For educational institutions, the implications of the emotional negotiation of adult learners with

online higher education are considerable. They include the requirement for an understanding of adult learners, their needs and their online learning contexts, and also the design of the online space itself. In recent decades the Australian higher education student profile has become more diverse. It is important to the current study to investigate who the Australian adult learner is, but such diversity can prove challenging when trying to pin down this cohort and attempting to take a closer look at evidence of their negotiation with the online learning space.

This section provides a review of selected Australian and international research literature concerning adult learners in higher education, and factors involved in their retention and attrition. The aim is to explore this cohort and their relationship to online learning and how these have been researched and understood prior to this investigation. This approach is not intended to reinforce ideas of oversimplistic notions of difference established on binary generational determinisms such as “digital natives” and “digital immigrants” (Prensky, 2001 pp 1-2), but rather to investigate the research pertaining to the complexity of a multi-generational cohort grouped together by institution, government and tradition. This research into the literature aligns with my sub-research questions 1, 2, 3 and 4:

Sub-Questions:

1. How does one group of adult learners describe their first weeks of study in an online environment?
2. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?
3. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?
4. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

2.3.1. Background

According to research studies (e.g. Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2013; Kahu, Stephens, Zepke & Leach, 2014; Moore & Greenland, 2017; Signor & Moore, 2014; Stone & O'Shea, 2019), and Government-reported statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017; 2020a; 2020b), while most full-time Australian university students are direct high school leavers, the numbers of adult learners, have increased. Over 430,000 students in Australia are currently aged 25 years and older (Universities Australia, 2019). These adult students account for 39.1% of the total domestic higher education enrolment, and 22% of first-year undergraduates (Universities Australia, 2020; Department of Education, Skills and Employment [DESE], 2020a, 2020b). In 2019 annual growth in first-year domestic undergraduate enrolments was as high as 6.6% for students aged 30 to 40 years compared to 0.5% for students aged 21 to 24 (DESE, 2020). Kahu's framework (2013a; 2013b; 2014), on the engagement of adult students who combine part-time, online study with complex lives, illustrates their unique nature and, therefore, the importance of studying this quickly growing cohort as a separate population (Kahu, Stephens, Zepke & Leach, 2014; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kahu, Picton & Nelson, 2019; Mallman & Lee, 2016).

A review of the research conducted over several years indicates that the reasons an older student enrols in university are characterised by a diverse and complicated arrangement of self-perceived pragmatic and economic benefits and issues. These may include educational achievement or lack thereof, familial responsibilities, the number of years since the completion of previous study, and current employment status (Kahu, 2013; Laming, Martin-Lynch, & Morris, 2016; Laming, Morris, & Martyn-Lynch, 2019; O'Shea, 2016; O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; TEQSA, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). Sources note that various extrinsic social and economic forces have also influenced adults' increased participation in higher education. These include an aging and

increasingly diverse population, later retirement age, rapid technological developments, and a global economy making constantly shifting demands upon the workplace. Such influences are not likely to wane. This suggests that for older learners, enrolling and persisting in an online higher education course presents a considerably different proposition to that of their younger peers.

Such diversity in itself presents challenges for the current study: to correlate individual adult student experience with wider political and social factors so as to produce a comprehensive 'snap-shot'. While this view will not necessarily be universally applicable, it will still contribute genuine understanding regarding student transition, persistence and engagement.

2.3.2. Factors impacting Persistence, Retention and Attrition

2.3.2.1. Attrition

While the research on attrition is vast, it is not without its limitations when concerning the adult student population who are commonly represented by diversity in background, experience and age. In order to better comprehend these differences, the next section will investigate the literature around the complexity, issues and obstacles frequently negotiated by adult students, particularly in the online learning space.

Australian Government data confirms the substantially lower completion rate by online students compared with students studying face-to-face (DESE, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2020b). It emerged from one government study over the eight-year timeframe 2008–2016 that just 46.6% of external/online students completed their qualifications, compared with 76.6% for internal, face-to-face students (DESE, 2016; Department of Education and Training [DET], 2015). Further studies by O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty (2015), Stone et al. (2016), and Stone (2017), for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) and the Federal Department of Education and Training (DET, 2017c), found that online students were 2.5 times more

inclined to withdraw from their studies without a qualification than their face-to-face peers. These studies provide data across the board.

More specific to the current study, adult students studying online are identified as being the most vulnerable, with around 43% of adult students studying online not completing their higher education, compared to 30% of those in the 20 to 24 years age group and 21% for those students enrolled directly out of school (DESE, 2019b, 2020b). Chesters and Watson (2016) argue that despite the change in university enrolment access for this group after the *Review of Higher Education in Australia* (aka The Bradley Review), this increased access is yet to transfer to increased completion rates. Wilson et al. (2016), in their study of effective intervention practices for the early transition needs of diverse commencing university students, point to low graduate outcomes, as do Pitman, Roberts, Bennett and Richardson (2017), in their study of graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Issues leading to attrition include the involvement of many interrelated and complex societal, institutional, pedagogical, and individual factors tied to the experiences and demographics of adult learners who may have been away from formal learning for some time (Banks, 2017; Boston et al., 2011; Clark & Mayer, 2011; e.g. Deggs, 2011; Deggs & Miller, 2018; Dron, & Anderson, 2016; Ellis & Goodyear, 2010; Funston, 2012; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; O'Shea et al., 2017). Deschacht and Goeman (2015) assert these extrinsic and intrinsic issues confronting adult learners boost the probability of attrition by this cohort. Of particular note to the current study, Grattan Institute higher education policy expert Andrew Norton (2016) reports that the number of adult learners and other equity groups enrolling in higher education who don't reach graduation is increasing, and among the biggest risks in dropping out for these students are (a) studying part-time and (b) studying online (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018).

However, while the literature (e.g. Edwards & McMillan, 2015; Kahu & Nelson, 2017; 2018) indicates that student success and retention continue to be of concern for higher education institutions, particularly in terms of both online study and students from the equity groups well after the Bradley Review, the historical focus of higher education online providers seems to have been more on managing the exponential development and uptake of online education at the expense of needs of adult learners in their early online experience. The literature also reveals the ubiquitous gap between the visionary political discourse of the Bradley Report (2008) about higher education and the actual situation in the current adult student context. Pressure to implement "the latest and greatest" in technology (Roberts & Crittenden, 2009 p. 3), ahead of research into best practice and understanding the particular needs, characteristics, lifestyles, motivations, enrolment patterns, and unique roles and responsibilities of adult students, is suggested to have led to problems of attrition among this cohort (Allen & Seaman, 2011, 2014; Boston et al., 2011; Funston, 2012; Remedios & Richardson, 2013; Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2019; Stone & O'Shea, 2019).

The Productivity Commission Report (2019) notes that the concept of an 'open door' policy was, and still is, seen by many as offering a chance to improve life condition and broaden personal choice. However, even as far back as 2002, before the Bradley Report and its subsequent changes, Blythman and Orr warned of the need to ensure that an "open door" policy does not turn into a "revolving door" (2002a, p. 232). It is important to the current study to realise that social inequalities will continue while enrolment levels present a main source of funding, leaving universities under pressure to increase those enrolment levels (De Paepe et al., 2018; Haughey, Evans, & Murphy, 2008; Stone, 2017).

Continuing ideological struggles between the Bradley Review focus on continuing improvement to the higher education sector and commercial imperatives to adopt corporate business revenue models are apparent (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; 2018). Very much dictated

to by economic theories, universities do not hesitate to call students ‘clients’, or ‘customers’. Research by De Paepe, Zhu and DePryck (2018) outlines an important consideration in the attrition of adult students in the higher education online space: this attrition rate should be taken seriously, and as a result, the retention of adult students enrolled in higher education online courses be rated as a success factor, and their attrition as a failure. Therefore, in the light of the current study, these struggles suggest re-examination of the assumption about the support of under-served students, including transitioning adults, as an institutional priority.

2.3.2.2. Environmental and Organisational External Factors

In order to underline the idiomatic experiences and demands upon this adult group, it is important to focus on actual obstacles or issues that many may face both before and after enrolment. These obstacles not only impact on their transition, persistence and engagement but also the whole concept of choice within higher education. This is not to imply that the obstacles discussed are the exclusive domain of adult students, but rather that these issues are frequently more typically negotiated by particular student groups.

Historically, the literature suggests that a great number of students with “significant work and family responsibilities” enrol in online learning (Grattan Institute, 2018, p.24). According to Devlin (2010), and Devlin and McKay (2016), typically this cohort lead complicated lives and cope with conflicting priorities. Macqueen (2016; 2017) looks at narratives from adult learners studying online. The author posits that their roles and identity as university students are often in competition with family responsibilities and financial concerns, which are given priority. A more recent study by Choi and Kim (2018), examining adult online learners’ predominant reasons for attrition and persistence in online bachelor’s degree programs, found a multitude of reasons impacting attrition. These included work constraints, perception of different levels of academic aptitude, issues of a family nature and other personal issues, intrinsic motivation for becoming a student, issues

with integration into the university and low levels of interaction or outright disconnection with communities of learning. However, these studies indicate a gap within the research focus with regard to early intervention and interception in the case of attrition on the part of adult online learners.

2.3.2.3. Persistence and Retention

The term *retention* is an institutional one, indicating re-enrolment (Tinto, 2006). *Persistence* is a personal quality aligned with identity defined by Tinto (2017), as continuing "in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise" (p.2). Several factors appear to be ascribed in the literature as being fundamental in sustaining, advancing, or hindering adult learner engagement and satisfaction, and the successful accomplishment of ongoing educational outcomes. Research indicates, for example, the close relationship between socio-economic, relational and institutional factors on one hand, and persistence, learning performance and achievement on the other (Deschacht & Goeman, 2015). Zhai, Gu, Liu, Liang and Tsai (2017) use a blended flipped delivery model to study students' perceived satisfaction in order to predict their intention of persisting with learning. The study indicates that persistence is a valuable indicator for predicting retention, learning outcomes and achievement, but not a definitive one. Although this and other studies have consistently examined the relationship between attrition and adult student success in online study (e.g., Mahieu & Wolming, 2013; Müller, 2008; Park, Boman, Care, Edwards & Perry, 2009; Wilson & Allen, 2011), it would appear that for some time there has been some contention as to which factors particularly lead to persistence and retention among this cohort (Harrell & Bower, 2011; Wilson & Allen, 2011). Indeed, more recent studies by Choi and Park (2018) into factors influencing adult learners' decisions to attrite or persist in online learning indicate persistence and retention appear to be continually evolving as a somewhat complex set of factors within the online space.

Many of these factors appear to be affectively and psychologically driven. In a national survey of Australian first-year students, for example, Naylor, Baik and Arkoudis (2018) establish a scale consisting of four measures to establish understanding of the student experience of university for both individuals and groups:

1. belonging;
2. feeling supported;
3. intellectual engagement; and
4. workload stress.

This scale was established to contribute to the institutional support and management of student persistence and retention. The data from this study show the critical importance of establishing a sense of belonging and mitigating workload stress. The study indicated that not only did many 'non-traditional' groups rate significantly higher than 'traditional' students on the stress scale, they also comprise considerable individual variation in complexity in engagement, motivation and sense of belonging.

As previously discussed, the literature attests to the fact that adults enrolled in online learning are prone to a low level of student persistence *and* retention. Persistence and retention, therefore, remain ongoing issues. Much of the current literature identifies the variables that lead to attrition, rather than exploring what promotes persistence and retention. However, potentially the reasons for leaving are not as critical as the reasons for staying: "...strengthening or providing additional reasons to stay could make whatever reasons there are for departure less salient" (Sieveking & Perfetto, 2000–2001, p.345). This interpretation further justifies the current study, which aims to better understand what it is that assists adult students to successfully transition into and engage with the online university space, rather than yield to pressures and attrite. It presents a clear rationale for focusing on understanding adult students' negotiation of their online transitionary experience and how to support their persistence. Indeed, I argue that the current study of

this early transition period is vital in terms of exploring why the adult student begins online study, why they stay and why they leave.

2.3.2.4. The Adult Student Identity

Another important aspect of persistence and retention is the establishment of a student identity. More and more adult students are experiencing an intersection of multiple identities, working and studying at the same time. According to Land and Bayne (2011), relevant concepts and skills specific to the online space may constitute challenging 'troublesome knowledge'. This umbrella term covers several aspects that could seriously impact the confidence and 'identity' of the adult learner and thus impact their persistence and retention:

- distinctive ways of thinking and practising;
- distinctive language and forms of online communication;
- isolation;
- the use of technology and the use of online resources in an educational context;
- an increasingly complex set of digital concepts;
- perceptions of the learning task;
- perceptions of the online learning environment;
- the need to self-regulate learning (Cho & Kim, 2013; Panadero, 2017; Yeh et al., 2019); and
- shifts in awareness and variations of identity as online learners (Kahu & Nelson, 2017, 2018; Land & Bayne, 2011; Mallman & Lee, 2016; Stone and O'Shea, 2019).

Askham (2008) suggests the unique diversity of the adult student cohort involves three general roles, these being the role of life experience, the role of self-direction and the role of identity. Research by Mallman and Lee (2016), into the negotiations made by adult students studying at university argues the importance and difficulties they face when they

must address both a learning identity (who they are) and motivations (why they're doing this) when commencing or returning to higher education study.

Rather than stipulating a point in time or a tick-box of characteristics to define a learner as 'not traditional', Ashwin (2009, p.77) argues that "aspects of students' personal identities inform how they understand and engage with the development of their learning careers". It is the determinants such as previous learning, life experience and possible professional identity that make the identity of adult learners unique and complex rather than classifying them as 'traditional' or 'non-traditional'. O'Shea, May, Stone and Delahunty (2017), in their study of eighty-seven first-in-family adult students beginning online undergraduate study, emphasise that rather than being identified by a single factor such as reaching a specified age, or the family or employment status of the individual, adult learners should be described in terms of the varied life experiences and influences shaping their identity. This impact of individual experience on the way the participants negotiate their first weeks of online study is still, however, under-explored.

Adult students enter higher education with an identity based in a culture very different to that of a school leaver. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the needs of enrolling adult students are the same as the needs of traditional students. Various studies have identified that while chronological age is not a conclusive gauge of life-stage, an 18-year-old school leaver and an adult student of 39 will, for example, predictably want and have developmentally different expectations, different self-identification, different experiences of university and different motivations to study (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Hoskins & Hooff, 2005; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009, 2010; Saar, Täht & Roosalu, 2014). Indeed, Stone and O'Shea (2019) suggest that adult students form a distinct population in that they often bring rich personal and employment experiences to the classroom, may struggle to support multiple roles and responsibilities above and

beyond those of traditional learners, and can require significant adjustments in terms of their learning styles, needs, and abilities.

Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) describe the process of ‘identifying’ as an adult student as “a real roller coaster of confidence and emotions” (p. 567). It is interesting to note here that several of the participants in the current study used this term to explain their feelings (Chap. 8, p. 236). The literature suggests that many of the lows in that “roller coaster” ride may be generated by the wider university culture. While this culture may not be experienced as fully by online students as those who study on campus, Howard and Davies (2013), and Kahu (2014), suggest this university ‘student’ culture is designed to support young school leavers. This can prove daunting and result in feelings of estrangement, isolation and separation on the part of adult students (Kasworm, 2010; Murphy, 2009; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003). This is particularly important in view of the additional stress placed upon adult students enrolling into the online space. Further investigation into how these negative reactions may be mitigated during the very early days of the first trimester is required.

Lizzio (2011) describes a sense of purpose as a factor necessary to a positive student identity. Studies by Kahu and Nelson (2017; 2018) and Stone and O’Shea (2019) indicate that adult students are a diverse group of people who have made decisions about themselves, and who are self-consciously choosing to reflexively use education to shape their own identities and the future course of their lives. However, while adult students may find applying their life skills to negotiate the challenges of their new environment to be advantageous, often their decisions also incur a major change from or break with their past lives and past identities (O’Shea, 2015b; Stone, 2017; Stone & O’Shea, 2019).

Archer and Leathwood (2003) assert that there is no one dimensional identity ascribed to adult students, and that individuals navigate their understandings of identity in a number of ways, meaning that it may be “embraced, resisted or, in some cases, subverted

and reconstructed" (p. 177). This is described by Schwartzman (2010) as being akin to experiencing a transformative state of liminality in which there is a reformulation of a learner's frame of meaning, involving both a conceptual and an ontological shift. This liminal aspect is discussed at some length in Chapter 3 when discussing the conceptual framework for this study, the Threshold Concept Framework.

In their study of behaviour relating to retention and attrition among Australian adult students studying online, Whannell and Whannell (2015) propose a model relating to university student identity formation, arguing the importance of the psychological identity of the individual. Drawing on identity theory, they assert that there is a relationship between identity, role evaluation and emotional commitment, and that identity influences behaviours relating to role. In describing this relationship, they conclude that emotional commitment to an identity is influenced by evaluation of performance in that role. According to the authors, this means that attrition is far more than just a reaction to "external, objective conditions" such as being older, or first-in-family to attend university, or experiencing financial difficulties or familial responsibilities. Rather, they emphasise the "interplay of objective conditions with the particular subjective, internal psychology of a given individual" (p. 44). The findings chapters of the current study, Chapters 6, 7 and 8, utilise the participants' voice to look closely at this "interplay" and reveal the depth of its impact upon their strategies and experiences as they negotiate their early transition into the online learning space.

2.3.2.5. Student Engagement

Student engagement is a convoluted and recondite construct (Ben-Eliyahu, Moore, Dorph, & Schunn, 2018). It is apparent from the considerable amount of literature, including multiple university institutional blogs available on the internet, that student engagement is seen as being critical to persistence and retention in higher education. Defined as "the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning,

understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992, p. 12, cited in Martin & Bollinger, 2018), engagement has been comprehensively researched over time in the literature (both academic and institutional) pertaining to distance and online learning (e.g., Banna, Grace-Lin, Stewart, & Fialkowski, 2015).

However, even when a shared sense of the focus and degree of student engagement is taken into consideration, there are gaps in the literature as to the real meaning of student engagement within specific contexts. Of particular interest to the current study is the systematic evidence map of forty-two scholarly articles published between 2007 and 2016 in four international databases. This narrative systematic review reviewed and synthesised in 2020 by Bedenlier, Bond, Buntins, Zawacki-Richter and Kerresn, aimed to investigate what student engagement was seen to mean in these studies, and to characterise the intricate relational locus between technology and student engagement. The mapped studies showed that of the three commonly recognised student engagement components, behavioural engagement was by far the most often recognised and mentioned, ahead of affective/emotional and finally cognitive engagement. However, the study also revealed continuing dispute about whether there are indeed only three components – affective/emotional, cognitive and behavioural (Eccles, 2016, cited in Bedenlier et al., 2020) – or whether there are more, including agentic/self-determined engagement (Reeve, 2012; Reeve & Tseng, 2011, cited in Bedenlier et al., 2020) and social engagement (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016, cited in Bedenlier et al., 2020).

There is disagreement among researchers not only about the components involved in the construct of student engagement but also concerning the many uses of the term. In a study questioning academic orthodoxy in higher education engagement research, Zepke (2014) argues that the term is not used with sufficient criticality. Trowler's (2014) study into the engagement of non-traditional students highlights its use as being chaotic,

imprecise and vague. Vuori (2014) argues that the meaning of student engagement in any given circumstance will necessarily be impacted by two concerns: firstly, both the particular context to which it applies, and secondly, by the contextual meaning of 'non-engagement'.

The literature also maintains that it is crucial to build numerous and varied opportunities for student online engagement (e.g., Johnson, 2015; Kahu & Nelson, 2017, 2018; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). The research outcome from Martin and Bollinger's (2018) survey-based study into engagement strategies in online courses with one hundred and fifty-five higher education students demonstrates that the development and delivery of engaging online learning experiences, both in the interactive design and facilitation of courses, is vital to the success of online learning. Indeed, a good number of the studies mapped by Bedenlier et al. (2020) indicate that within a curriculum, painstaking planning, insightful pedagogy, and thoughtful use of appropriate digital tools, including synchronous and asynchronous delivery, are critical to engagement (e.g., Englund, Olofsson, & Price, 2017; Koehler & Mishra, 2005; Popenici, 2013, cited in Bedenlier et al., 2020).

However, while engagement is important to student learning and satisfaction in online courses, it also appears adult students can experience many different levels of both confidence and familiarity with the use of technology in an online education environment, along with apprehension and anxiety, specifically around online engagement itself (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). The current study argues the necessity for specific engagement strategies to be developed for the adults transitioning into the online learning space and a deeper understanding of their experiences therein.

2.3.2.6. The Digital Divide

Taking into consideration the lack of internet access among large groups of people in both developed and developing worlds, another issue around student online engagement is the digital divide. There are those who benefit from online education practices and those

who are sidelined by them (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Soffer, Kahan & Nachmias, 2019; Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler & Stürmer, 2015; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Stone, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Even within developed countries such as Australia, adult educational Internet use remains unequal among different socio-economic and occupational classes. Those most likely to benefit from online education are already well-prepared and well-connected with access to the Internet.

However, access alone does not guarantee active widespread engagement in interactive online education (Pitman, Roberts, Bennett & Richardson, 2017; Pollard, 2018; Rabourn, Shoup & BrckaLorenz, 2015; Remedios & Richardson, 2013; Richardson, Maeda, Lv & Caskurlu, 2017). Several studies suggest that the barriers to online learning engagement and the online learning attitudes or behaviours among adults are much more diverse and complex than just a matter of technological accessibility or availability (Richardson, Maeda, Lv & Caskurlu, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Stone, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Hence the rise of the First-Year-Experience support system.

2.3.2.7. The First-Year-Experience

As previously mentioned, in Australia, completion and graduation rates for online programs across the board continue to fall behind those for face-to-face programs (ABS, 2017; Grattan Institute, 2018). In an attempt to mitigate these retention and completion rates, an array of First-Year-Experience (FYE) student support programs has arisen, particularly in this country and the United States (Brunton, Brown, Costello & Farrell, 2018; Brunton & Buckley, 2020; Cook & Rushton 2008; Feldman, 2018 (Ed); Tinto, 2006, 2017). This program development arose out of the perceived institutional need to help traditional 18- to 21-year-old first-year students enrolling into university directly from high school negotiate the stress of their first year of study in order to encourage persistence and retention (Kift, 2009).

In Australian universities, these programs have been particularly influenced by Kift's Transition Pedagogy Framework (2009), which has had an enormous impact on how students experience their first year in higher education (Kift, 2015a; Kift 2015b; Kift, Nelson & Clark, 2010; Guisard et al., 2012). While not specific to the adult student, Kift suggests six curriculum design principles to enable universities to assist first-year students, including those transitioning into online study, with the many transitional changes facing them. These principles include the frequently discussed educational design. They also include strategy and policy, quality assurance, diversity of student cohorts, student engagement, and institutional processes (2015a, 2015b).

Beer and Lawson (2016), Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010), Macqueen (2017), and Tinto (2017) recommend understanding the student's perspective of their own university experiences. They maintain the efficacy of observation rather than assumption about the influences these experiences may have on an adult student's decision to withdraw or persist.

Likewise, Heagney and Benson's in-depth case study (2017) with eleven adult students investigated what led to the success of adult students in Australian online higher education and the associated implications for institutional support. The most important impact upon students' participation was found to be assistance and support with financial, emotional and childcare and/or housework from relatives and friends. Other factors included the students' perception of the need for frequent and timely feedback and encouragement from teachers, appropriate curriculum design and flexible modes of study. In another Australian context, O'Shea (2016) investigates the transition of first-in-family adult learners to university during their first year. This study emphasises the importance of motivation, social and familial assistance in supporting student persistence. The findings also highlight the need for targeted programs to be incorporated into course design in order to support students being impeded by a lack of experience.

The Review of Attrition in Australian Higher Education (DESE, 2018b) agrees with much of the Transition Pedagogy literature, including instigating a comprehensive retention strategy. The review urges educational institutions to continually adjust curriculum, pedagogy and academic policy design to meet student needs and expectations due to the new economy, digitalisation and complex factors increasingly leading to attrition. Yet, the attrition continues.

The very mixed reactions in student pre-service teachers' perceptions of, and reactions to, first-year experience initiatives in Larkin, Rowan, Garrick and Beavis's (2016) pilot research outcomes from the University of Wollongong and Griffith University point to a need for further research. The disagreement within the literature concerning the support offered by the FYE also continues. According to Beer and Lawson (2016), in their case study of the intricate and inter-related determinants that are instrumental in student attrition in a regional university, the attempts by many universities at prioritising student success among adult and other equity groups has been mostly ineffectual. Listening to the voices of the participants, the current study takes note of how such programs affect adult students while transitioning into the online higher education learning space in their first trimester of study, if at all.

2.4. WHAT IS ONLINE LEARNING?

Given that the focus of this study is the adult learner and their transition into the online higher education space, this section examines the literature concerning the definition of online learning, the different modes of online course delivery and modality, the impact of flexibility of access to online study for the adult learner, and the evolution of online learning in Australia. The basic contextual premise of the current study is the online learning space. Therefore, it is important to the current study that this context be understood by establishing what the term 'online learning' actually refers to, why it is

becoming the delivery of choice to the adult student cohort and many universities, and how aspects of this delivery format may be affecting attrition rates among the adult cohort.

2.4.1. Is There a Common Definition of Online Learning?

According to the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning (ACODE), Learning Leaders on Technology Enhanced Learning Vodcast Series (2014; 2020), and an historical review of online learning by Kentor (2015), online learning is the latest iteration of distance education. Distance education is not a new phenomenon. It has been claimed it traces "... back as far as the epistles of St. Paul" (Keegan, 1990, p. 94), and has been ascribed to "Itinerant wanderers delivering information by word of mouth..." existing for 300 years in parallel with advances in communications technology (Willis, 1994, p. 5).

In its various delivery modes, online education has experienced worldwide growth due to the uptake of new technologies, the global implementation of the Internet, and escalating requirements for a trained workforce conversant in the ever-evolving digital economy. There has been an exponential, even chaotic growth of online higher education in the 20th and 21st centuries (according to Kumar, Kumar, Palvia & Verma, 2017; Larmuseau, Elen & Depaepe, 2018; Larmuseau, Evens, Elen, Van Den Noortgate, Desmet & Depaepe, 2018; Zhu, Herring & Bonk, 2019; Zhu, Zhang, Au & Yates, 2020). Given the proliferation in numbers of adults transitioning into the online higher education learning space and the associated potential for further growth of this modality, it is important to this study that the concept of online learning be defined. The exploration of the literature on the essence of online learning is particularly relevant to the current study's primary research question and sub-questions 1 through 3:

Primary Research Question:

How do online adult learners (25 years +) experience the transition to online degree studies in higher education?

Sub-Questions:

1. How does one group of adult learners describe their first weeks of study in an online environment?
2. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?
3. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?

To use an 'umbrella' explanation deduced from the literature (e.g., from studies by Allen and Seaman, 2011, 2013, 2014; Kumar et al., 2017; Larmuseau et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2020), online learning is a flexible medium of delivery that has permitted access to higher education to many more people than formally possible. However, this is strictly speaking, not a definition. Studies reveal conflicting conclusions as to what online learning actually is. This section will look at historical attempts at defining online education, as well as the literature showing the evolution of this digital delivery in Australian higher education. It will be shown that research reveals the term has been applied to distinct, and at times somewhat contradictory concepts.

It is apparent that existing definitions are coloured by a variety of impacts. These include research specialisations and interests; the variety in applications, delivery methods and learning management systems in different parts of the world; and the historically rapid growth involved in this delivery medium. These various definitions of the term online education as presented by different researchers and institutions are reviewed in the first part of this section.

There is considerable discourse, even debate, regarding a common definition of the term *online learning*. While the genesis of the term is debatable, it is generally thought to have first appeared in the mid-1990s (Bates, 2019). In some scholarly articles, the terms *online education* and *eLearning* are interchangeable; others define these terms as being

separate, distinctive and differentiated by the technologies used in the delivery of the education. For example, online education has been differentiated as only being delivered through Internet or web-based mediums, and e-Learning as education delivered via the Internet, but also including other electronic delivery mediums including CDROMs, satellite, and television (Lee, 2017; Moore, Dickson-Deane & Galyen, 2011; Singh & Thurman, 2019). Rodrigues, Almeida, Figueiredo and Lopes (2019) add to the confusion of definition somewhat with their suggestion that in an educational context, the mere process of using a computer connected to a network is reflected in multiple terms used to identify online education. Some eponymous examples include *online learning, cyber learning, open learning, Internet-based learning, web-based learning, computer-mediated learning, blended learning, e-learning, virtual learning, tele-education, distributed learning,* and *off-campus learning.*

According to the Quality Assurance of Online Learning discussion paper (2017), prepared for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (DET), the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education at The University of Melbourne, "interchangeable terminology and varying definitions have contributed to confusion and created barriers, which have hampered the development of a shared understanding of online teaching and learning" (p.6). Moore et al. (2011) describe this uncertainty amongst researchers when offering definitions for online learning. They argue that while researchers accept a relationship between distance education and online learning, often the descriptive narratives display uncertainty of the extent or meaning of that relationship. As a result, the authors determine that online learning is very difficult to define. Interestingly, a considerable number of definitions expressly articulated that uncertainty and argument around the definition of online learning.

2.4.2. An Historical Investigation

McIsaac and Gunawardena (1996) defined distance education as “no more than a hodgepodge of ideas and practices taken from traditional classroom settings and imposed on learners who just happen to be separated physically from an instructor” (p.5). Conversely, just three years later, Wright, Marsh and Miller (1999) noted the definite opportunities provided by what they termed “web-based learning” (p. 21) for both education and research. They also showed the foresight to warn of the challenges inherent in matching the advances in technology with the needs of students, faculty and educational providers. Over time, definitions have continued to evolve. Indeed, Basilaia et al. (2020) sum up online education as an evolution: one from fully online delivery to an incorporation of technology to deliver components or a whole course irrespective of time, place and mode.

As with all areas of evolution, however, the definitions of online learning have by no means been either universally accepted or clearly communicated. According to Bates (2019), what has generally passed for online learning in most cases over the years – placing course materials on the Web or in class management tools such as WebCT or Blackboard, still offers little clarity of definition. Several historical definitions also display this lack of clarity. While Forsyth (2003), and Jolliffe, Ritter and Stevens (2001), focus on online delivery as learning that is empowered by the use of the Internet, Abbad, Morris and Ayyoub (2009) very broadly define online learning as learning that is enabled electronically. Further circumscription by Richard and Haya in that same year included online learning to be any learning that is internet-enabled or web-based (2009).

The consensus of opinion around the importance of flexibility of access is evident in the literature from around 2012. That year, Moore and Kearsley’s book, *Distance Education*, defined a systems-approach to the organisation of designing and teaching courses online as “... teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a

different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization" (p.2). Evidence from Davies, Mullan and Feldman (2017) maintains that the designation *online* refers to a type of education where technology facilitates the procedures involved in learning, delivery is achieved via the Internet, and students and instructors are not required to be together at the same time and place. In addition, this research investigates how the use of digital technologies might impact the redesign of face-to-face teaching in blended and/or asynchronous formats. SWAT analysis on online learning educational services by Cojocariu, Lazar, Nedeff and Lazar in 2014 seems to continue to support this idea. Taken from the online student perspective, the authors deduce that the success of online education is due to developments in technology offering the possibility to learn anywhere, at any time, and in many formats. This has resulted in what the study participants themselves perceive to be a more student-centred, innovative, and flexible teaching/learning process. The Grattan Institute (2018) likewise describes online education as the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to increase learning quality by easing access to facilities and services as well as distant exchanges and collaboration.

An American study by Brothers and Spies (2017) took this idea further. They identified that in a general sense, the online learning space is a virtual 'lived environment' using the Internet. Their description of an invisible yet nevertheless comprehensible teaching space comprising the learners, the facilitator and the physical locale of each, yet separated by time and distance, aligns their study to mine. The authors also point out that in a technical sense, the online learning environment (OLE) actually constitutes the web-based software devised to accommodate and house learning activities.

Notwithstanding the degree of variety in the literature in regard to defining online learning, and after considerable investigation on my part, there appears to be an accepted, albeit longwinded, consensus. This refers to online education as a distance education

teaching and learning ecosystem in which the digital delivery of flexible learning is undertaken chiefly via electronic media (Cacheiro-Gonzalez, Medina-Rivilla, Dominguez-Garrido & Medina- Dominguez, 2019; Chipere, 2017; Valverde-Berrocoso, Garrido-Arroyo, Burgos-Videla & Morales-Cevallos, 2020). It includes synchronous or asynchronous communication and engagement between learners, peers, facilitators educational materials and activities, occurring within a virtual Learning Management System, e.g. via Blackboard, Moodle, or Canvas (Yanuschik, Pakhomova & Batbold, 2015; Mayer, 2018; Ouyang, Chang, Scharber, Jiao & Huang, 2020). These forms of delivery, interaction, and engagement will be further explored in the next section.

2.4.3. Different Modes of Course Delivery

The extant literature agrees that the Internet and digital technology have become crucial to accessibility to research, learning and the management and delivery of online higher education courses (Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2020). As teaching and learning curricula are designed for, and delivered via a communication channel, usually by an educational institution, Allen, Seaman, Pouline and Straut (2016) argue that online education includes several determinations of the characteristics that distinguish the different modes of course delivery and facilitation. They maintain that terms *online education* and *online learning* subsequently encompass more than just the offering of wholly online courses. These offerings range from fully on-campus face-to-face through to fully online delivery. In their annual overview of online education in the United States between 2003 and 2015, Allen et al. (2016, p. 7) propose that the term *online education* can cover several different perspectives, including online learning, blended learning, and hybrid learning. They explain these groupings as being conditional on the percentage of the content of a course that is delivered online.

Consistent with the Allen et al. (2016), classification a traditional face-to-face course is now widely accepted to be one in which no content is delivered online (0%). A

web-facilitated face-to-face course has up to 29% of its content delivered online. A blended and/or hybrid delivery blends face-to-face with between 30 and 79% of its content delivered online, meaning that students interact with the instructor, the material, and other students through both a physical classroom and an online platform to varying degrees. An online course has 80% and above of its content delivered online or does not entail any face-to-face delivery.

Allen et al. (2016) categorise blended and hybrid modalities together in the Babson Survey Research Group Online Report Card (2016). However, other research defines the hybrid modality as involving intensive online interactions incorporating interactive, virtual components often replicating real-world scenarios. Therefore, Bates (2015, p. 311), for example, argues that the term *blended learning* should be used to cover delivery, including any opportunistic and serendipitous combination of online and face-to-face with 30% to 80% delivered online, and the term *hybrid learning* should be confined to those blended courses where carefully planned face-to-face periods and online sessions are merged. As an example, an empirical study by Brinson (2015) illustrates the difference in traditional laboratories delivered in traditional or blended fashion and intensive non-traditional laboratories (NLT: virtual and remote) delivered in a hybrid modality. This information is relevant to the current study because the participants' online involvement was at least 80% of their overall study in their first trimester of twelve weeks.

2.4.4. Disruptive and Transformative Elements

Garrison (2017) emphasises the "disruptive and transformative elements of online learning" as a technology that is currently changing the approach to learning in an educational context (p. 21). Among these elements must be taken into account the flexible approach to learning available to online students through synchronous and asynchronous delivery modalities, the Learning Management Systems supporting these modalities and the self-regulated learning and engagement possibilities presented via these modalities

(Littlefield, 2018; Singh & Thurman, 2019). The next section looks at the information informing the current study in terms of better understanding the choices available to adult students transitioning into the online learning space and the impact these choices may have on their persistence and retention.

2.4.4.1. Online Self-Regulated Learning

When looking into reasons as to why adults study, several research studies including those of Rabourn, Shoup and BrckaLorenz (2015; 2018), Kellenberg, Schmidt and Werner (2017), and Lin and Wang (2015), argue that this cohort often applies self-regulation to their thinking, activities, and feelings when pursuing academic objectives. Self-regulation has been defined by Zimmerman and Schunk (1989, p. 1) as "an activity that students do for themselves in a proactive way". There has been a great deal of research interest into self-regulated study, characteristics of the self-regulated learner, and the importance of self-regulation within higher education. Evidence suggests that the habits that support successful self-regulated learning also support successful online learning behaviours.

These habits include efficacious time management, constructive use of learning resources, the setting of achievement goals, along with routines of regular monitoring, reflection and the planning of learning process (Whannell & Whannell, 2015; Wong et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2011). In a study on the alignment between expected online learning outcomes and students' achievement goals, Yeh et al. (2019) strongly connect the skills and strategies associated with successful self-regulated learning with successful online learning. Cochran, Baker, Benson and Rhea (2016), and Li, Wong, Yang and Bell (2019), further argue the positive link between self-regulated learners and the ability to persevere in demanding and difficult online learning situations.

Of benefit to the current study in terms of understanding adult learners' perceived barriers to online learning and the experiences and expectations that may impact lack of

engagement and low retention rates, is the literature examining and highlighting the key correlates of student success embodied in self-regulated learning strategies. For example, Wei and Chou (2020) look at learning performance and perception of success; Kahu and Nelson (2018) investigate the self-regulated mechanisms of student success; and Tsai and Chiang (2013), and Tseng, Liang and Tsai (2014) investigate research trends in self-regulated learning in the online learning context. Voogt and Knezek's (2018) report on outcomes from the Fifth International Summit on Information and Communication Technology in Education note the imperative to better understand self-regulated learning in a digital context.

2.4.4.2. Theorising Self-Regulated Learning

A growing body of literature is also investigating the increasing role of theoretical models in examining self-regulated learning in online students with a view to increasing retention (Arvaja, 2014; Crutzen & Peters, 2017; Garrison, 2017; Hersman & Schroeder 2017; Mastel-Smith, Post & Lake, 2015). While not specific to online learning, several examples of accepted models of self-regulated learning in the educational literature provide a framework for investigation that is of benefit to the current study. Rhode (2009) discusses the interaction embodied in self-regulation, and its role as an important aid in the construction of learning. Bandura (1986) makes use of social cognitive learning theory when studying self-regulated thought and action. Panadero (2017), contributes a course development and delivery framework based on self-determination, and constructivist approaches. In their studies on student metacognition and control of learning environments within science education, Schraw, Crippen and Hartley (2006) highlight the significance of self-regulated learning.

From an online perspective, Garrison (2017) recommends turning to the practical aspects of a Community of Inquiry to encourage self-regulated learning in online education. This practicality involves structure, guidance and support related to teaching,

social and cognitive presence (Cooper & Scriven, 2017). The Zhu, Herring and Bonk (2019) study also illustrates both the favourable relationship between social, cognitive and teaching presences and adult students' perceptions and satisfaction with their learning, and the ways in which these types of influences are manifested. In a systematic review on modelling the support of self-regulated learning in online learning environments, Wong et al. (2019) conclude that the integration of affective human factors and learning theories can facilitate more flexible support systems to adapt the development of online learning environments to an individual learner level. According to Müller (2008), adult students who display persistence tend to seek a curriculum and qualification to meet their current needs and future career aspirations so as to attain an educational goal important to their career, or the betterment of their socio-economic standing.

This image of the adult student is supported by the adult education theories of Andragogy (Knowles, 1985) and Heutagogy (Hase, 2011; Hase & Kenyon, 2007). The andragogical perspective views adults as autonomous subjects free from dependence and whose situation is self-determined and self-controlled (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997, p. 93). However, three sets of research findings are conflicted in relation to this andragogical perception. For example, Whannell and Whannell (2015), in their study incorporating identity theory as a theoretical framework to understand attrition for university students in transition, demonstrate that online learning requires higher metacognitive skills and additional self-regulated learning skills, time management skills and multitasking skills. These skills were not found to be regularly displayed. Of particular importance to the current study are two more of these findings. Firstly, adults often feel overly directed in their study rather than having the freedom to seek for (or refuse) educational opportunities according to their needs and circumstances (Choi & Kim, 2018; Deschacht & Goeman, 2015; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Macqueen, 2016, 2017; Stanley & Blackberry, 2018). This feeling may be attenuated somewhat by the use of a heutagogical approach to online

facilitation. This learning model is defined by Hase and Kenyon as self-determined learning. Heutagogy applies an active and proactive approach to developing learner capabilities with the instructor facilitating the learning process by providing guidance and resources, while also empowering the learner to negotiate their learning and to determine what will be learned and how it will be learned (Hase, 2011; Hase & Kenyon, 2007).

Secondly, a large group of possibly academically proficient and experienced students are entering university thanks to increased placements, having to then negotiate the higher level of challenge inherent in self-regulated study (Groves & O'Shea, 2019; Kahu, Picton, & Nelson, 2019; Heagney & Benson, 2017). Nevertheless, despite high attrition, since the Bradley Report (2008), the andragogical view is still inclined to be accepted and justified in universities, through reference to institutional emphasis on the establishment of increased student places for adults, particularly in online courses (Grattan Institute Report, 2018).

There has been little exploration into the self-regulated learning and negotiation strategies of these most vulnerable of online learners in their first twelve weeks of online study (first trimester). Nor is there sufficient data on the impact of the stress of transition into an online space upon their ability to self-regulate. Ergo, an appreciation of adult learners' actual preparedness to transition into and negotiate the self-regulated online learning space has critical implications. Indeed, the lack of combined academic and non-academic predictors of successful retention and academic performance presents a serious gap in the Australian research context. O'Shea, May, Stone and Delahunty (2017) argue that there are few publications on the integrative impact of a range of psychological, demographic and academic factors on the university experience. Qualitative research in this area should then remain open to adopting an approach to research that is informed by the actual responses of students, thereby retaining the possibility for discovery.

2.4.4.3. Flexibility

Since the Bradley Report (2008), ongoing changes within the Australian labour market have increased demands for new forms of competence and credentialing due to the constantly fluctuating demands of the workplace – as Hirschi (2018) puts it: the 4th Industrial Revolution. This has resulted in a growing need for flexible delivery of education (Australian Government Productivity Commission Report, 2019; Bimrose & Brown, 2014; Brown & Bimrose, 2014).

Historically, the growth of online learning has introduced a new source of diversity, with adult learner online enrolment constituting a growth sector within higher education (DESE, 2020a; Bailie, 2014; Ecclestone, Biesta & Hughes, 2010; Ellis & Goodyear, 2010). The integrative review examining online environments by Roddy et al. (2017) considers the importance of flexibility. In particular, it focuses on how the demand for flexible online offerings has led to the increase in higher education online learning programs, as the need to upskill and re-train has increased. However, several researchers look beyond the usual input around flexibility.

Daniel's (2017) paper on flexibility as a defining element of online learning explores both the opportunities and challenges presented by online delivery. His analogy of an earthquake levelling buildings that are either too rigid or too flexible highlights the critical need for institutional resilience and planning in preparing for the flexibility of online delivery. The aforementioned perception of a digital divide is of interest to Holly and Oliver (2011). They investigate 'access' and 'flexibility' from another angle – that of users for whom flexibility creates new spaces for which the complications of access must be negotiated, for example, the home. Their research illustrates that flexibility can actually be implicated in the aforementioned ever-widening chasm between the advantaged and the disadvantaged, with the latter ill-equipped to take advantage of these new spaces.

Research by Bailey et al. (2018), Johnson (2015), Kahu and Nelson (2017; 2018), and Stone and O'Shea (2019) looks into the differing requirements between on-campus cohorts and online cohorts regarding determinants including age, work and commitments. This research highlights the need for flexible, career-driven online programs and the crucial importance of institutional planning. According to many studies, this need for flexible online delivery is often driven by adults with significant work and family obligations; however, there is a gap in the research around how adult students negotiate their early online experiences of the flexibility of the online space and the strategies they use to cope with the aforementioned "disruptive and transformative elements of online learning" (Garrison, 2017, p. 21).

Several authors point out that while the demand for online learning can be ascribed to its intrinsic flexibility, another factor impacting attrition may well be that flexibility. The removal of the need for physical presence in physical classrooms due to the growth of online learning delivery has enabled a previously unattainable level of flexibility for those wishing to enrol in higher education (Soffer, Kahan & Nachmias, 2019). However, providing flexible educational services that meet students' diverse needs and expectations means far more than simply providing educational opportunities to every adult. It requires universities to adjust not only their pedagogical models (e.g., course design and educational support services) but also their fundamental operational mechanism (Bailey et al., 2018; Johnson, 2015; Kahu & Nelson, 2017, 2018; Stone & O'Shea 2019). The many resources involved in flexible online learning spaces may appear, and may be experienced as unstructured and confusing, leading to poor access, non-engagement, cognitive overload, isolation, poor self-regulation and subsequent attrition (Land & Bayne, 2011; Panadero, 2017; Yeh et al., 2019).

2.4.4.4. Learning Management Systems

The advantages of the Learning Management System (LMS), including Blackboard, Moodle and Canvas as a pivotal piece of infrastructure in the support of student learning in online higher education, have been well detailed in the literature (e.g., Washington, 2019; Chaw & Tang, 2018). Ellis and Goodyear (2010), in early studies on the student experience of online learning in higher education, describe an LMS as a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, reporting and delivering by e-learning education courses or training program. Chaubey and Bhattacharya (2015) later describe an LMS in much the same way, as a broad term denoting an extended group of online systems that coordinate and deliver access to online learning services for students, academics, facilitators and administrators. According to Aldiab, Chowdhury, Kootsookos, Alam and Allhibi (2019), the most significant features of an LMS are flexibility and the self-regulated learning opportunities afforded to learners beyond the temporal and spatial restrictions of traditional classrooms. Other studies found that the LMS presents students with a greater freedom from constraint including freedom of content, medium, access and relationship development not previously available in the fully on-campus delivery mode (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Daniel, 2017; Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018; Kahu & Nelson, 2017, 2018; Stone & O'Shea, 2019).

Nonetheless, the prevalence and the benefits offered to online higher education through the use of LMS notwithstanding, there are still varied opinions as to their value. On the one hand, Fathema, Shannon and Ross (2015), during an investigation into the critical role of user-related factors in determining faculty attitudes toward LMS usage, found that system quality, user-friendliness, easy accessibility and reliability are benefits in terms of successful flexible delivery. Conversely, however, some of these benefits can be irregular, deficient or necessitate considerable effort in order to take advantage of them. Specific obstacles can create barriers that thwart users in their attempts to access the

benefits of the LMS, and a considerable amount of literature has been published on the myriad factors that constitute the challenges and limitations of LMS software (Chaw & Tang, 2018; Radwan, Senousy & Riad, 2014; Alenezi, 2018). These can include limited functionality, slow interactions and the resulting frustration. As increasing numbers of barriers to success occur, they can serve to further isolate the multitasking online learner.

In a study on the use of LMS in Saudi universities, Asiri, Mahmud, Abu Bakar, Mahmud, Ayub and Bakadam (2015) found poor Internet connectivity to be a serious barrier to online study. Considering that LMS exclusively operate online, Internet access and connectivity are essential. Poor connectivity hinders availability of and access to learning infrastructure. It also interferes with features including online conferencing, which can only be accessed via strong networks. For the remote end-user this requires synchronizing setup between offline and online systems to improve the quality of learning. In an Australian context, Hillier (2018) points out the lack of high bandwidth connectivity among remote locations in Australia as an ongoing issue to nationwide access, requiring an offline processing capability. However, one interesting outcome to these challenges of the LMS came to light in a study by Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler, and Stürmer (2015), where it was found that they actually contributed to the sense of community among the online students because of a shared sense of frustration!

2.4.4.5. Communication within Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Spaces

Communication has the capability to enrich the learning experience and to build positivity. Effective communication is a pathway to the exchange of ideas, feelings, experience and information, advantageous to the understanding of those involved. Online communications and face-to-face communications have the same aim: to relate, exchange information, and to be heard and understood. Learner-content interaction contributes greatly towards the successful realisation of the expected learning outcomes and resulting learner satisfaction (Truhlar, Williams & Walter, 2018). This section reviews what has

been published about synchronous and asynchronous delivery modes and how student engagement, interactivity and communication is affected by these online learning spaces. Synchronous delivery refers to teaching and learning that occur together in the sense that students attend live classes with real-time interactions between educators and learners, including instant feedback, providing favourable circumstances for social interaction (Francescucci & Rohani, 2018; Richardson, Maeda, Lv, & Caskurlu, 2017; Watts, 2016). Asynchronous delivery covers teaching and learning that do not occur concurrently. Learning content is not available in live classes; rather, it is available at different times, often recorded or incorporating learning management systems (LMS) and discussion forums. Immediate feedback and response are unable to be achieved in asynchronous delivery (Littlefield, 2018). Both modalities are technology-driven, being conducted via technologies including the Internet.

According to Singh and Thurman (2019), online learning can be achieved through synchronous and asynchronous delivery by means of apparatus including mobile phones and laptops at any time, and anywhere there is online access. Littlefield (2018) also discusses delivery in terms of an asynchronous format, a synchronous format or a combination of both. This flexibility of delivery is an important element in understanding the choices offered to and made by the adult learner seeking to begin or resume study (Daniel, 2017; Nelson, Creagh, Kift & Clarke, 2014). Preferences for preferred synchronous or asynchronous deliveries and the communication and interaction therein may be determined by many extrinsic influences for these adult learners with possible limited choice in delivery mode (Stone & O'Shea, 2019).

Studies by Bower, Dalgarno, Kennedy, Lee and Kenney (2015), and Wang, Quek and Hu (2017) take these differences even further and subdivide blended learning into blended synchronous and blended asynchronous learning. According to the authors, in blended synchronous learning, the same lesson is delivered concurrently to both face-to-

face and online students. A blended asynchronous delivery involves a face-to-face session which is then generally recorded and made available online via digital tools, usually a learning management system (LMS).

However, in terms of synchronous and asynchronous delivery, there exists disagreement in the literature regarding several aspects of these two forms of delivery, in particular flexibility of access, academic support, and the use of Learning Management Systems as self-directed learning. Orlando and Attard (2015) suggest that "teaching with technology is not a one size fits all approach as it depends on the types of technology in use at the time and also the curriculum content being taught" (p. 119). Of particular relevance to the current study is the notion that additional factors must be taken into consideration with the incorporation of technology in regard to the way adult students experience communication within online learning. Barriers to participation exist in both synchronous and asynchronous spaces.

As a result of a two-university study across two units discussed by Gillett-Swan (2017), the following question was developed for further study: *Does the flexibility inherent in the online environment in fact serve to further isolate the already isolated learner?* (p. 26). The initial study investigated students' approaches to using an online asynchronous engagement with teachers and peers, using online platforms of their 78 choosing combined with an initial face-to-face class. The relatively limited capability to collaborate face-to-face and bring into play non-verbal cues and body language in the asynchronous space, proved to be an inhibiting factor to engagement and communication. Studies by Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler, and Sturmer (2015), have found that this limitation may occur because of additional work or the family commitments that may restrict adult students' engagement in alternative approaches.

Englund, Olofsson, and Price (2017), Koehler and Mishra (2005), and Popenici (2013, cited in Bedenlier et al., 2020), found other factors impact success for all first-year

students in various ways and to various degrees. These factors impact communication and interaction; they include lecturer characteristics, early institutional support, ease of digital access, teaching approach, the learning environment, and curriculum and learning design encouraging multi-faceted student engagement and self-regulated learning (Ben-Eliyahu, Moore, Dorph, & Schunn, 2018). Importantly to the current study, however, the majority of these studies cover the first-year experience through to course conclusion. In order to mitigate isolation and other inhibitions to communication, engagement and retention, research into the early development of adult students' experiences and subsequent negotiation of their relationship with both synchronous and asynchronous delivery needs to be investigated.

2.5. The Gap

2.5.1. What?

While the adult student cohort is slowly coming to be recognised in the literature as a distinct student population, generational determinisms aside, it is obvious from this review of the literature that a gap still exists in the current research into adult students per se. This includes their unique motives and needs and occupation with developmental tasks relevant to their level of maturation and their "identity formation" as students (O'Shea, 2015a, p. 246). According to the research, this cohort is subject to attrition in their first year of study in far greater numbers than their younger peers. A second gap in the research involves how and what these adult students experience immediately prior to and within their first twelve weeks of online study, and how their negotiation of these experiences impacts their decision to persist or attrite.

The studies involved in this literature review have concentrated on two periods: first year of study, and the full course of study until graduation. There is little evidence in the literature that these students are being asked what their initial experiences are or being listened to regarding how they feel they can be supported in this 'make-or-break' early

period of their transition into the online learning space. The current study examines the experiences of adult students transitioning into the Australian higher education online space, and their negotiation of their first twelve-week trimester as online learners. As such, it contributes to an understanding of these two challenges and will therefore make valuable contributions on two fronts.

Firstly, the design of my study intentionally focuses away from the full 'First-Year-Experience' (FYE) of established investigation. Schwartzman (2010, p. 26) points to "lacunae" in representations of student experience within the Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF). She maintains that descriptions of threshold characteristics and of liminality have focused on the aftermath, rather than the experience, of students' learning of challenging concepts, and so have generally not suggested ways of facilitating teaching or supporting students finding difficulty with those concepts. A related, emergent focal area within the TCF considers the psychological and affective characteristics that influence how learners cope with the demands of the learning transition (Berg, Erichsen & Hokstad 2016; Rattray, 2016). Much of this work is still exploratory or theoretical, raising more questions than answers and pointing to areas in need of further research. Making use of the participants' perceptions, this study addresses the transitional experiences of adults immediately prior to and during their first trimester of online study. The Threshold Concept Framework characteristics of liminality, troublesome knowledge and transformation are used as a conceptual framework to investigate the liminal journey these students undertake in these early days of their transition. It will inform the paucity of research covering the adult learner in their liminal journey from imminent pre-enrolment, the early stage of enrolment and through to the end of their first trimester. Secondly, the study investigates the considerable yet largely unacknowledged issues and opportunities around the very early practices, pedagogies and outcomes pertaining to attrition and persistence that stand to contribute meaningfully to improved retention among this cohort.

2.5.2. Why?

I argue that the field of online higher education needs to be more critical about our understanding and expectations of adult students transitioning into the online education space and pay more attention to their critical voices scattered across the literature. Due to the multiple roles and responsibilities adult learners face, there is increasing demand for accessible and timely education, and the numbers of adults studying in the higher education online space is burgeoning. It is becoming increasingly urgent to provide universities and online educators with practical suggestions to address the attrition emerging in relation to the growing disjunction between what we believe about ideal online education and what is actual online education in practice for this cohort. In order to build effective ongoing online learning experiences, a holistic understanding of the problems and challenges faced by adults in their early transition into the online learning space is critical. The current landscape regarding these challenges must be explored to enable future development in early adult online education.

It has been frequently argued in the literature that adult students are satisfied with online learning because it is flexible and convenient, especially for busy, working adult learners (e.g., Kahu & Nelson, 2017, 2018; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Notions about adult students being self-regulated and motivated to learn frequently come up as primary reasons for an adult student's enrolment into the online learning space, as well as their overall experience as learners (e.g., Harrell & Bower, 2011; Mahieu & Wolming, 2013; Panadero, 2017; Wong et al., 2019; Yeh et al., 2019; Li, Wong, Yang & Bell, 2019; Voogt & Knezek, 2018). However, Bailie (2014) argues that while remaining relevant, and indeed logical, this is overemphasis on the obvious, and that an examination concerning student satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and effective pedagogies and course designs, in online learning environments, from the student perspective, is overdue. Expressly, an empirical study concentrating upon the different ways in which new adult learners experience their

early transition to online study, incorporating constructivist co-exploration and dialogue between participants and researcher, is called for. My study aims to fulfil this need and add to the research by exploring in depth adult students' own experiences as online learners just prior to and during their first twelve weeks of study.

2.6. Chapter Summary

The significance of this study has been rationalised through the articulation of the current literature, its relevance, discord and contradictions. As mentioned in the beginning of this review, the material presented in this chapter has been selected according to the best way in which to situate the research outlined throughout the thesis. In order to provide a necessary background to both the analysis and interpretation of the participants' accounts and to position the current study efficaciously, this chapter has drawn together diverse research elements. These particularly relate to the adult student experience. As it evolves, the thesis continues to relate to the literature informing this focus of the study. Interacting with literature focusing upon issues including transition, persistence and engagement benefits all stakeholders within higher education. Highlighting a specific student cohort with a particular online emphasis empowers both their voices and those of influential others to be heard.

While the first chapter set the context for the study, this chapter has reviewed the research literature regarding who the adult student studying online in higher education in Australia is, and the definition of what online learning means in this university environment. The evidence for the demand for flexibility and increased accessibility having led to the rapid expansion in the field of online learning within higher education in Australia, has also been examined. Other important research discussed in this chapter include the attrition issues evident within this adult cohort, and the importance to the adult student of methods of delivery and associated accessibility when choosing higher education delivery modalities. Finally, this chapter discusses the gaps the current study

will fill. These gaps are deduced from the relevant literature on adults' participation in online learning, notably within Australia. The first gap involves the paucity of research into adult students as a group per se. The second gap involves the dearth of studies into the influence and impact upon retention of the early experiences and subsequent negotiations made by adult students transitioning into online learning. The next chapter investigates the Threshold Concept Framework (TCF), the literature concerning this framework and the importance of the TCF as the influence for the conceptual framework for this study.

CHAPTER 3:
THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

> *'Beyond' signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future; but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary – the very act of going beyond – are unknowable… disjunct and displaced.*
>
> (Bhabha, 1994 p. 4)

3.1. THE HISTORICAL LEGACY OF THE THRESHOLD

Figure 1: *Pax Intrantibus Salus Exeuntibus.* Lintel of threshold, Cannongate, Edinburgh1609

Ray Land notes that above a small seventeenth-century house in the age-old Canongate burgh of Edinburgh, there is a modest lintel built of sandstone. This lintel is engraved with an inscription in Latin: "*Pax intrantibus, salus exeuntibus*" – "Peace to those who are entering, and safety to those about to depart" (Lintel of threshold, 1609, as cited in Myer, Land & Baillie, 2010). Tradition has it that this unpretentious portal signifies the journey undertaken when crossing over the threshold from the familiar, relatively secure place that lies within, to the uncertainty beyond (adapted from Myer, Land & Baillie, 2010, p. xiii).

As Schwartzman (2010) suggests, all threshold concept work "is concerned (directly or indirectly) with encountering the unknown" (p. 38). Therefore, the concept of threshold crossing may also relate to any significant transition in the learning journey. This idea resonated deeply with this study of adult students 25+ years transitioning into their own 'unknown' – the higher education online study space.

Beginning with an introduction to the historical legacy of the allegorical threshold, this chapter sets out the conceptual framework for the study. Significant ideas which I argue are relevant to examining the transition of the participant cohort are examined. The background section then includes the origins and the foundational pedagogical elements of the Threshold Concept Framework (TCF) and the characteristics of Threshold Concepts (TCs). Particular attention is paid to troublesome knowledge, transformation and liminality. A rationale for the choice of this framework and how it aligns with and supports the structure of the study follows. This rationale includes my variations to the traditional definitions and application of the TCF. The lineage and theoretical alignments with regard to existing scholarship, and criticisms of the TCF are then outlined.

3.2. THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

> *The conceptual framework explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, concepts, or variables —and the presumed relationships among them*.
>
> (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 18)

A concept is the basic symbolic component of a larger spectrum of research (Rodgers & Knafl 2000). "… a unit of thought or element of knowledge that allows us to organize experience" (Donald, 2001, p. 9), requiring an explicit framework of thought in order to make sense. An integral part of research design, the conceptual framework is a construction by the researcher providing an empirical model or map of *how* things are and helping to clarify *what* is happening and *why* (Camp, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In constructivist terms, an explicit conceptual framework is a “self-audit facility to ensure cohesion” (Leshem & Trafford, 2007, p. 101) and an essential scaffolding tool helping to effect conceptually valid research (Crotty, 1998). It helps to define and give context to the research problem; to develop the research questions and choice of methodology; and to support the interpretation of the findings from different and new perspectives, thereby

providing new insights (Biesta, Allan, & Edwards, 2011; Reeves, Albert, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008).

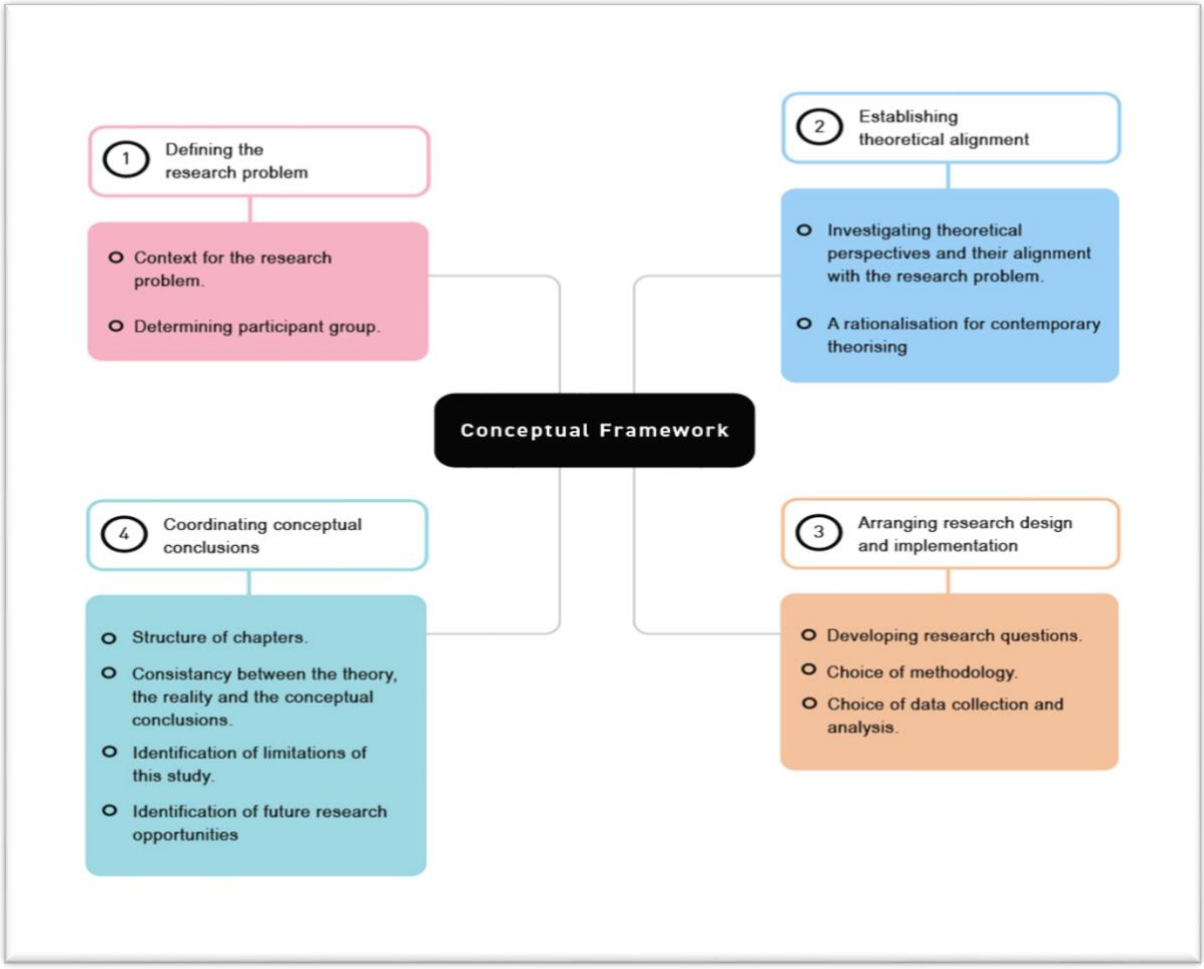


Figure 2: Mind map of the use of a conceptual framework in this study (Author)

3.2.1. Transition: The Fickle Flux

When certainties are removed, life is flux.

(Heraclitus of Ephesus, 6th century BCE)

Heraclitus (6th century BCE, cited in Baird, 2010) maintained that (1) everything is constantly changing and (2) opposite things are identical, so that (3) everything is, and is not, at the same time. The image of the fickle 'flux' of Heraclitus suits well the under-researched journey through the portal faced by the participant cohort, adults 25+ years of age transitioning for the first time into a variety of online courses in the higher education online space. Transition is the process or a period of changing from one state or condition to another. Combined with the physical aspects comes the psychological impact of critical

lifestyle change. Disruption will occur and changes will happen. The possibilities and potential embodied within such a transition can be either enabled or hindered by the way they are experienced, thereby influencing understanding, interaction and development (Charteris, Smardon & Nelson, 2017; Meyer & Timmermans, 2016; White, Olsen & Schumann, 2016).

Well documented policies and procedures to assist students transitioning into online study are easily found amongst the online marketing output of providers of higher education. However, a scholarly focus on the subjective experience undergone by adults in their initial transition is not so forthcoming, thereby representing a gap in the literature. This lacuna represents the limited insight into both the actual experiences faced by these students during their very early transition into the online liminal space, and the range of early triggers, interventions and processes that may support or hinder their persistence or attrition (Schwartzman, 2010).

Any research involving transition into an 'online learning space' needs to adopt a nuanced approach using an explicit conceptual framework to effectively identify themes and patterns emerging from the data. The framework of the current study is built to help elicit rich qualitative descriptions from the participants' own voices of their experience during early negotiation of the online liminal space; to help elucidate those research findings into theoretically sound, actionable form; and to suggest characteristics of epistemological and/or ontological transformation from these stories. The in-depth understandings offered by this profoundly personal perspective on the transitional online journey can lead to implications for future pedagogic and curricular responses, as well as insights into issues of attrition and persistence.

3.2.2. The Development of this Conceptual Framework as an Essential Tool.

3.2.2.1. Underlying Schema

The Threshold Concepts Framework (Meyer & Land, 2003) is the underlying schema in the construction of the current study's conceptual framework. The Threshold Concepts Framework will be discussed in depth later in this chapter; briefly, however, in order to set the context, this framework is described as a research model incorporating an analytic, educational framework in the constructivist mould (Meyer & Land, 2003). It links a matrix of concepts and ideas, speculations and projections, supporting and informing a research study and their effect and influence on the phenomenon being studied (Rattray & Land, 2017).

As a social constructivist approach, the Threshold Concepts Framework takes social learning perspectives into consideration when highlighting transformative individual learning (Burchmore, Irvine & Carmichael, 2007). Within this learning-centred approach (Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015), emotion and motivation are seen as core dimensions of learning (Meyer & Land, 2005; Timmermans, 2010) along with "celebration rather than suppression of differences" (Meyer & Timmermans, 2016, p. 34). Also extremely important to the approach is the fundamental acknowledgement of 'variation' experienced within the transformational (liminal) space (Baillie, Bowden & Meyer, 2013), and the focus on transformative learning at the cognitive, epistemological and ontological levels (Meyer, Land & Baillie, 2010; Mezirow, 2000).

3.2.2.2. Axioms.

In order to best grasp the transition of this cohort, the conceptual framework for this study is based on two sets of axioms: criteria and conceptual characteristics. Both these axioms will now be briefly examined with a view to clarifying the role of each in the development of the final conceptual framework seen in Table 1 (p. 90). The characteristics are also discussed in more detail in the next section entitled, 'Background' (p. 91).

3.2.2.2.1. Criteria

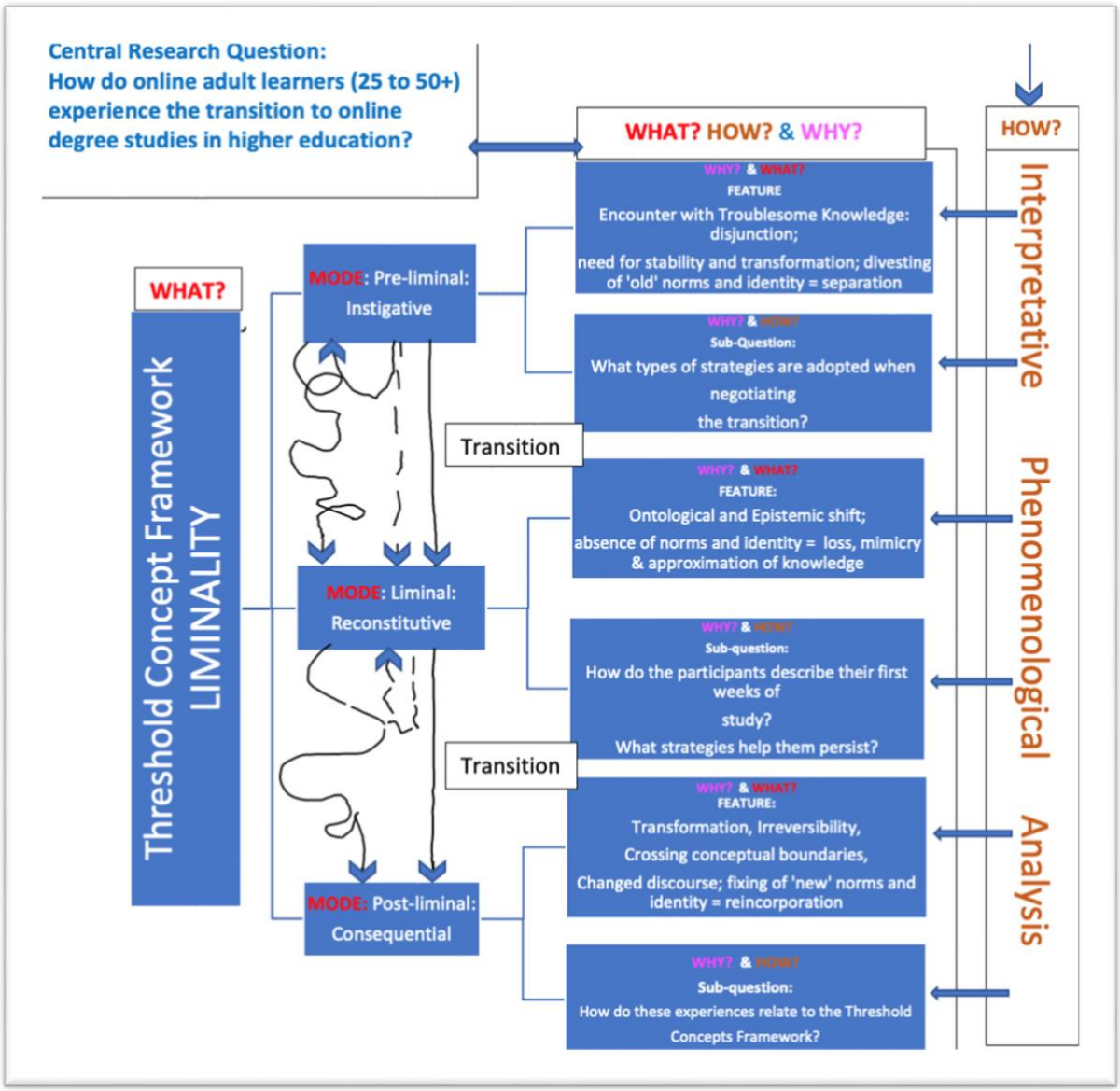
The criteria involved are fourfold. First, the conceptual framework supports the context for the research problem. Secondly, it identifies aspects of the research problem. Thirdly, the conceptual framework positions the research questions and appropriate methodology. Finally, the framework provides structure for critical engagement with the research, the findings and the discussion and indicates the alignment of ontology, epistemology and methodology (Leshem & Trafford, 2007; Smyth, 2004).

3.2.2.2.2. Conceptual Characteristics

The three conceptual characteristics: liminality, transformation and troublesome knowledge are considered to be the requisite elements of the Threshold Concepts Framework. As the research into threshold concepts has evolved, there has been growing attention given to liminality (Thomassen, 2018) and its critical co-characteristics of troublesome knowledge and transformation. The focus of this conceptual framework is the liminal space and the variations in transition between the three modes or stages therein: pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal. The conceptual framework developed for this study is illustrated in Table 1 (p. 90). This figure demonstrates the general trajectory the research will follow.

As seen in Table 1, liminality is the pillar supporting this conceptual framework. Possible recursiveness during the transition between each liminal stage is allowed for. Each feature of the liminal stages is indicated in relation to the research sub-questions aligned with each stage and aligning with ontology, epistemology and methodology. The methodology then forms the last pillar of the conceptual framework. The progression through the three stages of liminality begins with an encounter with the troublesome knowledge inherent within the pre-liminal space. This troublesome knowledge is an instigative or provocative feature that disrupts previous understanding and provokes a state of liminality.

Table 1: Explicit conceptual framework used in this study (Author)



WHAT? Ontology	WHY? Epistemology	HOW? Methodology
Context for the research problem	New knowledge	Research design
Key concepts	New conclusions	Research questions
Relationships	Implications for practice	Data gathering, organising, analysing, interpreting
Establishment of terminology		Validity – conceptual, practical
Boundaries for conclusions and findings		

When this liminal space is experienced, a reconfiguring of prior conceptual schema and a relinquishing of former conceptual perspectives can occur. Finally, in the post-liminal state, there is a transition across conceptual boundaries, transformation of self-image, and a

familiarity with or mastering of a different discourse (Rattray & Land, 2017). It should be emphasised that the sequential, three-tiered, liminal stages structure is not rigid and allows for recursiveness, as indicated in Table 1 (Land, Meyer & Baillie, 2010).

The objective of this conceptual framework is not to create what Haggis (2004) terms a "generalised, quasi-deterministic model" (p. 350). The purpose is assuredly not to overgeneralise the context of the study and label each participant as "a member of a stereotyped, homogenous mass", as cautioned against by Bryson and Hand (2008, p. 13). Rather the opposite, in fact. By depicting the intricate, even convoluted, collage of factors influencing each participant's transition, and by establishing these within the broader socio-cultural frame of reference, the need for in-depth study of the unique individual experiences within the transitional online space is clarified.

What follows is the background to the Threshold Concepts Framework. In particular, liminality, transformation and troublesome knowledge will be discussed, along with ways in which the framework has been reimagined in order to explore the transition into the online liminal space experienced by the participants. The Threshold Concepts Framework scholarly position, and various criticisms of the framework as they pertain to this study, will then be covered.

3.3. BACKGROUND

3.3.1. The Threshold Concept Framework and its Origins

The Threshold Concepts Framework first attracted critical attention in Erik Meyer and Ray Land's "Enhancing Teaching and Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses" project (Meyer & Land 2005, p 386), presented at the 10th *Improving Student Learning* conference in Brussels in 2002 (published 2003). Relatively new in terms of its inception, it remains in a state of development while enjoying increasing attention over the past seventeen years.

3.3.2. Passing Through the Portal: 'The Light at the End of the Tunnel'

In their development of the Threshold Concepts Framework, Meyer and Land (2003) drew on studies of cultural rites of passage by anthropologists and ethnographers Turner (1969), Campbell (1968), and Van Gennep (1960). These studies illustrate the idea that archetypal transition into new territory, or state of being, corresponds to passing through a pre-liminal threshold, portal or gateway, into a liminal stage often referred to as a 'tunnel' and exiting into a post-liminal "… transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something and opens up previously inaccessible ways of thinking" (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 1).

3.3.3. What is a Threshold Concept?

> *…a piece in a jigsaw of concepts that causes them to coalesce and produce a steep change in perception.*
>
> (Land et al., 2014, pp. 208–209)

A threshold concept is a transformative idea traditionally bounded within a specific discipline. Grasping of a threshold concept offers possibilities for better understanding of the inter-relationship of factors essential for mastering a subject, and understanding the worldview of a profession (Land, Cousin, Meyer, & Davies, 2005; Land, Cousin, Meyer & Smith, 2008). Meyer and Land (2003) labelled these concepts as "threshold" because "… once understood . . . [they] occasion a significant transformative shift in the perception of a subject, or part thereof" (p. 5).

The idea of a threshold concept was first discussed in order to distinguish between concepts that characterise the perception of things in a fresh way, and those that do not (Meyer & Land 2005). As a consequence of that discussion, a threshold concept is understood to be distinct from a core concept. A core concept boosts established knowledge for a learner. Assimilation of a threshold concept is said to be crucial to building *new* knowledge "…without which the learner cannot progress" (Meyer, Land, & Smith, 2008, p x).

As an example of this difference, Thompson (February 26, 2018) notes the core concept of 'rhetoric'– speaking or writing that is designed and used to persuade. Knowing the core credos and conventions of rhetoric does not help a writer to understand how to use it. "It is the understanding that writing is both social and rhetorical" that is the threshold concept (par. 3). This understanding enables decisions to be made concerning what rhetoric is, what rhetoric to use and how it is used. According to Meyer and Land (2003, 2006) and Meyer, Land, and Baillie (2010), these advanced ways of thinking cannot be acquired until the student has transitioned through the portal, undergone the subsequent transformation, and assimilated the threshold concept.

Nathanson (1991) calls these instances of transformation and separation from ordinary reality; a transition from a self that is "unrealized" to one that is "realized, or individuated" (p. 180). "Once the portal is approached, negotiated, and experienced as a transition in terms of sense of self" (Meyer & Land 2006, p. 19), it offers a process of identity transformation (Cousin, 2006b, 2009; Flanagan, 2016; Tight, 2014), and enables cognitive and affective mastery of significant aspects of the field of study, activity or practice (Tucker, Weedman, Bruce & Edwards, 2014).

3.3.4. Characteristics of Threshold Concepts Within the Threshold Concept Framework

Meyer and Land (2003, pp. 5–7) suggest that threshold concepts have various characteristics by which they may be identified. These characteristics together make up the Threshold Concepts Framework (as seen in Table 2, p. 94). These 'threshold' traits of a concept are epistemologically influenced and personally experienced, meaning that these characteristics can be viewed as the framework's metaphors for the "product" and "process" of learning (Meyer & Land, 2005). While the first three characteristics in Table 2, liminality, transformation and troublesome knowledge, are considered to be "superordinate and non-negotiable" characteristics of a threshold concept (Land, Meyer &

Flanagan, 2016, p. 16), this is not a definitional checklist. Claiming it as such could be interpreted as hegemonic and thereby hamper understanding of individual engagement with a given threshold, and the varied degree to which each characteristic might be individually experienced (Meyer & Land, 2006; Meyer, Land & Davies, 2008). The other five characteristics are considered to be common to threshold concepts (Land, 2016, p. 16).

Table 2: The Threshold Concepts Framework: Characteristics of Threshold Concepts (Author)

"…superordinate and non-negotiable" characteristics of a TC (Land, 2016, p. 16)	
liminality	The overarching characteristic of a threshold concept. A transformative place for "processes of growth, transformation, and the formulation of old elements in new patterns" (Turner, 1967, p. 99) as well as a "stuck place where a person becomes uncertain about the identity of self and purpose in life" (Meyer & Land 2006, p. 22).
troublesome knowledge	Threshold concepts are uncomfortable and counter-intuitive; challenge pre-existing understanding; require letting go of prior familiar ways of seeing things (Perkins, 1999, 2006, 2010).
transformation	Once understood, the threshold concept is *transformative*, causing both a significant ontological and epistemological shift in perception (Meyer & Land, 2005; Timmermans & Meyer, 2017). This is accompanied by a shift in identity, incorporating values, attitudes and confidence. Research has linked this transformative aspect of learning experiences with the troublesome nature of essential knowledge (Mezirow, 2003).
Commonly found characteristics of a TC (Land, 2016, p. 16)	
discourse	New language associated with technology-led education invades everyday existence with ever-evolving terminology, and "all encounters with threshold concepts have a discursive challenge (Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014). "What is being emphasised here is the inter-relatedness of the learner's identity with thinking and language. Threshold concepts lead not only to transformed thought but to a transfiguration of identity and adoption of an extended discourse" (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 375).

reconstitution	"New understandings are assimilated into our biography, becoming part of who we are, how we see, and how we feel" (Cousin, 2010, p. 2).
integration	Involves the assimilation and the subsequent unification of new information or understanding "in varying degrees" (Land, Meyer, & Smith, 2008, p. x) by enabling connections between different phenomena and knowledge that were previously hidden from the learner's comprehension (Meyer & Land, 2005).
irreversibility	Unlikely to be forgotten once the shortcomings in simpler and earlier understandings have been understood (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Hawkins & Edwards, 2015; Land, Neve, & Martindale, 2018). Meyer and Land also maintain that the "change of perspective occasioned by acquisition of a threshold concept is [also] unlikely to be forgotten" (2003, p. 5).
boundedness	It "may in certain instances serve to constitute the demarcation between disciplinary areas, to define academic territories" and "any conceptual space … terminal frontiers, bordering with thresholds into new conceptual areas" (Meyer & Land, 2003, p.5). "A celebration rather than suppression of differences that arise in inter-disciplinary discourses about the contextualized nature of transformative learning, in particular the epistemic and ontological learning journey" (Meyer & Timmermans, 2016, p. 34).

The next section looks more closely at the three "superordinate and non-negotiable" (Land, 2016, p. 16) characteristics of a threshold concept that formed the main platform scaffolding this study of the transition of adult students into and through the online space: troublesome knowledge, transformation and liminality. It is important to clarify at this point that the word 'space' will be used in the next section in two often overlapping contexts: the liminal space and the online space (Baillie, Bowden & Meyer, 2013; Cousin, 2006a, 2008; Land, 2016; Meyer & Land, 2005; Schwartzman, 2010).

3.4. Troublesome Knowledge, Transformation and Liminality

3.4.1. Troublesome Knowledge and Transformation

> *Troublesome knowledge sounds very negative, but in some sense knowledge needs to trouble you. It needs to unsettle you so that you do become open to new possibilities, that you do let go of your prevailing view to some extent so that you can admit the possibility of seeing otherwise.*
>
> (Land, 2013, Keynote Presentation)

Threshold concepts are troublesome because they may often be difficult to grasp for learners, presenting a challenge to existing ways of thinking or even what is perceived as 'common sense' (Walker, 2013). Threshold concepts may not easily be grasped, bargained for, or made allowance for within one's "orienting frame of reference" (Schwartzman, 2010, p. 30) and learners can get 'stuck'. According to Schwartzman, "real learning requires stepping into the unknown, which initiates a rupture in knowing" (p. 38, 2010). Such "… significant learning is often troublesome, and indeed needs to be, so as to 'provoke' learners to move on from their prevailing way of conceptualizing a particular phenomenon to new ways of seeing" (Land, 2011, p. 7).

A troublesome learning experience may therefore be emotionally uncomfortable or unsettling due to "the reconfiguration of previously acquired understanding" (Davies, 2010, p.8). New conceptual material conflicting with a previously held sense of 'self', or belief systems, may be encountered (Meyer & Land, 2005). Knowledge may be experienced as ambivalent and unpredictable, particularly at first [i.e., leaving a familiar position and moving to a new and less certain terrain] (Cousin, 2006b, 2014). In so many ways, 'we are what we know'; the learner can remain 'defensive' in the face of this unsettling and uncomfortable ontological shift in subjectivity initiated by a threshold concept.

One outcome of this defensive reaction can be for the learner to construct a coping strategy. Land (2012) refers to this as mimicry – a disjointed, restricted or superficial understanding of the concept to be learned – a kind of 'fake it till you make it' approach including cramming for an exam. A more significant outcome is that of frustration, loss of confidence and anxiety, possibly leading to attrition. "If knowledge is to have a transformative effect it probably should be troublesome, or at least troubling, but that does not mean it should be stressful or should provoke the kinds of anxiety, self-doubt and

frustration that can lead to students giving up" (Myer & Land, 2006 p.xiv). Troublesome knowledge and transformation are inextricably linked to liminality (Cousin, 2006a, 2014).

3.4.2. Liminality

3.4.2.1. Characteristics of the Liminal Space

> *…a corridor almost, or a tunnel that requires novices to be suspended from everyday life as they enter another physical and psychological space where they are on their own.*
>
> (Turner, 1977, p. 37)

An interpretation involving liminality is critical to an understanding of the ambiguous learning environment of the adult student transitioning into the higher education online learning space. The liminal space is the transformative period that precedes the actual 'crossing' of the threshold: the space between the initial step over the threshold and the final step out of the troublesome 'tunnel' (Ross, 2011; Land, 2012, 2014). It is a space where all transformation takes place; a place of transition, waiting, and not knowing, between the 'what was' and 'what is next'. From the Latin *limen* meaning *threshold*, liminality is a social anthropological concept relating to the uncertainty experienced during a hiatus in familiar and conventional norms, rules, and routines of life (Turner, 1977; Van Gennep, 1960). Liminal space may be defined in several different ways. A liminal space can be a literal space: an anteroom, a waiting room, a reception hall. However, liminality is also a cognitive state (Thomassen, 2018). Often, liminal spaces initiate a feeling of something just out of reach (Turner, 1977).

Liminality is variously described in the literature as an indeterminate, constantly oscillating state of transition (Kabo, Day & Baillie 2009); as entailing both a conceptual and an ontological shift (Land, 2012, 2014; Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014); and a space which anthropologist Turner (1990) called "the fructile chaos of learning as process, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities" (pp. 12-13). This is the period of transition (Van Gennep, 1960) and transformation (Campbell, 2004; Turner, 1977; Turner & Turner, 1978) bounded by comparatively 'stable' stages of life (Turner & Turner, 1978).

"The transformation and transition to understanding may be sudden or it may be protracted over a considerable period of time" (Land, Meyer & Baillie, 2010, p.xiv). Turner (1967, 1969) terms this as an ambiguous, out-of-time state, a social limbo that was not any place they were in before and not yet any place they would be in, "neither here nor there; ... betwixt and between" (1974, p.232). Ellsworth (2005) calls liminality a "… doppler effect in which the individual 'smudges' him or herself when moving from the self whom one has been, to the self yet to become" (p.122).

Savin-Baden's model of transitional learning spaces (2008c, p.103), adapted from a relational view of the features of threshold concepts by Land, Meyer, and Baillie (2010) (see Figure 3), illustrates the cyclical troublesome learning journey undertaken in the process of acquiring threshold concepts. It depicts a catalyst for change resulting in disjunction, separation and movement into the liminal space; a sense of splitting up part or all of the self. According to Savin-Baden, this loss of sense of self is often accompanied by anxiety and confusion, resulting in anger, and a frustrating need for the "right answers" (2000, p. 87).

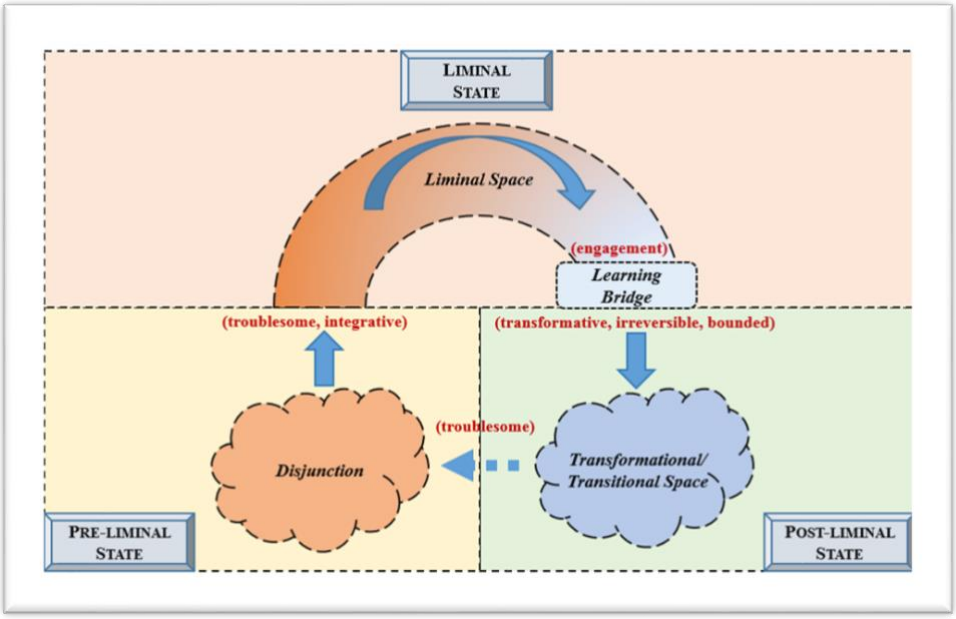


Figure 3: A conceptual model illustrating the process of learning threshold concepts across liminal states (Savin-Baden, 2008c, adapted from Land, Meyer & Baillie, 2010)

However, a liminal space can also be considered as a place for "processes of growth, transformation, and the formulation of old elements in new patterns" (Turner, 1967, p. 99), as well as a "stuck place where a person becomes uncertain about the identity of self and purpose in life" (Meyer & Land 2006, p. 22). While acknowledging a liminal space to be characterised by intellectual and emotional discomfort, where transformation of understanding proves to be troublesome, Ellsworth (1997) maintains that a conceptual threshold also represents potentially positive transformational and empowering progress. The emphasis is on conceptual development and ontological shift rather than a fixed point that must be passed through. Winnicott (1960) sees the liminal space as a place of development encouraged by change. Turner also described a liminal state as "a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (1995 [1969], p. 97).

Understanding the stages of the liminal state and the variations within the liminal state experienced by adults in early online education leads to more appropriately assisting these students during their transition.

3.4.2.2. The Three Stages of Liminality

Honor [sic] the space between 'no longer' and 'not yet'.

(Levin, June 24, 2015)

Ethnographer Van Gennep (1960) divided liminality into three stages:

1) Pre-liminal Rites – the rites of separation;
2) Liminal or Threshold Rites – the rites of transition – separation from one status but not yet part of a new status; and
3) Post-liminal rites – the rites of incorporation into a new status (p. xii).

Meyer and Land (2010) suggest that the features that designate threshold concepts can also be depicted relationally if viewed as a journey through preliminal, liminal and postliminal states, helping to identify "at which points, and in what ways, individual students might experience conceptual difficulty and experience barriers to their

understanding" (p. 64). The following diagram (Figure 4) is a conceptual model illustrating the process and features of the three liminal stages experienced by students during the learning journey towards, through and beyond thresholds (Land, Meyer & Baillie, 2010).

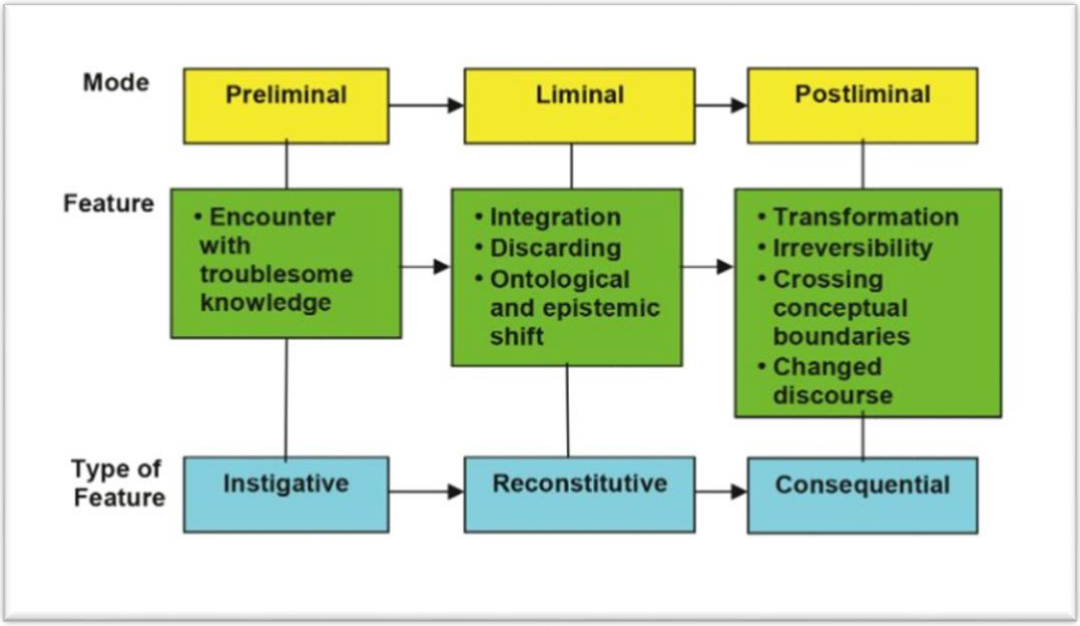


Figure 4: Relational View of Liminal Features of TCs (Land, Meyer & Baillie, 2010, p.xii)

3.4.2.3 Liminal Variation

Liminal variation impacts the occupation and negotiation of a liminal space. Troublesome knowledge is managed in different ways, drawing on different life experiences to assist integration and engagement with new conceptual knowledge. Turner (1995) maintains that we continuously revise our conceptual knowledge, going back and forth so as to perfect our conceptual networks, making and re-make them continuously. Individual students enter, occupy and negotiate, and journey out of a liminal space differently, experiencing different trajectories. Subsequently, these liminal spaces are not traversed in orderly steps (Cousin, 2006a; Wenger, 1998; Meyer & Land, 2003; Sfard, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Indeed, Land, Meyer and Baillie, (2010, p.xi) unequivocally emphasise the 'oscillation' involved in the acquisition of threshold concepts. "…deviation and unexpected outcomes" (Meyer, Land, & Davies, 2006, p.202), incorporating "messy

journeys back, forth, and across conceptual terrain" (Cousin, 2006a, p.5), are likely, as represented in Figure 5.

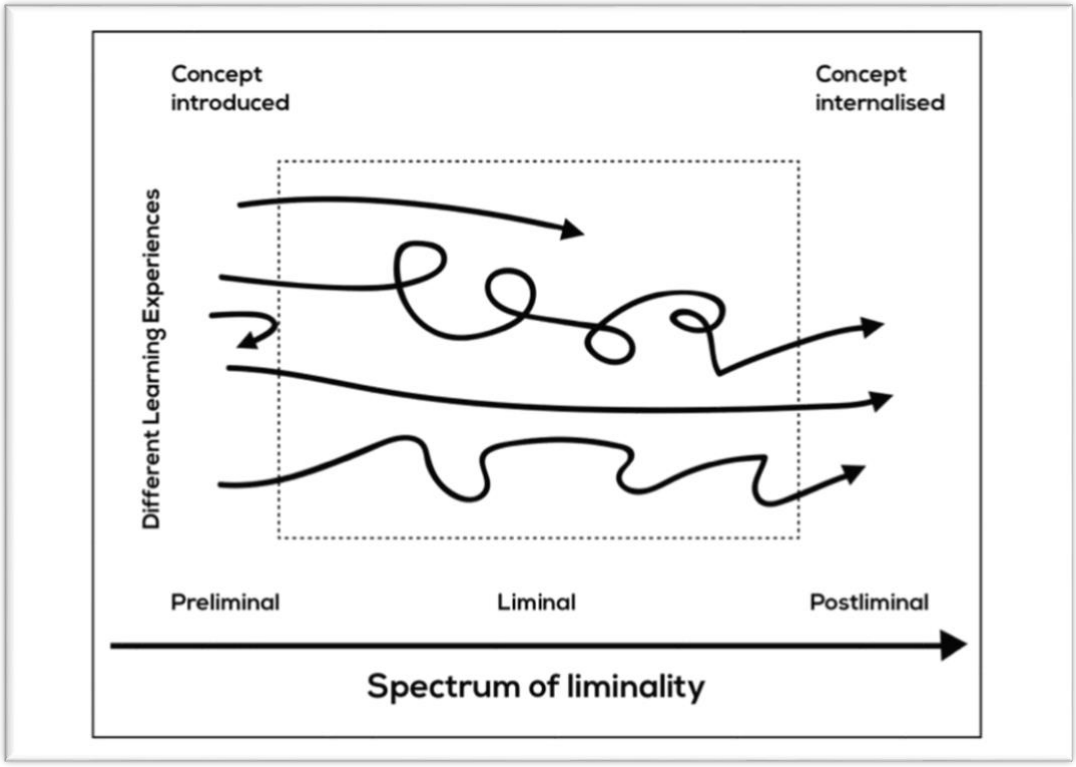


Figure 5: Navigation through a liminal space (Kabo & Baillie 2009, in Harlow Scott, Peter & Cowie, 2011, p. 3)

Online educational space is "fluid and ephemeral… being re-written and re-inscribed, formed and reformed as each pedagogic moment is transformed into another and as they are acted out in time" (Gulson & Symes 2007, p. 105). In terms of this study, crossing interlinked and multi-layered conceptual thresholds within the online space for new adult learners, may well be considerably more complex in their initial stages than crossing conceptual barriers in a particular discipline.

Liminality, troublesome knowledge and transformation are likely to be experienced to some extent in all subjects and modes of delivery (Schwartzman, 2010). Surely then, crucial elements of these elements – transformations in identity and subjectivity, procedural knowledge, and ways of thinking and practicing within a given community (Rattray, 2016) – cannot be regulated to a purely disciplinary context (Savin-Badin &

Falconer, 2016). The following section will present a reconfigured non-disciplinary-based Threshold Concepts Framework in order to rationalise its use in this study.

3.5. Challenging the Traditional Threshold Concepts Framework: A New Approach

> *While the idea of threshold concepts being located within disciplines is useful to a degree, they need to be broadened… transcend disciplines and subject boundaries.*
>
> (Savin-Badin & Falconer, 2016, p. 3)

The Threshold Concepts Framework was originally developed as a means to explore certain learning concepts within undergraduate disciplines. However, remaining focussed on a specific discipline approach at the expense of developing brave and imaginative new areas of research can result in imagination and creativity being stifled (Chamberlain, 2000). The online space (aka e-learning; virtual 'space') is a liminal space impacted by the use of technology (Savin-Baden & Falconer, 2016). As such, this 'space' may not constitute a specific discipline. However, in order to shed light on the experiences of adults in the transition process into and through the portal of the initial liminal online space, a conceptual framework was required that could assist these core complexities to be investigated and more readily understood, unfettered by a purely disciplinary context.

Research into online education has thus far seemed to predominantly concentrate on content, delivery technique, the design of online teaching activities (e.g., Alhabeeb & Rowley, 2018; Bean et al., 2019; Corfman & Beck, 2019; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018; Martin, Ritzhaupt, Kumar & Budhrani, 2019; Sun & Chen, 2016) and self-efficacy and professional development for facilitators within online pedagogy (Kilgour, Reynaud, Northcote, McLoughlin & Gosselin, 2018; Northcote, Gosselin, Reynaud, Kilgour & Anderson, 2015). It is undeniable that these studies have contributed essential information for success at teaching and learning in online spaces. However, little research has been involved with what it means to *be* in an online space and to *be* a student transitioning into

that space. This investigation into the transitionary experiences of the participants presents an opportunity for reconceiving the Threshold Concepts Framework as an analytic lens on *becoming* a new online student.

3.5.1. The E-Learning Space

> *The spaces in which we work, live and learn can have profound effects on how we feel, how we behave, how we perform ... spaces can also limit the possibilities of our activity, restricting us to old modes of working and thinking.*
>
> (Watson, 2007, p. 260)

The way we sense spaces, and our place within them, has always been integral to our lived experience of transition. Online spaces expedite polysynchronous information sharing, communication, academic and professional development operating contemporaneously across sundry contexts and within different communities and with different authorities (Charteris & Smardon, 2018, 2019; Gil Ortega & Falconer, 2015; Holmwood & Scales, 2018). Within these diverse arrangements of time and place, Internet-connected devices now constitute portals or conceptual gateways across a range of designed learning spaces (Charteris, Smardon & Nelson, 2017; Ham, Richardson & Richardson, 2020).

Lehman and Conceição (2010), and Peachey (2010), argue that as people interact to undertake real activities that lead to real outcomes in online spaces, these spaces themselves become real. More than the sum of the component parts, and qualitatively different to its discipline-bound counterparts, the online space itself is therefore recognised in this study as a social and pedagogical entity. While primarily conceptual and affective, the online space also bridges the social and material, and presents as a scholarly ‘activity’ and ‘place’ in and of itself. By transcending disciplinary boundaries, the threshold concepts experienced within the online space itself can be investigated. The intention of this re-conception is not to downgrade the more traditional domain or discipline-specific focus of the threshold concepts characteristics, nor to create any new theory. Indeed, there

is precedence in the TC literature for the reconsideration of the scope of threshold concepts.

3.5.2. Re-Imagining Threshold Concepts

Although not mainstream as yet, literature relating to emerging knowledge of the critical features of threshold concepts within different non-discipline specific domains is becoming more evident. Rattray (2016) investigates affective responses to threshold transformations. This work focuses on the variation in learner's psychological responses to journeying through the liminal stages of their study. Baillie, Bowden and Meyer (2013) investigate 'Threshold Capabilities' through the use of the Threshold Capability Integrated Theoretical Framework (TCITF). This framework is a tool to aid design of university curricula so as to assist students' resilience when dealing with unforeseen circumstances. Gourlay (2009) looks at the first-year student experience in higher education and argues for the extension of the idea of Threshold Concepts into 'Threshold Practices', which can assist in strengthening the sense of student identity.

Also important to the current study is the call within the threshold concepts literature for further enquiry into liminality (Rattray, 2016), and also into bridging disciplinary divides within academia (Groundwater-Smith, 2013; Savin-Badin & Falconer, 2016). Land, Rattray and Vivian (2014), Meyer and Timmerman (2016), and White, Olsen and Schumann (2016) were the first to look into threshold concepts within integrated learning in transdisciplinary and inter-disciplinary liminal spaces. Åkerlind, McKenzie and Lupton (2014), Sanders et al. (2012), and Thomas et al. (2012; 2017) are investigating 'threshold skills' proposed as a complement to threshold concepts in computer studies. Ongoing innovative research begun in 2014 by Land, Rattray and Vivian is using the connection to semiotic theory and visualisations to understand why some students struggle to negotiate liminality. This varied research is precedential and pertinent to the idea of a new 'take' on the Threshold Concepts Framework.

Rather than concentrating on the orthodox discipline-specific approach, this study reconceives the Threshold Concepts Framework as a lens in a broader sense, and from a more pragmatic perspective as a spatial framework for a liminal cognitive e-learning space rather than a discipline-based one. This new approach, in turn, leads to the explicit conceptual framework employed in this study. Here the concepts of liminality, troublesome knowledge and transformation are the featured characteristics of the Threshold Concepts Framework in the exploration of the participants' subjective transition into the online learning space. The next two sections look at the Threshold Concepts Framework in terms of the position of the framework with regard to existing scholarship, and the criticisms pertaining to the approach. The aim is to provide a basis for the efficacity of the framework and as a means of discerning the ways of best framing the issues suited to the context of this research.

3.6. Lineage and Scholarly Alignment of the Threshold Concepts Framework

Adapting ideas from a range of theories and influences is expedient for conceptual and thematic framework development and evolution. The Threshold Concepts Framework embodies key aspects of several established pedagogical theories of learning, types of knowledge (Entwistle, 2008; Illeris, 2009; Perkins, 2010), and philosophical and methodological paradigm(s) into an overarching infrastructure (Cousin, 2006a, 2006b; Land, Meyer & Smith, 2008; Lucas & Mladenovic, 2007). Lucas and Mladenovic (2007, p. 237) call the framework "a catalyst, drawing together a variety of fields of research into a productive educative framework", which facilitates the generation of insights into learning. Various authors (e.g., Cousin, 2008; Schwartzman, 2010; Walker, 2013) have mentioned areas of overlap and links between the Threshold Concepts Framework and long-established complementary theories, for example:

Table 3: Theories compatible with the Threshold Concept Framework (Author)

Perkins (1999)	Troublesome Knowledge	Knowledge from an unfamiliar or unknown perspective ('alien'); not explicitly taught (tacit); learned without a context and rarely used (inert); routine knowledge applied with unquestioning or implicit belief but not explained or justified (ritual); and/or is counter-intuitive (conceptual) (Perkins, 2010a), or "even intellectually absurd at face value" (Meyer & Land, 2003a p.2).
Cousin (2006)	Emotional Capital	Less emotional capital means more discomfort with troublesome knowledge, resulting in an unwillingness to enter the liminal space and, therefore, a longer stay in the pre-liminal space (Meyer & Land, 2005).
Winnicott (2005)	Transitional Space and Creative Play	The psychology of transitional space and play and the inner and outer worlds we all experience within 'alternative' or liminal space.
Sibbet and Thompson (2008)	Nettlesome Knowledge'	In the context of liminality in health care, nettlesome knowledge is deemed taboo, defended against, repressed or ignored because if grasped, it may "sting" – result in an intense emotional response.
Middendorf and Pace (2004)	Decoding the Disciplines and Bottlenecks	Starting from the bottlenecks (the places where students get stuck), a framework to clarify a task and determine which pedagogical tools would be most useful in achieving it.
Mezirow (2000)	Transformative Learning	The use of disorientating dilemmas to challenge development of critical thinking.
Wenger (1998)	Communities of Practice	Learning as a social experience enabled by a variety of levels of participation, enculturation and integration.
Kift, Nelson and Clarke, (2010)	Transition Pedagogy	The facilitation of a sense of engagement, support and belonging among increasingly diverse student cohorts beginning study.
Knowles, (1975)	Self-directed Learning	The active involvement by learners in the critical analysis, reflection upon, and response to the circumstances of their learning.
Vygotsky (1978)	Zone of Proximal Development and Social Constructivism	The notions of socialisation through culture, and the transformative internalisation of knowledge actively constructed by the learner with the assistance of a more knowledgeable other.

The Threshold Concepts Framework also draws upon anthropology, psychology and mythology. Turner's studies on rites of passage (1969) are of key importance in exploring the liminal rite of passage for initiands. The affective experiences of learning, including anxiety, discomfort and identity rupture are anchored in psychology (Zittoun et al., 2013; Zittoun, 2014; Zittoun & Grossen, 2012; Zittoun & de Saint-Laurent, 2015), and the Threshold Concepts Framework notion of mimicry aligns with Brookfield's conception of impostorship (2006, p. 91). Another very important influence is the Hero's Journey from Campbell's tale, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* (1949). The 'Hero' of the journey is a character who leaves the ordinary world and sets out to get what he/she needs; ventures into unknown spaces and encounters trials, challenges and crises of 'self'; crosses a threshold; and eventually prevails – the three stages of liminality.

3.7. Criticism of Threshold Concepts and the Threshold Concept Framework

The Threshold Concepts Framework has attracted critical attention since its inception. In an attempt to discern ways of best framing the issues suited to the thrust of this research, the threshold concept literature was scrutinised to ascertain what issues there had been with previous research, what criticisms of contradictions or problems pertaining to the framework and its applications had already been posited, and any subsequent implications for this study. These opinions will be examined more closely in this section, and their impact on this study will be discussed.

3.7.1. Inherent Vagueness and Potential Ambiguity

Contention has been caused by what has been labelled as 'inherent vagueness', 'lack of definition' and the 'equivocal language' Meyer and Land use to refer to the criteria (e.g., probably, possibly, potentially) (O'Donnell, 2010). It is definitely true that definitions of 'concept' cannot be easily located from analysis of the early core papers. Indeed, Meyer and Land, in their early published work on threshold concepts (2003; 2005),

actually failed to clarify their own interpretation of what comprises a concept, or how concepts are acquired, referring initially only to identifying a threshold concept through discussions with academic colleagues. This gap was cited by Rowbottom (2007) as a source of potential ambiguity in Meyer and Land's subsequent definition of the term 'threshold concept'.

However, it can be argued that this criticism seems to be trying to "nail down firm parameters for what is actually a rather undomesticable phenomenon" (Morgan, 2015, p. 14). It was more important to this study to concentrate on the transformative impact on the learner, than address unproductive debates regarding the unequivocal definition of the term 'concept'. Also important to this study was the realisation that the 'concept' per se is not the 'be all' and 'end all' of a threshold concept. Indeed, the 'concept' may occur throughout the spread of domains that constitute the student learning experience: cognitive, affective, psychomotor, social and ethical (Fleming, 2016; Timmermans & Meyer, 2019). As Meyer (2016) writes, "concepts are associated with every aspect of scholarly endeavour" (p. 466). Indeed, the gap in exploring the subjective experiences of adult learners noted in this thesis on p. 87 presents justification for interpreting threshold concepts beyond their cognitively-focused conceptual nomenclature.

3.7.2. Variability of Student Experience of Threshold Concepts

There has been further debate over the identification and reaching of consensus about potential threshold concepts being made more epistemologically difficult due to the variability of students' reactions – that what constitutes a threshold concept for one learner may not be the same for another, because what is troublesome and transformative for one person may not be troublesome and transformative for another (Barradell, 2013; O'Donnell, 2010; Rowbottom, 2007). In fact, Meyer (2016) actually agrees that

> *...all students will vary in their experiences of comprehending a TC because of individual differences in, for example, relevant prior knowledge of that concept, the proximal domain in which it is located, or a habit of mind that resonates with the epistemic function of that concept* (p. 467).

Given these criticisms, this study subscribed to a nuanced approach, acknowledging that what was seen as a limitation when viewed from within one paradigm [normative] could possibly help to shape the theoretical framework of threshold concepts when viewed from another [interpretative] (Land et al., 2014). Variation in the participants' perceived experience of their transitional journey could be "… attributable to individual differences in, for example, level of prior knowledge, experience, and disciplinary background" (Meyer, 2012, p. 8). It was accepted that each participant necessarily had an individual and unique standard for how troublesome or transformative their transition was, and therefore would encounter the possible threshold concepts at different times and in different ways.

3.7.3. Debate Over the Definition of a Threshold Concept

There is also an ongoing debate around whether only some, or all of the characteristics of threshold concepts as listed by Meyer and Land are required to define a threshold (Barradell, 2013). For example, Higgs and Cronin (2013) describe transformational and integrative aspects as definitive of threshold concepts while designating others as "often irreversible", "likely to have borders", and "likely to involve troublesomeness" (p167). Barradell (2013) focuses mainly on the troublesome and transformational elements. Rodger, Turpin, and O'Brien (2013) require threshold concepts to meet all five of the original criteria. Morgan (2015), however, criticises the need to include all threshold concept characteristics simultaneously, calling this "Nearly mathematical in its exactitude, an unusual characteristic for a fundamentally contingent phenomenon" (p. 20). Peter and Harlow (2014) designate three significant aspects of the Threshold Concepts Framework approach: the critical role of the liminal space; learners' divergent understanding of troublesome ideas; and an emphasis on interactions between epistemological (what is learnt and how) and ontological (changes in learners' identity) aspects of learning (2014).

According to Land (2016), Land et al. (2010), and Male and Baillie (2014), the core properties: troublesome knowledge, the liminal state and transformation are regarded as essential to a threshold concept. In order for concepts to be classified as 'threshold', they have to display at least these three properties or characteristics. While not required to be evident in every case, the integrative, discursive, bounded, reconstitutive, and irreversible characteristics of many threshold concepts can also often be observed.

3.7.4. Impact on this Study

Ultimately, the successful application of the Threshold Concepts Framework, or characteristics thereof, does not depend only on consensual isolation of specific disciplinary threshold concepts (Land, 2016). Rather, it enables an investigative conceptual framework offering insight into participant experience into threshold crossing and transformation, both within specific disciplines, and in the case of this study, without. The framework does not succeed or fail according to whether every learner experiences a particular concept as 'threshold', or whether there is mutual agreement on specific threshold concepts within a discipline (Meyer, 2016). In other words, while criticism for the framework exists, the inherent principles of the Threshold Concepts Framework approach, although challenged, have not been repudiated (Morgan, 2015). In terms of this study, close attention to these criticisms have only confirmed the importance of transformation and variation on the participants' transition through the liminal online space. If anything, the Threshold Concepts Framework has substantial unrealised potential that is still to 'see the light'.

3.8. Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the conceptual framework for this study into the transition of undergraduate students 25 years of age + into the online higher education space. the underlying schema for this conceptual framework is the Threshold Concepts Framework. A rationale for the choice of this framework is offered. Also presented are variations to the

traditional definitions and application of the Threshold Concepts Framework, the origins, criticism, and scholarly alignment of the framework and how it supports the structure of the study. Following on from this, Chapter 4 discusses the methodology and methods involved in the study.

CHAPTER 4:
RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES AND METHODS

> *… it is important that every research study give a detailed account of the mountains that study has climbed to get to their individual final destinations.*
>
> (Alase, 2017, p. 9)

One of the many fascinating challenges of qualitative research is choosing a methodology well suited to investigating and analysing questions relating to the participants' subjective experience of reality. The fascination is to be found not so much in reaching the destination, for we can never completely enter another person's world, but in the journey and what might be found along the way. The conundrum of qualitative research is that this journey cannot be mapped ahead. As the researcher navigates the literature and negotiates method and methodology, it becomes apparent that rather than being a steady, direct route, it is rather a circuitous trek beset with side-tracks, blind alleys and dead ends with the destination remaining elusive until journey's end.

This is a qualitative study theoretically located within the interpretivist tradition. It is informed by the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and examined through the lens of the Threshold Concept Framework (TCF). It was important to justify the selection of IPA as a germane methodology in relation to its alignment with the aim of this study, the research questions, and how these could best be explored, thereby ensuring the chosen approach was "fit for purpose" (Newell & Burnard, 2011, p22). This purpose was, as far as possible, to see their reality through the eyes of the people being studied (Bryman, 2008).

As seen in Figure 6 (p. 113), Chapter 4 provides a review of and rationale for the methodologies used to investigate the participants' journey by explaining my journey as the researcher. Firstly, the interpretivist tradition is positioned in relation to axial, epistemological and ontological considerations. The decisions around the qualitative

approach to the study follow. The data collection methods: semi-structured interviewing techniques, journaling, data collection, and transcription are then outlined. Finally, the methodology of the study is examined: the journey to the choice of IPA; criticism of the approach; and handling of the data.

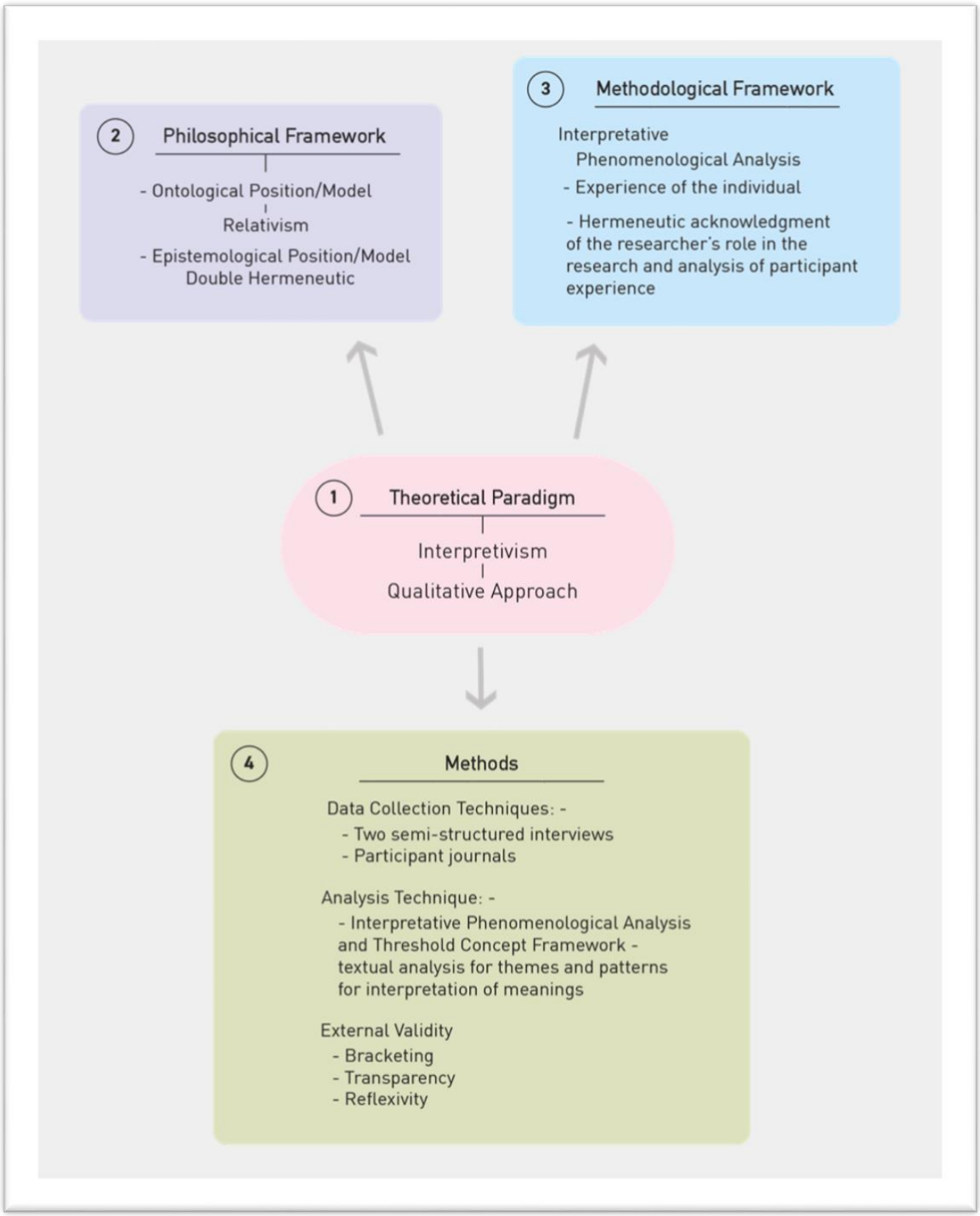


Figure 6: Methodologies and Methods used in this study (Author)

4.1.1 The Theoretical Perspective: Interpretivism

> *Interpretivism encompasses … accepting and seeking multiple perspectives, being open to change, practicing [sic] iterative and emergent data collection techniques, promoting participatory and holistic research, and going beyond the inductive and deductive approach.*
>
> (Willis, 2007 p. 583)

A paradigm (or worldview) shapes the choice and construction of the research topic and questions in a study, and how answers to these questions are sought (Huff, 2009; Kuhn, 1970). As far as this study is concerned, the "worldview" or paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p.183) is interpretivist. Interpretivism essentially focuses on acknowledgement of the need to navigate individuals' interpretations of experience within their social, cultural and historical world.

Historically, interpretivism is associated with the hypotheses of sociologist and philosopher, Max Weber (1864–1920) (cited in Tucker, 1965). Weber's concepts of 'verstehen' (understanding) concerned the way the human mind focuses and adjusts interpretations of reality. A number of theoretical approaches and methodologies have been variously influenced by this notion of verstehen, each adapting different approaches to the combined objective – that of understanding human action and experience. It can be argued that interpretive research as a whole strives for verstehen in the endeavour to interpret and understand beliefs and assumptions of reality, based on experience.

According to Guba (1990), Creswell (2013), and Creswell and Poth (2018), a research paradigm is made up of a range of abstract ideas and beliefs constituting reality and grounded upon four key metaphysical considerations: Ontology – the nature of knowledge; Epistemology and Methodology – the theoretical framework, literature and research practice; and Axiology – the value and ethical systems (See Figure 7).

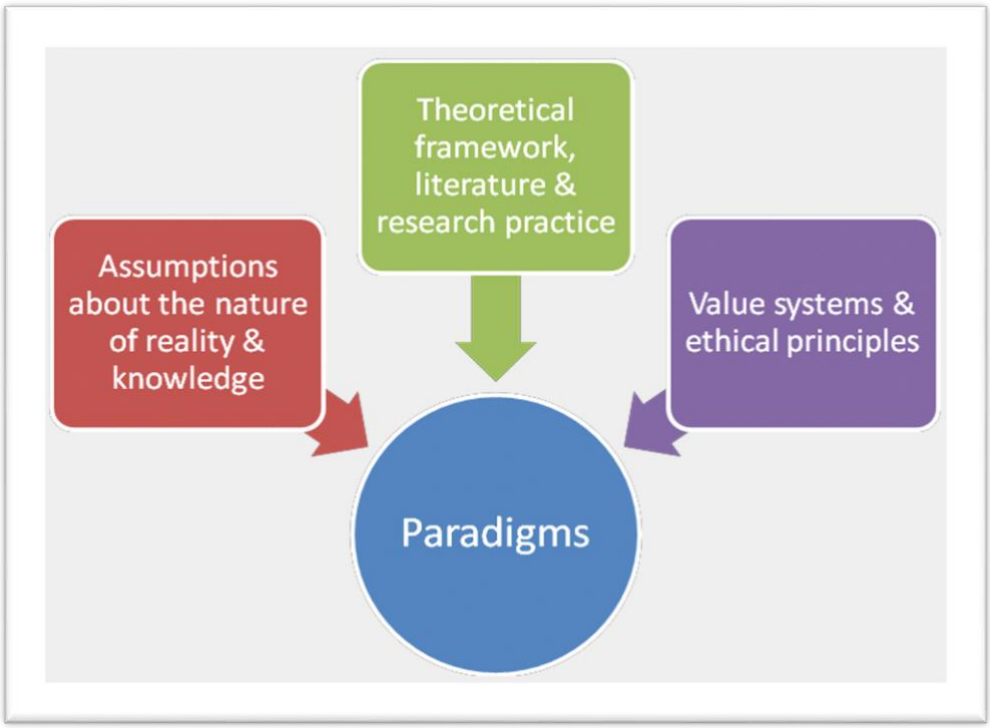


Figure 7: Factors influencing the choice of a paradigm (Author)

4.1.2. Axiological, Ontological and Epistemological Underpinnings of Interpretivism

An interpretive paradigm holds that meaning is socially constructed through interaction between perception of common experiences, and particular multiple and varied meanings corresponding to individual participant experience (Collins, 2010; Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998; Neuman, 2011). At this particular time and place, there is a gap in the research that focuses on how adult students subjectively experience their transition into the online higher education space, and any links to liminal threshold crossings therein. This dearth of research has influenced choices around approaches to this study. Ontological beliefs informed epistemological considerations, which then informed the methodology, and together these gave rise to the methods employed to collect and analyse the data. At this point, the axiological, ontological, epistemological and methodological positions which helped me prepare to interpret the elements that constituted the participants' experience of their world will be summarised (Scott & Usher, 2004).

4.1.2.1. Axiology

Axiology refers to ethics and value systems (Patton, 2002). No research is neutral. The purpose and values involved in research involve ethical judgements by the educational researcher and a researcher's values, beliefs, bias and experience always need to be acknowledged in a qualitative study. The relationship between myself as the researcher, the participants, and the ways in which the lives of those participants were represented in my study, was inevitably influenced by my own values. I had to acknowledge the value-laden nature of the study and that my own values and biases may interfere with neutrality by influencing thought and behaviour. This relationship will be examined more thoroughly in the section in this chapter on the Reflexivity and Positionality of my role as an Insider Researcher (pp. 132–135).

4.1.2.2. Ontology

Smith maintains "there is no particular right or correct path to knowledge, no special method that automatically leads to intellectual progress" (1993, p.120). Ontology is one's view of reality created by social and contextual understanding: "… the study of being" (Crotty, 1998, p. 10); the rationalisation of the reality of our place in the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), e.g. 'What is reality?'. The ontology that underpins interpretivism is relativism, which accepts that there are numerous and often varied interpretations of reality and rejects the existence of any possible absolute or correct reality (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018). Reality is a complicated concept.

Rather than passively perceiving objective reality, human beings interpret and understand their world by subjectively composing personal realities that make sense to them (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Smith, Flowers & Osbourne, 1997). Reality may be varied and complex with seemingly similar experiences actually differing considerably in individual interpretation. Reality is, therefore, a construction, not an absolute fact or an 'objectified' truth. Individual circumstances affect

perception and construction of ‘reality’. While objects have existence and appearance distinct from humans, the meanings we allot to these objects only become apparent when we as humans engage with them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Accordingly, the primary ontological concern of IPA is the meaning the participants make of their lived reality.

As the researcher, I had to examine my underlying belief system and philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality (Scotland, 2012). My guiding ontological premise was that social reality is constructed by personal perspectives of the world based on experience that can change over time (Gergen, 1999). This reflection was crucial to the orientation of my thinking throughout the study; in particular about the research problem and its significance, subsequent research questions at the beginning and at the end of the first trimester, making sense of the meaning embedded in the research data, and the choice of epistemological approach.

4.1.2.3. Epistemology

Epistemology refers to ways of knowing, e.g. How do we know what we know? How do we come to understand a unique person’s worldview? Epistemologically, IPA contends facts and values are inseparable (Smith, 1996). The researcher and the research process are inextricably connected and the contact between researcher and participant is typified by reciprocal candidness and connection. The researcher, therefore, is involved with making possible both the appearance of meaning and its interpretation (Smith et al., 2009, p.23). Often it is the researcher “...bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises – regardless of ultimate truth or falsity – [who] become[s] partially self-validating” (Bateson, 1972, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.19).

In IPA, the term ‘double hermeneutic’ is given to the undertaking of the researcher making sense of each participant’s ‘sense-making’ and is regarded as pivotal to knowledge-making (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The double hermeneutic refers to a dual approach to understanding knowledge, which arises through empathy and questioning. As

depicted in Figure 8, "… the end result is the account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking" (Smith et al., 2009, p.80). This concept will be further explained in the section in this chapter on the key theoretical axes of IPA (pp. 144–147).

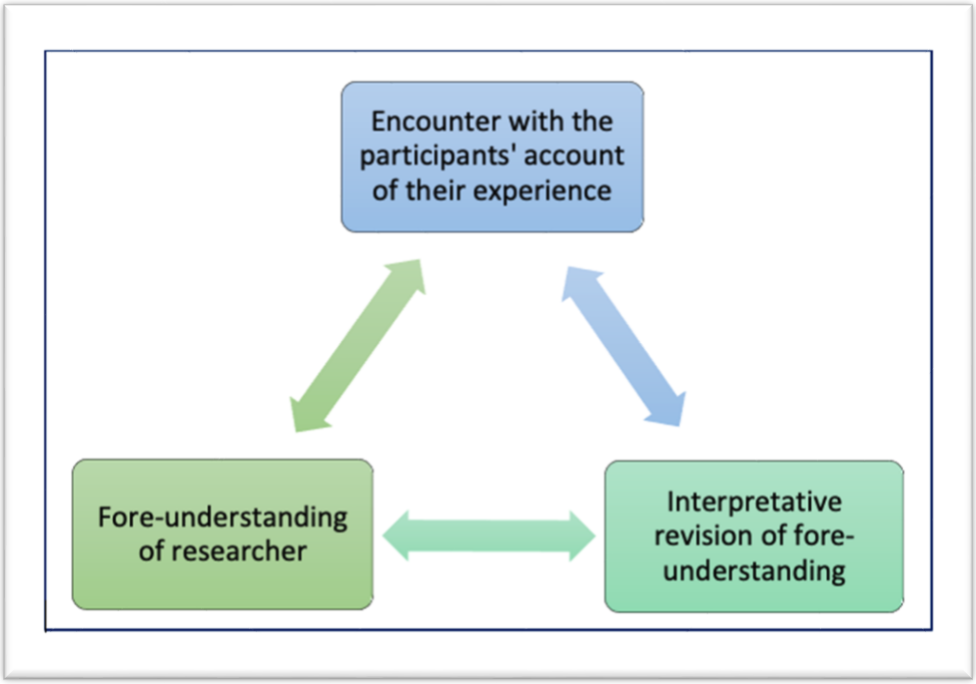


Figure 8: The double hermeneutic circle in IPA analysis (Gil-Rodriguez and Hefferon, 2012 p. 20)

Trying to work out how to go about creating and laying the foundations for this research initially led to a rather tumultuous reflection on my own epistemological beliefs. If the "complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 221) was truly to be investigated, capturing the 'reality' of the adult students transitioning into online learning was critical. Having almost too many choices in terms of approach to the study, this required, to use Kuhn's (1970, p.175) metaphor, a "revolutionary paradigm shift" in my own thinking. A qualitative approach was the result.

A qualitative approach whereby individuals seek to understand the reality of their world and develop their own particular multiple and varied meanings (Collins, 2010; Creswell, 2013, 2018; Crotty, 1998; Neuman, 2011) had considerable appeal for this study. It enabled common experiences to be identified while, at the same time, facilitating the study of individual participant perception. This helped me recognise that our individual

circumstances, including the role of social, historical and institutional factors in the development of experience, affect our perception and construction of ‘reality’. It acknowledges too, that meanings may be varied and complex.

4.1.3. The Qualitative Research Approach

> *...there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity.... No single method can grasp all the subtle variations in human experience. Consequently, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretative methods, always seeking better ways to make more understandable the worlds of experience they have studied.*
>
> (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 19)

All research is fundamentally about seeing the world in new ways, about searching or re-searching the same space and perceiving it in a different way. Qualitative research approaches have been defined as constructivist sets of “interpretive material practices that make the world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Rather than work with objective methods that offer precise information, interpretivist researchers seek to encompass the worldview through a series of individual eyes. Indeed, “Interpretivists eschew the idea that objective research on human behaviour is possible” (Willis, 2007, p. 110).

A close relationship exists between the interpretivist paradigm and the qualitative approach to handling data. Because the interpretive paradigm "portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing" (Thomas, 2003, p. 6), qualitative methods of data handling are frequently employed when an understanding of participant perceptions of experiences are important in the search for subjective reality. Qualitative researchers typically accept reality to be multi-layered. Therefore, it is important to utilise a ‘multiplicity’ of methods so as to gain a deeper understanding of this ‘multiplicity’ of reality. Primarily empirical in nature, the strength of qualitative research is its ability to recognise the contextual and subjective nature of the socially constructed meaning ascribed to a particular experience, situation or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013,

2018; Thorne, 2000). This is achieved by amassing evidence from divergent sources and engaging methods, including case studies, interviews and participant observation.

There was no distinct time nor exclusive place in which qualitative research emerged. Rather, developed by scholars, both men and women in many disciplines around the world, qualitative research has had a rich and varied history existing as a wealth of diverse approaches to research since the late nineteenth century. It has been shaped by the ortgeist and zeitgeist – the social, economic, and artistic life of particular places at particular times (Creswell, 2013, 2018; Thorne, 2000). At this particular time and place, there is a gap in the research that focuses on how adult students subjectively experience their transition into the online higher education space, and any links to liminal threshold crossings therein. This dearth of research has influenced choices and contextualised the approach to this study.

Quinn (2004) states that "critically situated" local research such as this study is well situated to "generate webs of connections" (p.61). It is the specificity of qualitative small-scale studies where the advantage over an attempt at homogeneity becomes evident. Therefore, qualitative research was arguably the most suitable method for this study into 'making visible' the experiences of these adult participants and what, if any, threshold crossings they might face in order to traverse this liminal space.

4.2. Data Collection Methods

The following sections of this chapter highlight the qualitative approach to data collection in this study. Details of the merits and limitations of each of those data collection methods are discussed, beginning with semi-structured interviews and following up with the participant and researcher journals. Ultimately, understanding the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of research approaches is essential to a determination about the methodology best fitting a research study. The method of data collection adopted was informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and aligned with the

Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF). To add further clarity to the findings presented in chapters 6, 7 and 8, the discussion of these findings in chapter 9 and the conclusions in chapter 10, IPA as a methodology will be discussed in more detail, later in this chapter.

4.2.1. IPA Study Guidelines

There is no single, stipulated method for undertaking IPA research (Smith, 2011a, 2019). Nevertheless, there are specific, yet non-prescriptive guidelines and structure for carrying out IPA-informed studies (Finlay, 2011; Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2011a, 2014, 2019; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2017, 2019; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Storey, 2007). Even more to the point, Smith et al. (2009) argued that the "Interviewing [process] allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of participants' responses, and the investigator is able to enquire after any other interesting areas which arise" (p. 57). Researchers are therefore encouraged to make use of these data collection guidelines identified by Alase (2017, p. 15). Table 4 lists these guidelines and the alignment with the study.

Table 4: Steps within an IPA Study (Author, adapted from Alase, 2017)

• *An IPA research study should conduct semi-structured and unstructured interviews with as many as twenty-five (25) participants, but as few as two (2)* • This study used twenty-four (24) participants.
• *The interview duration should be approximately sixty to ninety minutes in duration per interview session* • This study adhered to the guideline of 60 – 90 minutes per interview.
• *The study should keep the interview invitation to one interview per participant. However, only if there is a need for a follow-up interview shall the researcher contact the participants for additional interviews.* • Two interviews were used in this study in order to capture any changes in the participants' subjective interpretations of their online experiences from the beginning of the trimester to the end and also to note any changes in threshold concepts faced at different times in their first trimester.

• *The site (including the date, time and place) for the interviews should be left to the participants to decide. However, the researcher's natural first choice and preference should always be at the participants' place of comfort, for convenience purposes to the participants. But if need be, a safe and comfortable alternative place should be provided for the meetings by the researcher (i.e., at restaurants, coffee shops and/or any other convenient outlets).* • A great deal of effort went into the comfort and convenience of each interviewee (see pp. 124-125).
• *Finally, the research study should utilize different technological devices to collect necessary data (i.e., electronic voice recording devices and video recording devices, if need be). And naturally, the traditional 'note and pen' should be used for jotting down important observations as the interviews progress.* • All interviews in this study were recorded and notes were taken.

4.2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Being that can be understood is language…

(Gadamer, 2004)

Language and discourse provide the foundation for the ways we process our experiences, produce our assumptions about the way things are, think and act, and subsequently make sense of our world (Foucault, 1980). The semi-structured qualitative interview has been equated to "wandering together with" the interviewee as "traveling companions" engaged in dialogue in the context of a conversation trying to construct his or her "stories of the lived world" (Kvale, 1996, p.4). If an individual is to be genuinely heard, genuinely understood, a way must be furnished for her or him to speak in a genuine voice in that conversation (Creswell, 2013, 2018). This can result in a deeper consideration of the lived experience of the participant through interpretation of the discourse (Bryman, 2008).

In qualitative research, the semi-structured interview exceeds the mere gathering of facts. It would be irreconcilable with the essence of a qualitative interview to just ask questions and await responses. Rather, it is a critical data collection method in which the traditional roles of interviewer and interviewee are fluid. The fluidity and flexibility of the

qualitative semi-structured interview method allows for individuals to be seen as "significant commentators on their own experience" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p.5).

As this qualitative study involved shedding light on the experience of adult students, language and discourse were important foci. The twenty-four participants, most with no former experience of either online study or higher education, have a range of complex, complicated, equivocal and nuanced backgrounds, past experiences, values, cultures, ages, and beliefs. The voices of the participants were therefore central. The goal for the interviews in this study is that they genuinely enable the interviewees' voices to reveal stories of their lived world as they transition into the online learning space. Consequently, broad and open-ended semi-structured interviews of one hour or longer (depending on the participant) were used in this study, which allowed for real-time interaction with each participant (Fontana & Frey, 2000) (See Appendix A).

These semi-structured interviews are justified as a data collection method in this qualitative study because they are congruous with the ontological standpoint of social constructivism and educational research (Creswell, 2013). While methods of data collection vary within the Threshold Concept literature, semi-structured interviews are the most common. This approach to interviewing also aligns with the guidance from Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) for studies informed by an IPA approach. By interviewing a number of participants who have had similar experiences, multiple realities can be revealed. This mutual interest in the topic of the interview is also in keeping with the double hermeneutic research approach in IPA between the researcher and participant (Smith, 2011a; 2011b; 2011c; 2019). The double hermeneutic will be discussed later in this chapter.

4.2.3. The Use of Semi-Structured Interviews in this Study

An initial round of semi-structured interviews was arranged with individual participants newly enrolled in their first trimester. This first round of interviews was

designed to capture students' initial perceptions as they experienced transition to their online study. A second interview followed at the end of the trimester. This second interview investigated the participants' experiences during their first online trimester, their attitudes, and any intentions regarding persistence in ongoing online study.

The use of two such interviews at the beginning and end of a 12-week trimester provided rich, focused information, and opportunities to explore the data; it engaged the participants and enhanced the reliability of their accounts (Mackey & Gass, 2005). As Ryan (2006) explains, our reality is not simply reflected or described by discourse, language and visual imagery. Discourse, language and imagery actually play an essential role in constructing our reality, experience, normality, our understanding of the world and our assumptions of what is natural. This explanation concurs with the IPA approach, which requires a two-way idiographic dialogue commonly achieved within in-depth individual, semi-structured interviews, including both structures of expression such as pauses, movement, words used, word order or sentence structure, and structures of meaning and (inter)action (Smith, 2011a; 2019).

In qualitative research, the possibility exists of an imbalance-of-power in the dynamics and interaction between the participant and the researcher, with the interviewees perhaps feeling somewhat powerless and at a disadvantage. Therefore, the participants were given the opportunity and encouraged to choose their preferred interview dates, times, and places. Upon gaining consent from the interviewees, a range of options for the interviewing to cater for individual preferences was offered at the interviewees' convenience. These options were Skype, using the Evaer App, or the Camersoft App, telephone, or, if feasible, face-to-face in private, neutral spaces. Ultimately face-to-face preferences ranged from before or after lunchtime to late evening, over the phone, in offices, or within the university campus. These mutually convenient times, dates and venues for the interviews negotiated with participants gave them a degree of control and

placed them in a more comfortable position to engage in the interview process (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002; Parahoo, 2006).

The first round of interviews took place within the first two to three weeks of the start of the program, with the aim of collecting students' initial thoughts and perceptions related to enrolling in an online course. Interviews conducted at this time also captured pre-census data, which included information regarding student intention to persist in or leave the course. The second round of interviews was conducted in Week 12, at the end of the trimester, with a view to capturing data from the perspective of those students who did persist. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a transcript was given to each participant for checking before any analysis commenced.

4.2.4. Initial Issues with the Interviews

> *Our nature or being as humans is not just something we find, nor is it something we make; instead, it is what we make of what we find.*
>
> (Richardson, Flowers & Guignon, 1999, p. 212)

The interview process in this study aimed for a careful balance between guiding and leading the participants (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011, p.757). Nevertheless, as a novice interviewer, I did experience some early issues in this context. In the first two interviews during the first round, I found myself asking too many leading questions and talking too much. Because one of the main research design objectives was to draw out the inner voice of the participants, upon reflection, more focus on active listening was then incorporated to encourage students to feel confident and engage in more lengthy discourse.

Rather than think about what *I* was going to say or ask next, I tried to fully concentrate on what *they* were saying; respond appropriately; make a conscious effort to understand what was being said; and enable comfort with silence so as to enable reflection. Cousin (2009) refers to this interview technique as "the art of hearing data" (p.75). More effective listening on my part helped me to avoid dominating the interview and produced

richer data as a result. It encouraged participants to describe their own experiences, construct their own meaning and discuss individual perspectives.

Concentrating on what was said and how it was said, also allowed me the flexibility to be open to change, ambiguity, and rapport/empathy, and for unanticipated, unclear perspectives or topics to emerge and be confirmed. Taking a reflexive approach to reviewing and amending the process where necessary meant the interview questions were not necessarily asked in order and sometimes differed in order from one interview to another. Rather than imposing predetermined assumptions, appropriate prompts based on the metaphors and phrases used by the participants, encouraged them to talk at length. This enabled each of them to find the courage and confidence to find his or her own voice. Figure 9 shows an example of the questions and prompts which evolved through the two interviews.

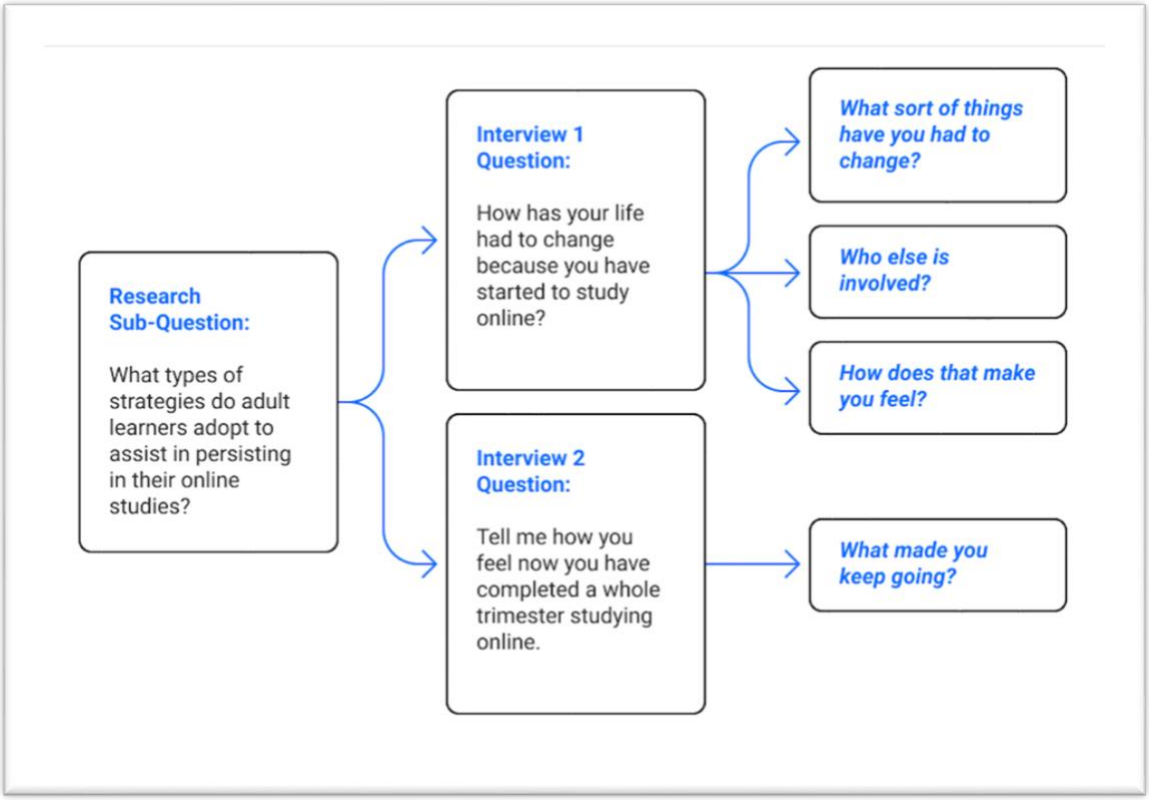


Figure 9: Examples of questions and prompts in this study (Author)

4.2.5. Reflective Journals

> *…the quality and validity of the final analysis is determined by the 'personal' analytical work done at each stage of the procedure.*
>
> (Smith, cited in Brocki & Wearden, 2006 p. 96)

The validity of a study can be increased by investigating the phenomena from a variety of perspectives using different data collection methods. The second data collection method in this study involved reflective journals written by the participants. It has been documented that the use of written reflection in the form of journals can help to overcome potential inaccuracies in participants' recall of situations that otherwise may change over time (e.g., Alaszewski, 2006, p.113; Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Journals/diaries are also recognised as a suitable method of data collection in IPA informed studies (Smith, 2017). Importantly, it became obvious that the participants' reflective journals were extremely useful in charting my decision trail while moving through the analytic process, as depicted in Figure 10.

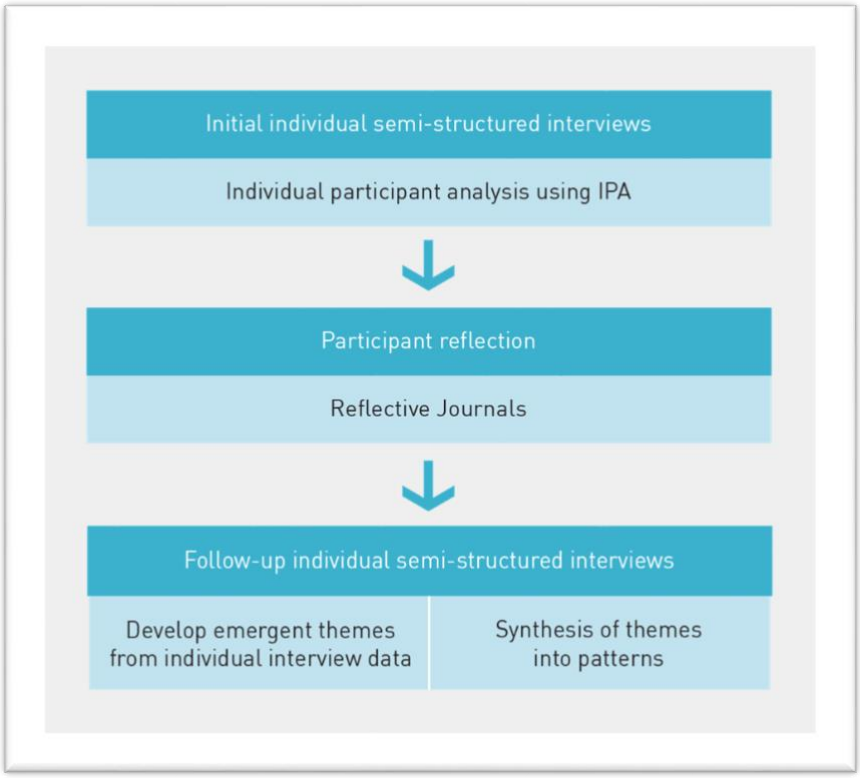


Figure 10: Relationship between interviews and reflective journals/diaries (Author)

4.2.5.1. The Participants' Journals

Reflective journals were introduced to the research process as a result of the personal initiative of twenty-three of the participants. In order to keep track of their experiences, all students but one undertook reflections in journal/diaries, of their own volition. It became obvious at the beginning of the second round of interviews that the participants were using these documents to reflect on their experiences prior to and during the interview process "… binding isolated items into a coherent single whole" (Dewey, 1991 p. 80). They had found it difficult to recall their experiences of particular concepts and how they felt at the time, without recording this information on a regular basis in both word and illustration. I am very glad they did.

Subsequently, ethics approval was applied for and granted in order to ask the participants if these journals/diaries could be included in the data analysis. One participant had left the university prior to the second interview. All the remaining participants were notified (See Appendix C) and agreed to my request to use these documents, which were then included in the data collected for analysis. They also agreed to carry forward these journals to record their feelings as their experiences progressed. These journals provided rich experiential data. The collection of this additional data meant that the findings emerging from the interviews could be further contextualised thus providing a more detailed interpretative engagement with the material than would have been possible from interviews alone (Richards, 2009). The participant who did not make use of this document was Mattie. She exited both the study and the university course several weeks into the trimester and thus several weeks after the first interview.

4.2.5.2. The Researcher's Journals

An IPA-informed study is a 'participant-oriented' interpretive research tool used to invade another person's private space. At each stage, it is very important that the researcher has a sustained sense of self-reflection. The use of a journal established a record

of my thinking and helped me to truly reflect in detail and document decisions made during the research process (Denscombe 2007; Smith et al. 2009). By maintaining my own reflective journal throughout this process, I was able to become attuned to two important aspects of the data, and subsequently maintain an open stance: the unique and diverse nature of each data set; and the participants' shared experience.

This approach which allowed orientation to each participant as well as the group, helped with recognition of similarities and differences across the data. Aspects of the interviews, including dialogue of each participant's responses and use of language, the intensity with which the participants were recalling their transitional experiences, and any thoughts and questions that occurred were recorded in my written reflective journal. This meant concepts and themes arising from the first interview could be developed within the second interview.

Journalling provided me with opportunities for new insights into the data, and to document new thoughts and explore new possibilities. It helped me to remember, and to collect my thoughts. Because I was conducting insider research, it also supported critical self-reflection and acknowledgement of possible personal influence on the design, implementation and interpretation of the research data findings. This helped to ensure rigour in the process and outcome of the research (Jootun, McGhee & Marland, 2009, p. 45).

To maintain the subjective nature of the analytical process of the study, personal reflection was also maintained throughout the coding and development of themes (Arksey & Knight 1999). The personal written journal was augmented during the electronic analysis phase by using NVivo. The process is described in greater detail later in this chapter, but briefly, in terms of journalling, I was able to document discoveries and interpretations in electronic memos, developing understanding by means of notes on each set of responses, before moving on to the next participant's experiences. This helped to

merge the participant's world and my understanding and interpretation of that world (Smith et al., 2009).

4.2.6. Reflexivity and Positionality

> *Researchers are biased. This is not good or bad. It simply is. Thus, it is both sociological good sense and an ethical obligation to disclose those biases.*
>
> (Norum, 2000, p. 337)

According to Alase (2016), a 'self- reflection' for a researcher should be more than a casual part of a thesis paper. It should be a progressively incremental and descriptive account of the journey taken to reach the final destination. It is critical to examine one's own positioning on areas such as beliefs, personal experience, and the meaning and scope of the study, in consideration of how this may impact upon both the aim and the theoretical foundations of the project. As May (1996) points out:

> *Researchers should therefore be aware of the ways in which their own biography is a fundamental part of the research process. It is both the experiences of the researched and researchers which are important* (p.14).

How my personal reflexivity and positioning influenced this study will be discussed in more detail in this section. It is important at this point, though, to reiterate that this research methodologically fits comfortably within the interpretivist paradigm; thus, it had an emic focus on the individual participants' points of view, enabling immersion into the participants' reality. However, the fact that I conducted the study as an adult researcher meant that this study was also influenced by both my positioning as an adult and my personal subjectivity or reflexivity.

4.2.6.1. Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process of awareness of the researcher's influence upon the research process. Reflexivity aids openness and transparency throughout the research process. Research is value-bound, and no research is neutral. "All researchers construct their … inquiry out of the materials their culture provides, and values play a central role" (Crotty, 1998, p.105). These values informed the methodology chosen for inquiry, and

influenced the choice of study topic, research questions, data collection and analysis methods, along with my interpretation and reporting of the findings. As the researcher, bringing my own background, experience, biases and belief systems to this study through personal, cultural, and historical experiences was inevitable (Creswell, 2013; Lambert, Jomeen, & McSherry, 2010). Given my lengthy involvement as both an online teacher and an adult online student, this meant acknowledging the filters of my own assumptions or preconceptions in order to ensure rigour in the process and outcome of the research (Barusch, Gringeri & George 2011).

4.2.6.2. Positionality

Positionality "...reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt *within* a given research study" (Savin-Baden & Howell-Major 2013 p. 71), or where the researcher is coming from (Foote & Bartell 2011). Smith, Jarman, and Osborn identify that the "...objectivity, authority and validity of knowledge is challenged as the researcher's positionality...is inseparable from the research findings" (1999 p. 436). Making my background and beliefs explicit; clarifying as far as possible the variables that may have affected the results (Smith & Eatough 2017, 2019); and recognising myself in the research – seeking to understand my part in it, or my influence on the research (Cohen, Manion et al. 2018) – are essential to identifying my positionality (Bryman, 2012 p. 393). Conducting this study in my own workplace, my position in relation to the data collection and analysis requires clarification. In order to provide perspective for the reader, what follows is an attempt to provide some explanation of my position, some clarity about my background and relationships, and an awareness of the lens through which my interpretations have evolved (Clegg & Stevenson, 2013; Clegg, Stevenson & Burke, 2016).

4.2.7. Insider Researcher

> *Your insights as an insider are valuable because of your depth of knowledge, but you should also demonstrate that you understand alternative perspectives.*
>
> (Costly, Elliott, Geoffrey & Gibbs, 2010, p. 33)

'Insider researcher' is the designation given to the researcher directly engaged or associated with the research setting (Trowler, 2011). Insider researchers need to cultivate and maintain a "delicate and reflexive balancing act" (Reinharz & Chase, 2002, p. 234) in terms of bias (Creswell, 2014). Norum (2000) stresses the responsibility of the researcher to decipher where he or she is positioned, clarify how the inner self 'percolates' into the intellection and progression of a study and to make sense of how their standing may impact the research both during and after the study. Reinharz and Chase (2002, p. 234) urge us to understand,

> *... how our acts of knowing – our interpretations of ... words – are socially situated which includes reflecting on our complex social locations and subjectivities as well as out personal, political and intellectual agendas.*

Both inevitable and intrinsic to research, researcher bias can, however, help the exploration and interpretation of participant narratives, including the possible revelation of factors concealed from those unfamiliar with particular bias. It can be beneficial to conduct research within a familiar professional setting: a connected environment in which to reconsider and re-contemplate assumptions or judgements. If the reciprocity between research and professional practice is clear, open and interwoven rather than circumscribed or unrelated, the results and determinations of a study can be deployed effectively. In fact, the most suitable person to rectify the concerns, issues or predicaments noted by participants, may well be the insider researcher (Merton, 1972).

My position as 'insider-researcher' was somewhat complex. As an employee of the university, I was very much an insider. However, I would argue that to the participants in the study, I was an outsider, having never, neither prior to the study nor subsequently,

facilitated any of them directly. As a long-term lecturer, I also appreciate that my position could have impacted upon or influenced participants' responses. Therefore, participants were reassured of the confidentiality of their responses. The aims of the study were clearly communicated to the participants at the beginning of the research process by means of an explanation of the research forming the main data collection, the professional and academic reasons for the choice of focus, and my personal reasons for wishing to undertake the study (See Appendix B). This process will be examined further in Chapter 5.

However, as Smith and Eatough (2007; 2017) argue, we may not be aware of all our assumptions when beginning research, only becoming aware of them as emergent interpretations are questioned and clarified. Bracketing prior conceptions consistently throughout the research process is a fundamental criterion for quality and validity in IPA studies – not in order to keep these preconceptions in abeyance but to ethically acknowledge them. As the conduit for ascertaining subtlety of meaning within the data, I undertook an iterative, cyclical process simultaneously bracketing or distancing myself from the participant and asking questions (Smith, & Eatough, 2007, 2017; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As I bracketed my preconceptions, interpreted data, and re-thought those preconceptions, the movement around the circle and the extent of the 'coming together' increased – envisioned below in as interwoven circles of contact.

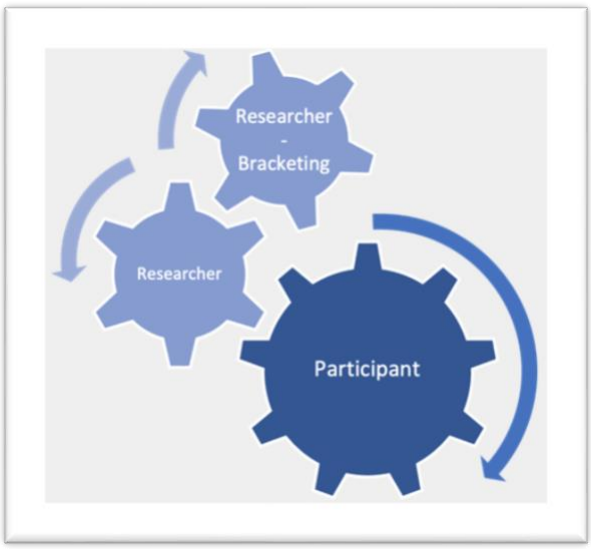


Figure 11: Interwoven gears representing the circles of contact making up the relationship between the IPA researcher and participant (Author)

Being cognisant of my own beliefs, perceptions and experiences was paramount in order to enrich my interpretations rather than be an impediment to the study of the participants' experiences. Consequently, it was appropriate and important to me to choose an approach to inform the study in which my interpretations as the researcher were acknowledged as explicit and legitimate parts of the research (Biggerstaff & Thompson 2008). However, I cannot be so confident as to say that my study is not influenced by my professional experience as an online facilitator, and by my own student experience. Therefore, two further factors should be taken into consideration here.

Firstly, I transitioned into online study as an adult. While Dahlberg (2006) argues that our prejudices are not inherently bad and can result in useful and creative interpretations, when considering difficulties with the transition into online learning for these adult participants, my own experiences as an adult online learner did link me to these students. Secondly, I have been researching the Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF) for ten years. My embedded knowledge from both these life experiences would therefore have formed an integral part of the data collection and would have naturally impacted on the data analysis process. This could have led to certain biased assumptions when identifying and interpreting students' responses to issues and emergent themes.

Subsequently, to ensure ethically sound, rigorous and accurate research, two vital personal approaches to the study had to be followed. Firstly, it was important to use my own contexts insightfully while being straightforward and unambiguous regarding the impact of my bias on the analysis and interpretation of the data (Finlay, 2011); secondly declaring how the application of my interpretation of the TCF as a conceptual framework influenced the process of my research (Clegg & Stevenson, 2013; Clegg, Stevenson & Burke 2016). I look to Heidegger (1962) and Smith (2017), and acknowledge that it is not possible to empty the mind of presupposition. Where possible, I have therefore declared my advanced experiences and understandings. I have also tried to employ these 'fore-

structures' (Smith, 2017) as a guide to an ethical, mature, meaningful and multifaceted interpretation.

4.3. DATA ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

This section clarifies the analytical journey taken throughout the study. This will be a clear, positive, systematic, and coherent elucidation of the processes used within the research (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The path taken to select an analytical approach is discussed along with a reasoned argument for the methodology adopted. Although ultimately compiled into a cohesive whole, this whole may not fit neatly into a box, as "methodological appropriateness" more than "methodological orthodoxy" (Patton 2002 p. 72) was my aim. The steps taken during this process are therefore made explicit in order to establish my credibility as the researcher and to present a reasoned and solid review of the interpretation of the data, and the findings presented in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

4.3.1. Developing a Suitable Analytical Approach

> *I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?*
>
> (Spradley, 1979, p. 34)

In selecting a suitable methodology, it was essential to take into consideration the aim of the study, the developing research questions, and how these would best be served. This study aimed to explore adult students' experiences of the transition into the online study space within Higher Education, and any experiential threshold/s they face in so doing. A qualitative approach was needed that would also align well with the use of my re-conception of the Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF) (as discussed in Chapter 3).

Several philosophies inhabit the qualitative approach. Several basic differences relating to the interpretation and perception of reality are evident between these

philosophies. Each focus also theorises the role of the researcher in distinct, albeit related, ways. This study required a suitably flexible approach to work with the transdisciplinary and spatial consideration of the participants' individually lived experiences. At the outset, a number of existing methodological traditions and analytical approaches to inform the study were considered. It was by no means a linear journey to reach the final research design. The next section briefly explores the two research approaches, Phenomenography and Phenomenology and the differences therein. This is done in order to build an understanding of the choices made in the consideration of a methodology to inform the study, the origins of the chosen approach, and the impact of Phenomenography and Phenomenology on that chosen approach.

4.3.2. Phenomenography and Phenomenology

Phenomenography and phenomenology share some similarities in theory and method, and the research object of both is to disclose human experience and awareness (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997). The two research approaches also share the term ''phenomenon'' which means, in the writings of Kant, ''to make manifest ''or ''to bring to light'' (cited in Cholbi, 2016, p.232). However, they also have distinctive differences, the most obvious being in the titles. Phenomenology, with the suffix 'logos', aims to establish and clarify the structure and meaning of a phenomenon itself (Giorgi, 1999). Phenomenography, with the suffix 'graph', aims to describe the different ways a group of people understand a phenomenon (Marton, 1981).

4.3.2.1. Phenomenography

> *... research which aims at description, analysis, and understanding of experiences; that is, research which is directed towards experiential description.*
>
> (Marton, 1981, p. 180)

The origin of phenomenography as a research approach lies in the pedagogical tradition. Phenomenography originally developed in the 1970s, when a team of Swedish

researchers in the Department of Education at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden began to research the experience of learning (Marton & Saljo, 1976; Svensson, 1977). Since the 1970s, phenomenography has grown as a qualitative research approach into the collective experiences, conceptualisations and understandings of a prescribed phenomenon (Dahlgren & Fallsberg, 1991; Giorgi, 1990, 1999; Hasselgren & Beach, 1997; Marton, 1981, 1986).

Marton (1986), and Booth (1997), maintain phenomenography is focused on the experience of phenomena, how they are perceived and understood. The focus is, however, not on the essence of the phenomenon, but rather on the different features that *constitute* the phenomenon (Walker, 1998). Similarly, the focus of a phenomenographic research study is not the researchers' interpretation or his /her acknowledgement of a particular phenomenon (bracketing), but awareness and reflection of the subjects, or the participants' collective impression of a phenomenon (Orgill, 2007). This means that the researcher must not include any aspect of his or her perspective when handling both data collection and data analysis. Consequently, phenomenography is more about highlighting the collective meaning of the phenomenon than the individual experience of it (Marton, Carlsson, & Halasz, 1992).

4.3.2.2. Phenomenology

All phenomenology takes its start from the phenomena.

(Spiegelberg, 1959, p. 75)

Phenomenology requires concentration on the phenomenon itself – the lived experience of an activity – to elucidate its distinctive essence as an experience. Phenomenologists are not of the opinion that the world can be 'known' as, for example, in looking at a photograph. 'Knowing' is subjective – related to, and constructed by, the person involved in the 'knowing'. For that person, a phenomenon is fundamentally what it appears to be (Henriksson, 2012).

The term ‘phenomenology’ was first used by German philosopher Georg Hegel in his work *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Mind*), published in (1807/2018). Influenced by Descartes, Hume and Kant, phenomenology as a philosophy originated with Husserl (e.g., 1900/1901; 1962; 1970; 1973; 1975; 2012) and was advanced by and further developed by Heidegger (e.g., 1927/1962; 1982; 1994), Merleau-Ponty (e.g. 1964, 1974, 2011) and Spiegelburg (e.g., 1959; 1975) among others. It then developed into a major approach used in qualitative education research at the school level, the higher education level and within adult education (Collins, 1987, 1995; Crotty, 1996; Brookfield 1990, 2015; Stanage, 1987; Van Manen, 1977, 1982, 1984, 1990, 2001). Current research studies across these areas of education are now very well represented, just a few examples being Farrell’s (2020) investigation into some of the key philosophical principles of phenomenology and their application to educational research; Stolz’s (2020) study into the possibilities offered by inter-disciplinary research within higher education; Koopman’s (2017) study into the lived experiences of Science Teachers; Penley’s (2018) phenomenological study of the implementation and effect of mindfulness in school culture; and Bliss’s (2016) investigation of experience within adult education.

The two best known approaches to phenomenology: descriptive and hermeneutic, follow the broad philosophical traditions of Husserl and Heidegger respectively (Finlay, 2011). The next section will briefly summarise these two phenomenological approaches beginning with the classical descriptive process developed by Husserl and following with the hermeneutic/interpretive focus of Heidegger. Not being a philosophical tool, this ‘iceberg’ summary will only touch upon the vast depth of information abounding about these two approaches in order to clarify methodological choices made in this study.

4.3.2.2.1. Husserl's Descriptive Phenomenology

We can only think the world because we have already experienced it.

(Merleau-Ponty paraphrasing Kant, 1974, p. 201)

Husserl's descriptive phenomenology includes the concepts of 'intentionality', epoché and eidetic reduction. 'Intentionality' refers to thinking itself being an affirmation of the synthesis between the thinking 'subject' and the 'object' of the thought. Husserl (1962) maintained that the reality of objects or judgement about the natural world be 'bracketed' or suspended (epoché), in order to focus on the essence or structure of experiences, as perceived by the consciousness. Thus, a descriptive phenomenological approach calls upon the researcher to bracket, or put aside, past understanding or assumptions (Finlay, 2011). Husserl developed eidetic reduction as a reduction of a phenomenon into its essences (characteristics) in order to discern those necessary for 'it' to be 'it' and not something else (Finlay, 2011; Henriksson, Friesen, Henriksson & Saevi, 2012; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

4.3.2.2.2. Heidegger's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Thus 'phenomenology' means αποφαινεσθαι τα φαινομενα – to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself.

(Heidegger, 1927/1962)

Heidegger's hermeneutic or interpretative approach diverges from Husserl's descriptive phenomenology. The hermeneutic approach holds that true reduction is impossible, and that the notion of the researcher keeping personal opinions in abeyance to enable the interpretation of experiences is unrealistic, if not also impossible. Heidegger hypothesised that our experience of the meaning of something, and therefore our interpretation of it, hinges upon the context in which we come across it. This context includes the importance of the given person, that person's way of 'being' and 'existence' which Heidegger made reference to as 'dasein' (being in the world), and where and how the experience is encountered (Smith et al., 2009; Finlay, 2011).

Both and Phenomenography and Phenomenology employ discriminative structures, e.g. to clarify singular meaning of a certain phenomenon or event as an 'outcome space' (phenomenography), or the use of eidetic reduction in the distillation to an 'essence' (phenomenology). The differences in the context of this investigation would be between studying the essence of what it is to be a new adult student transitioning into online learning in higher education (phenomenology) and studying the different ways those adult students understand or make sense of their transition into online higher education (phenomenography). What I believed was required for this investigation was an analytical approach to inform it, rather than a strict adherence to formula; a more flexible approach along a different pathway within the phenomenological methodology landscape (Smith et al., 2009).

4.3.3. What Else is Out There?

Ricoeur (1987/2016) calls the history of phenomenology the "history of its own heresies" (p. 9). Indeed, the history of the phenomenological camp is full of philosophers, including Husserl and Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, each articulating their own idiosyncratic phenomenology. According to Crotty (1996), there are contemporary phenomenological approaches that do not exactly fit either the Husserlian or the Heideggerian versions, yet still provide a viable alternative research methodology.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), one of a group of allied phenomenological psychology approaches, is one of the more recent approaches to conducting phenomenological research. This 'new' empathetic phenomenological approach, while influenced by its predecessors, focuses deeply on the gathering and understanding of subjective meanings given to an experience by those experiencing it, and the significance of that experience (Finlay, 2011). As such, IPA represented the more flexible pathway I envisioned for this study, as Geetz (2005) observed, to "…at least to

open up the possibility of an analysis which attends to their substance rather than to reductive formulas professing to account for them" (p. 86).

4.4. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The designation 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' (IPA) indicates both the approach's twofold properties (Smith et al., 1999) and the participants' and researcher's coactive reflections (Osborn & Smith, 1998; Smith et al., 1997). Introduced in 1996 by Jonathan Smith, a psychologist in the United Kingdom, IPA was a reaction to a perceived need for advancement of a more experiential qualitative approach during a time dominated by reductionist research methods. To achieve this end, and in the historical tradition of the 'phenomenological heresy' (Ricoeur, 1987/2016), Smith included contributions from the philosophy of many eminent phenomenological leading lights.

IPA borrowed from Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology "resulting in a method which is descriptive because it is concerned with how things appear and letting things speak for themselves, and interpretative because it recognizes there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8). Smith (2004) actually explains IPA in hermeneutic phenomenological terms due to its two core foci: the experience of the individual (Baillie, Smith, Hewison, & Mason, 2000; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003), and the traditional hermeneutic acknowledgement of the researcher's critical role in research and analysis of that individual's experience (Palmer, 1969).

From Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Schleiermacher, and Gadamer came alignment with existential meaning (affirming the existence of a thing/entity); the continuous interface between participant and context; and the special importance afforded to historical, contextual, and social dynamics upon participants (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn 1999). Elements from the constructivist perspective of symbolic interactionism added an emphasis on emphasising subjective exchange of meaning via language and

cultural symbols (Blumer 1969; Denzin, 2010; Mead, 1982). This amalgamation resulted in the development of an adroit and holistic phenomenological research approach based on empathetic discourse and subjective interpretation by researchers incorporating their bias rather than completely parenthesising it (Finlay, 2011; Smith & Eatough, 2017).

4.4.1. Comparison of Methodologies

At this point in the methodology decision-making process, a comparison of the approaches considered thus far was necessary to generate a comparative overview of their characteristics. This next section, therefore, compares the three approaches, delves more deeply into the axes or building blocks of IPA, and reviews the criticism around the methodology as a research instrument.

From a theoretical perspective, in comparison to both phenomenography and phenomenology, "IPA has the more modest ambition of attempting to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people" (Smith et al., 2009 p. 16). All three approaches are focussed on the experiential perspective, however as depicted in Table 5 – a comparative overview of the three approaches – they differ in theoretical emphases and methodological imperatives (Davidson, 2011):

Table 5: Comparison of Methodologies (Author)

Characteristics	**Phenomenography**	**Phenomenology**	**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**
Focus	Discovery of human experience and awareness, interpretation, understanding and perception of phenomena. Emphasis on collective meaning. Experience of phenomena is closed and finite. (Marton, 1981).	Discovery of human experience and awareness, interpretation, understanding and perception of phenomena. Emphasis on individual experience Clarification of experimental foundations as a singular essence (Husserl, 1931).	A qualitative research approach committed to the empathetic understanding of what people consider their major life experiences to be, and how they make sense of them. When everyday life takes on particular significance for people [threshold concepts affective] (Tuffour, 2017).

Background	Education and child psychology.	Philosophy, psychology and education.	Applied psychology, health psychology. Phenomenology and Hermeneutics. Acknowledges a debt to symbolic interactionism.
Position	Non-dualistic ontology: object and subject cannot be viewed as separate and independent of each other. A second-order perspective: the world is described as it is understood. (Koole, Rasmussen & Costello, 2014).	Dualistic ontology: the object and the subject are viewed to be separate and independent. Interpretivism (Social Constructivism). A first-order perspective: the world is described as it is (von Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994).	Interpretative – hermeneutic – researcher is making sense of the participant who is making sense of X (Smith, 2017). Therefore: second-order perspective as the researcher has access through the participants' accounts.
Unit of Analysis	Typical to treat all transcripts as a single text (Cousin, 2009), or separated into a pool of meaning (Marton, 1994).	Studying several individuals who have shared the same experience (Creswell, 2013; Polkinghorne, 1989)	Individual responses to semi-structured interviews analysed – what sense this individual is making of what they are experiencing? (Smith, 2017).
Data Collection	Predominantly semi-structured, deep interviews (Booth, 1997); focus groups (Cousin, 2009)	Predominantly semi-structured interviews with individuals. Can also consider documents, observations and artifacts (Creswell, 2013).	Semi-structured interviews, journals/diaries. Homogenous sample selected to provide convergence and divergence.
Data Analysis	Analysing data for categories of description resulting in an outcome space comprising a finite number of qualitatively distinct yet logically interrelated ways the phenomenon is experienced and perceived (Marton, 1994).	Analysing data for 'meaning units'/ themes – significant statements incorporating textual and structural description of the 'essence' of the experience (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, 1997; Rieman, 1986).	Detailed, case-by-case analysis, then cross-case analysis presented as a narrative account by the researcher (Smith et al., 2009).

4.4.2. The Theoretical Axes of IPA

The key theoretical axes in which IPA is grounded are phenomenology, interpretation (hermeneutics), and idiography (Smith, 2004; Smith & Eatough, 2017; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). While not unique to IPA, the combined use, focus and techniques of these three influences identify IPA as a distinct phenomenological approach in its own right, and firmly establish this methodology within an interpretivist worldview. Mindfulness of and sensitivity to these three axes of IPA were extremely valuable to the current study by facilitating expanded insight into data handling and enabling reflexivity. The process of interpreting experiences among adult students within the context of transitioning into online study, and the transition itself, resulted in thick description via a dynamic, non-linear style of thinking. In defending the use of IPA to inform this research study, the next section of this chapter now considers these influences, and their importance to my own understanding in the context of this study.

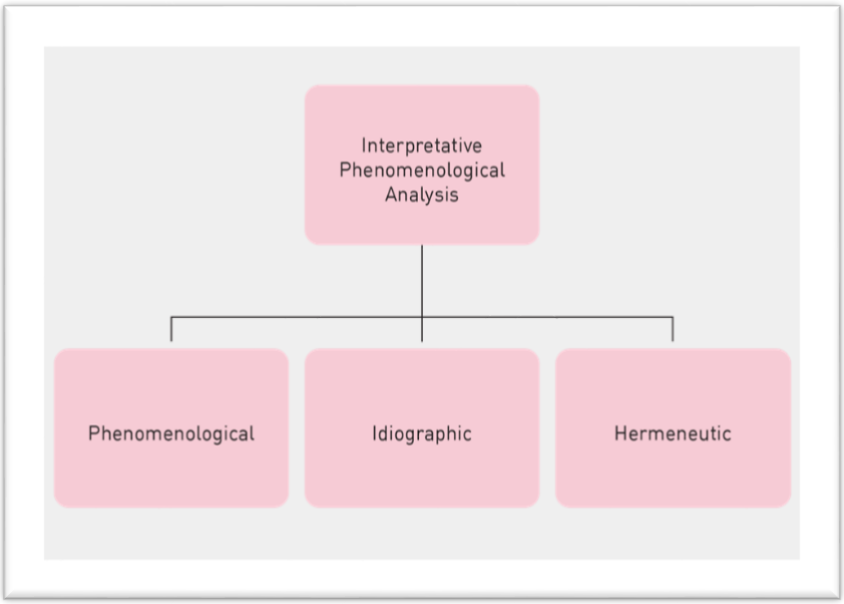


Figure 12: The Theoretical Axes of IPA (Author)

4.4.2.1. Phenomenology and IPA

IPA's perspective is situated within a phenomenological continuum which has Husserl's descriptive approach at one end and Heidegger's interpretive approach at the other. While informed by Edmund Husserl's work in the early 1900s on the essence of

experience, Heidegger's work contributes significantly to the phenomenological aspect of IPA. Of significant importance are the views put forward by Heidegger, and supported by Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, that the person and the context are interwoven and cannot be separated: we can only be understood through our involvements in the world and the world can only be understood through our involvement in it (Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011; Noon, 2017, 2018). An interpretative approach to viewing context allows for different perspectives to be considered regarding the participants' experience of phenomena (Clarke, 2010; Smith, 2017).

4.4.2.2. Idiography and IPA

Idiography is the next theoretical axis of IPA (Smith, 2004). The term originally differentiated the study of the 'specific' or 'particular' from the study of 'things-in-general' or nomothetics (Lamiell, 1998; Smith et al., 2009; Windelband, 1998). It is important to note that the IPA approach expands upon and goes beyond traditional phenomenology in its strong adherence to idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). While traditional phenomenological approaches analyse and extrapolate across cases collectively (Finlay, 2011), IPA involves a detailed analysis that embraces an individual's unique experience of a phenomenon within a collective setting (Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This ideographic approach covers individual perspectives and attempts to understand as much about one individual's responses and the contexts in which her/his experiences occur, before moving on to the next (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith, 2017). Only then are emergent themes and patterns across the group identified (Allan & Eatough, 2016; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2011a, 2011b; Smith et al., 2009). This enables both a detailed individual narrative and the consideration of overall themes and patterns within the group (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

This approach is important because people experiencing the same phenomenon may assign it radically different meanings. Similarly, while an overall phenomenon may be interpreted similarly by participants, individual aspects of that experience may differ greatly (Crotty, 1996). This ideographic approach honours the voices of individual participants in the written reports of IPA studies, through the inclusion of quotes, metaphors, images and other expressions of their contextualised story.

4.4.2.3. Hermeneutics and IPA

According to the tenets central to IPA, phenomena are unable to be known without interpretation (Smith & Eatough, 2019). Inasmuch as it is possible for the researcher to enter "the participant's personal world" (Smith et al., 1999), "access depends on and is complicated by the researcher's own conceptions... required in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity" (pp. 218–219). Hermeneutics (derived etymologically from 'Hermes', messenger of the gods) refers to the principles and processes of interpretation of meaning, according to culture and context.

IPA is closely connected to the interpretative or hermeneutic tradition in the acknowledgement of the integral role played by the researcher in interpreting the discourse around the personal experience of participants in a research study (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Palmer, 1969; Smith & Eatough, 2019; Tuffour, 2017). Rich analytical and interpretative engagement between the researcher and the participants is known as the double hermeneutic approach. This double hermeneutic dynamic involves the researcher seeking to make sense of the participant(s) making sense of their world(s) (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

To assist this meaning-making process, studies such as this one, informed by IPA, include the 'hermeneutic circle'. This concept involves the idea that an understanding of a text as a whole is achieved by an awareness of the particular sections, and an understanding of each particular section by awareness of the whole. Neither the whole text

nor any particular section can be grasped without reference to the other, ergo its description as a circle (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It is an attempt to understand "the whole through grasping its parts and comprehending the meaning of the parts divining the whole" (Crotty, 1998, p. 92).

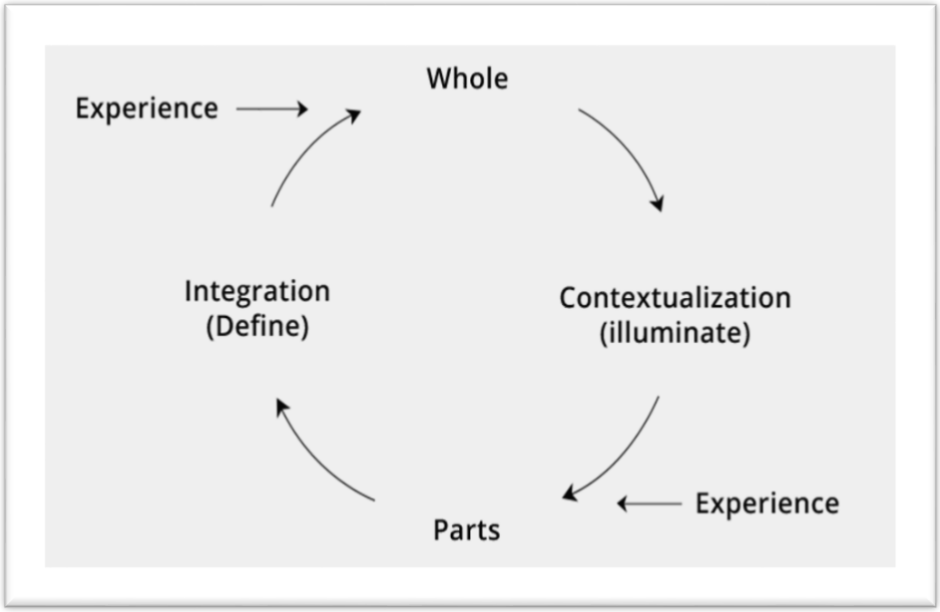


Figure 13: The basic form of the hermeneutic circle (reproduced from Bontekoe, 1996, p. 4)

As illustrated in Figure 13, this iterative process means uncovering preconceptions and interpreting data cyclically between the sections and the whole of each lived transitional participant experience (Bontekoe, 1996; Eatough & Smith, 2017; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This cyclical process and its use in the context of this study will be explained further later in this chapter in the section on the methods of data handling.

4.4.3. Criticism of IPA Research

A sound IPA-informed study highlights the span of developmental and contextual diversity within participants' narratives of lived experience. It enables the freedom to explore the context of that variation (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) while still providing an opportunity to elicit in-depth personal accounts of experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It delivers an illuminating interpretative methodology supported by an evidence trail that enables a clear connection between the

data transcription, coding and analysis, and interpretation (Smith & Eatough, 2019). However, IPA has its critics.

Sousa (2014) argues that the IPA theoretical and methodological foundation could be seen to lack clarity and coherence and argues an “anything goes” (Sousa, 2008, p. 148) research culture. Sullivan (2014) adds to these negative opinions with the criticisms that IPA has an indiscriminate epistemology that plays recklessly with research methods, and conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Giorgi (2011) similarly argues that as a phenomenological approach, IPA lacks a clear method with few if any recognisable fixed steps, limitations including ambiguity and a lack of standardisation, and a lack of recognised scientific criteria.

According to other authors (e.g., Frost et al., 2010; Smith, 2010), however, flexibility is an important factor in good research, increasing its trustworthiness and credibility. Even Sousa (2014) goes on to say that research that espouses different perspectives and engenders innovative ideas need not be compromised on rigour, quality and integrity. Indeed, the rules and regulations attached to a specific research ‘recipe’ can be restrictive (Parker, 2008). As far as IPA is concerned, qualitative research has characteristically embraced diversity (Flick, 2018; Madill & Gough, 2008).

Innovation in IPA research is welcome. The critical ingredients should be the multi-layered, multi-perspectival, and multi-dimensional interpretive procedures and intuitive insights expressed by the researcher, as opposed to conformance to ‘fixed steps’ (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2017; Frost et al., 2010; Madill et al., 2018; Smith, 2010; Spiers & Riley, 2019).

However, this flexibility and innovation can present substantial challenges for the IPA researcher in all stages of a study if not handled carefully. Consequently, Smith (2017) advises several questions to be considered by the IPA researcher pertinent to keeping a study on track:

- Using IPA, what can this study achieve, and what is it unable to achieve?
- Are the interview questions unduly directive or are they too vague and unfocused?
- Do the questions allow for further discourse?
- What data collection tools will best capture the experience in question?
- Has hermeneutic analysis been accomplished?

Another criticism of the innovation found in the IPA approach is that the integral role of language is given unsatisfactory recognition in IPA (Willig, 2008). However, in their rebuttal of this criticism, Smith et al. (2009), and Henriksson, Friesen and Saevi (2012), argue that meaning-making occurs through interactive and textual interpretation of subjective expression within context. The IPA approach is always interlinked with the cognitive, physical, linguistic and affective nature of both participant and researcher, recognising the complicated connection of language to the emotional state. Indeed, the hermeneutic response involves the use of language consistent with an individual's or a group's pre-existing perceptions and understandings – making use of, for example, discourse metaphor and narrative (Bontekoe, 1996).

Notwithstanding the fundamental purposes of IPA being to better understand experience, Smith encourages "fertile links" with other qualitative approaches, including narrative, "through shared concerns" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, pp. 196–7). While I did not employ a full narrative analysis such as might be found in an ethnographical or grounded theory approach, I became increasingly aware of how many participant interview transcripts and reflective journals involved a strong sense of narrative. Bruner suggests that narrative is "our preferred, perhaps even our obligatory medium for expressing human aspirations and their vicissitudes, our own and those of others" (2002, p. 89).

Participants used narrative to describe their transitional experiences, and many times expressed elements of these within a 'mini-narrative' sheltered within their larger story. As their description of events as they experienced them unfolded, these micro-

narratives often included a strong sense of plot. Sometimes participants introduced characterisations of other people relevant to their lived experience, or obstacles they felt they encountered, or explanation of experiences due to the actions of others.

As with any qualitative study, meticulous attention to the collection of rich and comprehensive data from participants in an IPA study was critical (Smith et al., 2009). It is recognised that IPA interpretations are conditional upon the participants' competency to adequately express their thoughts and experiences and, similarly, the researcher's reflection and analysis capabilities (Baillie, Smith, Hewison, & Mason, 2000). It was important, therefore, that the participant journals, in addition to the written word, made use of images in order to contextualise their journey and render opaque ideas more accessible in visual form.

Due to its interpretive range, qualitative stance, and flexible approach, combined with the rich approach to data analysis, IPA was ultimately chosen to inform this study. Being sensitive to the nuances of narrative and image in this study was helpful in exploring the experiences of my participants. It helped me to capture feelings, images, and concepts of time, and to be able to work with the ambiguity, diversity and complexity expressed in the descriptions of their lived transitional experiences (Chamberlain et al., 2017). A more focussed reasoning for the use of IPA for this particular study follows. This includes the suitability of the methodology in terms of the research aims, the compatibility between the TCF and IPA, and synchronicity with the research questions.

4.5. THE CHOICE OF IPA TO INFORM THIS STUDY

> *IPA has a theoretical commitment to the person as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being and assumes a chain of connection between people's talk and their thinking and emotional state. At the same time… the researcher has to interpret people's mental and emotional state from what they say.*
>
> (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 54)

4.5.1. Why and How was IPA Suitable for this Study?

4.5.1.1. Walking in the Participants' Shoes.

In IPA, experience and reality refer to something significant and transformative that happens, the detailed examination of the meaning of experience and, very importantly, the interpretation which the researcher makes of that experience (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1; Tuffour, 2017). This study was based in an interpretive paradigm. As far as possible, I wanted to see through the eyes of the participants being studied (Bryman, 2008), and try to understand the meaning of their experiences in terms of the motives giving rise to them. Termed "Eklarendes Verstehen" by sociologist Max Weber (1897, cited in Elwell, 1996), the empathetic and interpretive understanding inherent in IPA would require me 'to get into the shoes of people doing the activity'. I also wanted an approach that informed and encouraged my role, and thereby my interpretation of the participants' subjective experiences of their transitions. Arguably, it was this IPA focus on the exploration, depiction, interpretation, and cognisance of the participants' sense-making of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009; Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006) that appealed.

4.5.1.2. The Compatibility between IPA and the TCF

Smith's IPA (2017), and Meyer and Land's TCF (2006), were two compatible approaches well suited to the comprehensive examination and interpretation of the lived experiences of transition into the online learning space. Although operationally different, when administered together, these two models identified, clarified and aided in the analysis of the data. A cross-fertilisation of the conceptual lens of the TCF combined with the

interpretive analytical lens of IPA offered the potential to enrich data and bolster rigour by making it possible for diverse, contrasting *and* coadunate facets of the data to be revealed (Madill et al., 2018). Together they set the stage for the exploration of the phenomenon experienced by the research participants and enabled candid and honestly chronicled interpretation of how the transitory journey impacted the research participants.

The philosophical basis of IPA also helped to focus the TCF into a more hermeneutic lens. I became more aware that the actual nature of the phenomenon of liminality in the online space, and how being an adult learner transitioning into that online liminal space, had remained largely hidden from view.

4.5.2. IPA and the Study Questions

4.5.2.1. The Power of the Subjective Within the Interview Questions

The most important decision to use IPA as an analytical approach to inform the study was based on the potential for the principles to assist in answering the research questions. It is the role and responsibility of the IPA researcher to "focus on context analysis, explore the deeply-rooted causes of phenomena, and highlight the explanations of what happened" (Wu & Wu, 2011, p. 1305). For example, during the qualitative semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked, "What was it like?". Answers concerning the lived experience of transitioning into the higher education online learning space [i.e. the 'naming' of "objectivised subjective feelings"] (Husserl, 1964, Meditation #5; Polkinghorne, 1989) enabled the empathetic Eklarendes Verstehen mentioned above to take place (Weber, 1897, cited in Elwell, 1996). Polkinghorne (1989) echoed this empathy when he modified his earlier writing to say, "I understand better [now] what it is like for someone to experience that" (p. 46). The participants were also asked "How did you feel?" How they felt while *undergoing* the experience of transition into the online space [i.e. the 'naming' of "subjectivised subjective feelings"] (Husserl, 1964, Meditation #5), gave depth of insight into the person having the experience.

The attention to the subjective, as outlined above, supported deep engagement with the research questions. Focus was on each participant's views and understandings of his/her distinct experience of transition into the online study space at an ideographic (particular) level, and then subsequently balanced with the participants' overall shared commonalities of experience. Such consolidated understandings boosted development of new insights. Table 6 aligns my research questions with the components of IPA and links to the TCF.

Table 6: Alignment of Research Questions with the Theoretical Axes of IPA and Conceptual links to the TCF (Author, adapted from Eatough & Smith, 2017)

Central Research Question: How do adult learners (25 years +) experience the transition to online degree studies in higher education?			
IPA Theoretical Axes		Conceptual links to the TCF	Research sub-questions
IPA's phenomenological component (How has this person understood this phenomenon?)	Charts the participants' experiences and orientation toward the world: (concerns, successes and issues).	What challenges and stumbling blocks do the adult learners feel they face in their journey transitioning into online study?	How does one group of adult learners describe their first weeks of study in an online environment?
IPA's hermeneutic (interpretative) component (In this context, what does this mean for this person?)	Contextualises these described experiences within the cultural and physical contexts, both individually and across the group. Endeavours to clarify the mutually constitutive relationship between 'person' and 'world' (Heidegger, 1927; Smith et al., 2009).	How is the affective dimension of TCs represented in the adult learners' experiences?	What types of strategies do the adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning? What types of strategies do the adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?
IPA's idiographic component	Enables a detailed exploration of each individual participant's experiences of transition, whilst also effecting sufficient depth to examine those same individuals' encounters with TCs.	What fundamental and transformative threshold concepts, behaviours, and attitudes might these adult learners face and master in order to successfully transition into online study?	How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

Moustakas (1994) specified that the intent of IPA research is the essential recognition and comprehension of the "underlying dynamics of the experience" (p. 135). The role of a qualitative IPA researcher is, therefore, to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the approach, to enable the participants to comfortably and without fear of misrepresentation, share their stories of 'lived experience' These opportunities for detail and empathetic understanding began with the data collection and continued with data handling. The next section covers in depth the handling of the data. This includes transcription, both electronic and manual handling, and the use of the hermeneutic cycle as it was applied in this study.

4.6. DATA HANDLING

As with data collection, the IPA approach to handling data is not prescriptive. It is, at its core, a subjective research approach (Giorgi, 2010; Smith et al., 2009) in which both data collection and data analysis are guided by rigour, receptiveness to context, accuracy, transparency and clarity (Yardley, 2000; 2008). It is guided by an idiographic focus, an attitude of open-mindedness and a commitment to be immersed in the data – as mentioned earlier: 'Eklarendes Verstehen' to walk in the shoes of the participant (Weber, 1897, cited in Elwell, 1996).

4.6.1. Transcription

Rather than simply a way of expressing oral data in a written format, the transcription process is "a key phase of data analysis" (Bird, 2005, p. 227). The interview data was in digital audio format. I transcribed the data verbatim in its complete narrative form at the semantic level. This included all the words spoken and original grammar and syntax, including false starts, laughs and other verbal features. All non-verbal signals that were recorded on the tape, such as laughs, sighs and significant pauses, were also noted in the original dated and timed transcripts. This enabled familiarisation with the data itself. To increase awareness of the participant's spoken tones and nuances, each recorded

interview was listened to several times. I then simultaneously listened to the recordings and read the transcripts to check for possible errors. It is impossible to remove the interpretation of the researcher completely when transcribing interviews; however, human actions are meaningful, and the outcomes of those actions comprise meaningful data which requires interpretation (Mantzavinos, 2012, p. 226).

The reflective journals were either in handwritten format or electronic format and many contained illustrations, so transcription as such was not really necessary. As with the interview transcriptions, a thematic narrative approach was adopted with the journal entries in order to capture the meaning and contextual detail. The process was relatively straightforward. Each journal was read several times and aligned with the appropriate interview transcription for each remaining participant. (The participant Mattie left both the course and the study after six weeks without having begun a journal.) Exploring both the visual and textual journal and interview data concurrently offered the scope to look at and analyse the alignment of interaction between these images, the written journal text and the interviews. Using an inductive approach, each completed transcript covering both individual interview and its aligned journal was then imported into the NVivo program for Mac, a qualitative data analysis computer software package. There are many different ways that NVivo can be used to assist in the analysis of data. The next section provides an overview of how this software was used in this study.

4.6.2. Handling the Data Electronically: NVivo 10

NVivo software allows codes to be fixed within the transcribed interview text. Coding is the grouping of data compiled in a study into themes. It is the first step in the analytic process. In IPA-informed studies, the development of coding is placed in vivo (during the analysis) so that it maintains an idiographic ontology (Barbour, 2008). Initial coding began after importation of the transcriptions. Firstly, each interview was separately coded line-by-line, looking at words and sections of text and copying extracts to the

relevant code. This allowed me further immersion in the data, and definition and identification of any early emergent themes.

However, this stage also made me realise that my changing approach during the early first interview stage, and the semi-structured nature of the interviews, could be very confusing and a little frightening when initially attempting to code ‘mechanically’. I did not find NVivo intuitive, and my initial attempts at coding were inconsistent. Another initial concern was that using the software package would impose a structure on the data restricting the opportunity to focus on content. However, after a couple of classes in the NVivo process, I became satisfied that the NVivo tools could be ‘cherry-picked’. I understood more clearly what I wanted the coding to do and came to value the routine and efficiency the software offered for revisiting and linking records. Revisiting the study’s goals, the intended outcome and the research questions also helped with what initial information to code. Subsequently, the best possible scenario of the coding of each transcript resulted in a possible theme and, at worst, resulted in a series of usable quotes.

The next step was refining and aggregating that data from the initial coding into broader categories in order to develop any hierarchical relationship between the data. Existing codes were re-examined, refined, renamed, amended, merged or subdivided as I felt appropriate into hierarchical categories and sub-categories where relationships between these categories could more easily be examined. These refinements enabled further deeper diving into and across sections of text. It also enabled me to reduce and combine categories because by this stage, there was a lot of data and I needed to prune. Superordinate categories were identified either through a process of abstraction or subsumption (Richards, 2009, p. 106-107; Saldana, 2013).

Predominantly through a process of abstraction, patterns in the data were identified by clustering similar themes together. New names that captured the essence of the theme were given to each cluster and each of these became a new superordinate theme category.

Subsumption was also used to delegate single themes to superordinate status if interpreted as important enough due to capturing the essence of the other themes in the category (Smith et al., 2009, p. 97). For example, the theme of "credibility" (which was related to the participants' search for an identity as a ‘real’ student) was categorised as being superordinate from a subsumption process. From this, an "imposter" identity pattern among participants was identified.

To complement my written reflective journal and maintain a sensitivity to the context of the study, I also recorded my thoughts about the data by writing an electronic memo of possible relationships and themes. Birks, Chapman, and Francis (2008) suggest memos are helpful in developing conceptual understanding of the original data. I found this to be true, particularly with aligning relationships, exploring new possibilities, and in terms of counting ‘what was said and who said it’. This NVivo function allowed real-time recording of my reflective thoughts on each code and the ability to link a memo to a theme. The memos developed throughout this study included details, for example, the numbers of participants who self-identified as online students and the number of those who did not. Memos also proved a useful memory aide and provided opportunities to recognise preconceptions and assumptions arising from my position as an insider researcher.

4.6.3. Issues

Barbour (2008) argues that in analysis, it is how rigour and transparency have been demonstrated, not the label on the data analysis approach, that is most important. Processes within the computer software package assisted in the reliability and the validity of this study. NVivo enabled searches to be done relatively quickly and accurately and ensured that all usage of a specific word, phrase or chunk of transcript were found, thereby adding rigour to the analysis process and validity of the results. Conducting such a search electronically will clearly generate more reliable results overall than completing it by hand because it rules out most human error. However, while NVivo was invaluable mapping

themes across the data set, looking for similarities, connections, and relationships and enabling fast, straightforward recovery of indexed data for specific codes within each transcript, I was not completely comfortable. Some of the themes mapped using NVivo did not seem to correspond closely enough to the data as read in the transcripts and journal entries.

Recovering all responses can be made more difficult due to the completely different ways in which participants can convey similar ideas. As Brown, Taylor, Baldy, Edwards and Oppenheimer (1990, p.136) suggest, "The existence of multiple synonyms would lead to partial retrieval of information". For example, I searched for participants who had expressed any fear about their experience in transitioning to online higher education. After originally attempting a search for the word ‘afraid’, only two finds were returned as only two participants had actually used this particular word. However, when I later re-read the actual transcripts, I found more examples of this attitudinal category evidenced by the use of words such as "anxious", “lost”, "scared", "terrified", and "panicking". Finding some responses by using the search facility was difficult because of the many different ways an idea was expressed, and because ‘what you don’t ask for, you won’t get’. This admittedly rather ‘intuitive’ dissatisfaction led to me to reflect further on the process of analysis.

Schostak and Schostak describe the essence of capturing data adroitly when they say, “data … are open to reconfiguration and thus alternative ways of seeing, finding answers to questions one wishes to answer” (2008, p.10). I strongly felt that this study would benefit from the pairing of NVivo with manual data handling and analysis. This conclusion was not made in order to position one qualitative analysis and management tool over the other, but rather, to demonstrate rigour by recognising and utilising the advantages of each: the electronic provision of a reliable, general picture of the data; and the manual approach to gain a deeper interpretation of the data. Together I felt these two approaches

would more readily and reliably enable ‘Eklarendes Verstehen’ – walking in the shoes of the participant (Weber, 1897, cited in Elwell, 1996).

4.6.4. Handling the Data Manually

Using the interview transcriptions that had been completed prior to the computer-assisted analysis, I began handling and analysis of the data guided by the manual step-by-step approach for IPA-informed studies suggested by Smith et al. (2009, pp. 82–107). This approach begins with a close analysis of the first participant’s data, followed with consideration of pertinent themes. Once each participant’s data has been analysed, these themes are compared across the data set. What follows is a brief overview of that manual analysis as used in this study. This process was also used when aligning the participants' journals with the interview transcripts.

Each aligned interview transcript and journal narrative were read and re-read several times before moving on to examine each of the others in turn. New insights appeared with each reading. These initial readings also populated the listing of the participants’ details in Chapter 5. A body of more detailed impressions, ideas and early interpretations of the data were then built up as comments in the transcripts of each of the two interviews and the journals.

Variously coloured notes were made in the margins about what was emerging in terms of the narrative’s language, style and mood. Details included descriptive word and phrases, specific language, linguistic characteristics (e.g., metaphor, hesitancy, and repetition), similarity or contradictions. These were sometimes summarised and sometimes paraphrased, depending on what was seen as wanting more or less commentary. Quite often, these details would lead to questions, e.g. What does this description show about this participant's understanding of their transitionary experience? Key points were then noted with a coloured label or code, usually of a few words or a sentence. This process was undertaken for each participant individually.

The next stage involved an interpretive process of identifying emergent themes – examining and identifying the similarities that presented in each label or code to check whether there was sufficient evidence for a proposed theme. The themes were then written as statements, mostly in the form of a phrase or sentence. This required focusing on the most important and interesting data, while still keeping the depth and complexities of each original narrative. Searching for connections across emergent themes was then organised by clustering similar themes together and giving them a name describing the whole, thereby creating a superordinate theme. These were then grouped into different superordinate themes mostly by abstraction – grouping similar themes under one heading, and occasionally by subsumption, when an emergent theme acquired superordinate status (Smith et al., 2009, p. 97).

Finally, for a deeper understanding of the data to be developed, a cross-case analysis involved noting differences and similarities and identifying connections. Each participant's subordinate themes were assembled under common superordinate themes, some of which were then renamed (Smith et al., 2009). In order to shape a united theme structure, I systematically searched and grouped patterns by distinguishing common and coinciding threads, examples of divergence, and recognisable nuances across all the participants' accounts. This meant some superordinate and some subordinate themes were scrapped or adjusted. In some cases, new superordinate themes were added, and some data extracts were moved from one superordinate theme to another.

At this stage, strong connections could be seen between some theme areas (for example, the theme of 'fear' which had not been obvious using NVivo originally), weaker ones between others and some isolated themes that did not fit any other patterns. If any significant misalignment in the fit between superordinate themes and subordinate themes became obvious from a particular participant, the original superordinate theme data was retraced, and its validity examined. Themes were not gauged as being final until all of the

data had been read through and the coding re-checked at least twice. This search and grouping process was then repeated across the themes elicited from both the computer-assisted NVivo analysis *and* the manual analysis.

In the final stage of analysis, the data from both interviews and journals was again explored using the TCF as a guide. In particular, the TC characteristics of liminality, transformation and troublesome knowledge were used as a filter/lens to examine themes. By the end of this stage, I could clearly express what the themes were and what they were not, concisely explain the scope and content of each and assign the themes in a way that best reflected the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With themes identified and the patterns and connections established, the analysis developed to where I was able to produce an account of the lived transitional experience of each participant, in keeping with the idiographic focus of IPA-informed studies. I began to draft my findings again. These findings are presented in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 as an analytical narrative, which includes relevant participant quotations and a detailed interpretative commentary.

4.6.5. Use of the Hermeneutic Circle in this Study

> *Meaningfulness fundamentally grows out of a relation of part to whole that is grounded in the nature of living experience.*
>
> (Dilthey, 1989)

Although presented here in a linear fashion, the actual process was actually ‘messier’. While the relationship of the ‘whole’ to its ‘parts’ remained crucial, it is important to explain at this point that I moved backwards and forwards in these stages, making use of my own version of the hermeneutic circle or, in this case, cycle (see Figure 14).

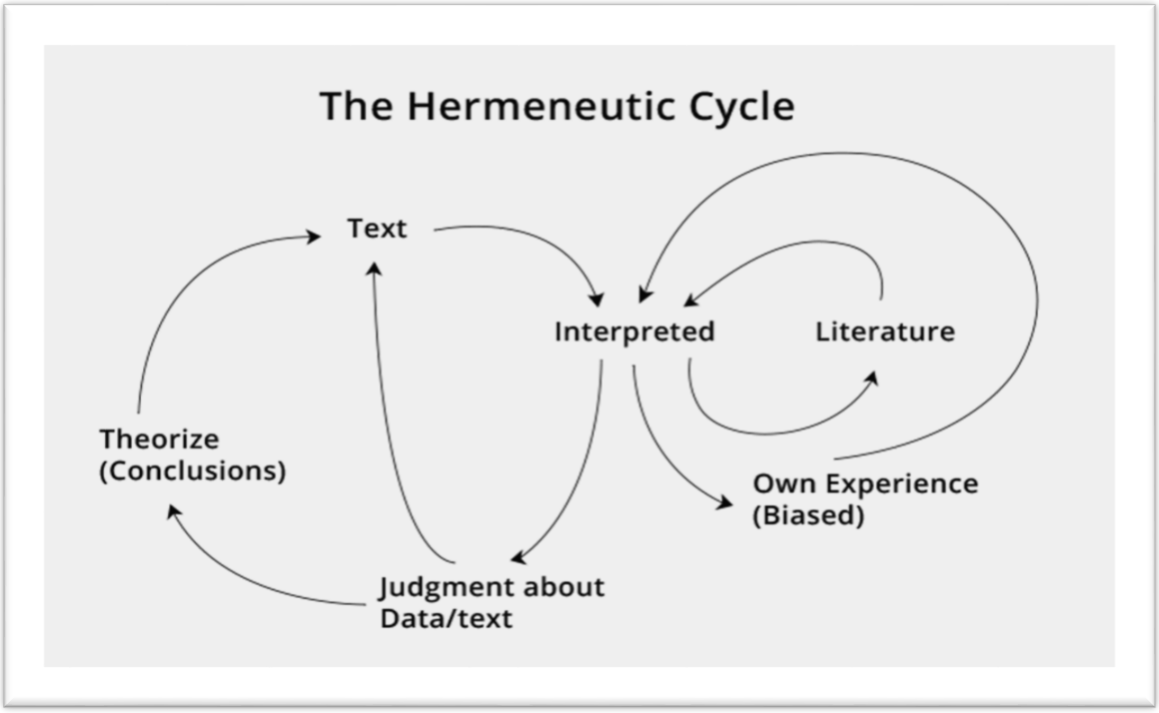


Figure 14: The Hermeneutic 'Cycle' as used in this study (Bontekoe, 1996, p. 4)

Analysis and interpretation of some interviews occurred while others were being transcribed and transcription of first interviews occurred while second interviews were being carried out. The literature review was being constantly updated during this stage as well. The participants' journals were aligned with their interview transcript quite late in the day as they were not in my possession from the start of the research, and I was only given ethical permission to use them as data toward the end of the trimester. While these steps were initiated one after another, each stage needed to be engaged with continually. As a new researcher, this process both helped me to remind myself of both the scope of the collected data, and of my impressions during each of the two interviews and from the journal entries (Richards, 2009; Smith & Eatough 2017; Smith & Osborn 2015).

The data handling process took eight months partly because I work full-time, partly because learning the NVivo process from scratch in itself was a substantial task, and partly because of my decision to process the data twice. I believe this last decision to handle and analyse the data in two ways resulted in a rich source of data. It allowed me as the researcher to more thoroughly merge the participant's world with my understanding and

interpretation of that world (Smith et al., 2009), thereby encouraging 'Eklarendes Verstehen' (Weber, 1897, cited in Elwell, 1996).

4.7. Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed and justified that qualitative research in general and IPA specifically offered a flexible and versatile approach to decoding and fathoming the participants' experiences. To set the scene, an outline of the nature of both the interpretative paradigm and qualitative research were provided. Both were explored with regard to their fitness for purpose for this study. The techniques and methods adopted in this study were also discussed, including the semi-structured interview method used to gather data and the transcription thereof. The computer software package tools and manual techniques that were chosen to handle data and the reasons for their use were also outlined.

IPA is regarded within this study as a suitable methodological approach for researching potential threshold experiences among the participants. The methodological approach taken in existing TCF research is not particularly highlighted. However, TCF data collection methods are detailed, with semi-structured interviews with participants being the preferred approach. IPA uses semi-structured interviews to focus on participants' interpretation of their experiences of a phenomenon, also acknowledging the researcher's interpretation of those experiences. To make sure the choice of IPA to inform this study was based on well-balanced methodological reasons and fitted the research questions and aims, the qualitative methodologies, phenomenography and both Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology were briefly compared. Keeping in mind Newell and Burnard's (2006) caution that preferences may lead to biased decisions, IPA was then examined in greater depth in order to establish methodological suitability. This examination included the acknowledgement of contemporary criticisms of this approach. The research methodology and method informed by IPA are recorded in this chapter accordingly.

So as to provide a context for the design of the study and in order to position the upcoming data analysis, Chapter 5 presents the mechanism of the study, including research design, and an explanation of the ethical requirements and procedures, before looking at an overview of the participants, their recruitment and their pathways to study.

CHAPTER 5:
RESEARCH CONTEXT AND DESIGN

> *It's 6am, cold and raining outside. My whale-sounding alarm clock makes me wonder if life would be better as a fish. If I were a fish, I could be flexible, waking when I wanted, swimming with the crowd, flowing with the tide, or going in my own direction. Independent, yet still connected to the whole, with a healthy distance in between. In the past friends have asked me, 'why would you choose to study online?' My reply is simple, why swim against the tide?*
>
> (Chandler, 2018)

Research cannot happen in a vacuum. In order to develop contextually appropriate approaches to research design, I needed to shape my research design around the unique circumstances and location in which the events, actions, and meanings transpired. I found that a particularly compelling aspect of this approach to research design was that it treated that design as a bona-fide reality, not merely a formula or plan. Chapter 5, therefore, relates the ethical practices, data protection, security, confidentiality and participant context, their pathways to study, and information about the university into which they were transitioning.

5.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

> *Research is a dynamic activity that travels a long and winding trail from start to finish. It is not a single event, rather the act of doing research is a process.*
>
> (Anderson, 1998, p. 39)

5.1.1. The Setting for this Study

Research design should reflect the context in which the research will take place. Along with the conceptual framework, the research design for this study flowed from the particular context and setting within which the participants studied, and the influence this context had on their actions and experience. The study was located within my place of work, an Australian university registered as a higher education provider with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). To be familiar with this context as the

study developed was advantageous, on the understanding that it did not impact negatively upon or upset the participants, or my interpretation of the findings.

So as to ensure anonymity of the institution, the sources for this information will not be cited beyond acknowledging that the details given here concerning this HE provider are taken from that institution's marketing information from 2019. Part of a leading international network of institutions of higher education, the particular university in which the study took place was comprised of a number of interstate campuses and a very strong online presence. A diverse spread of both domestic and international students from a varied range of educational backgrounds was catered for.

5.1.2. Ethical Consideration

> *All human behavior [sic] is subject to ethical principles, rules and conventions which distinguish socially acceptable behavior from that which is generally considered unacceptable. The practice of research is no exception.*
>
> (Anderson, 1998, p. 27)

Ethical concerns must be involved in every aspect of the research design: goals, methods, the selection of research questions, data collection, transcription and analysis. Each research participant must give informed consent (Chapter 2.2, National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research [NHMRC], 2007/2018). The purpose of requiring and achieving consent in a proposed research study is to show respect for the individuals and institutions involved and reduce, as far as possible, misrepresentation and pressure on participants (O'Neill, 2003). However, consent is a propositional attitude, necessarily applied within an environment of an unknown outcome.

When planning and executing a study, it can be difficult to actualise the ethical principles that constitute the bulwark of research (Biros, 2018; Suri, 2020). As Chase (1996) tells us, no written document can sufficiently "...capture the dynamic process of interpretation and authorship" (p.57). There is subsequently always a limitation to the

understanding of informed consent (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). As such, complete consent is paradoxical.

Also, as previously mentioned in Chapter 4, semi-structured interviews were used in this research. While the prepared framework of questions was used, quite frequently, conversations took off along unexpected tangents. Actually, as Chase (1996) argues, this appears to be a shortcoming of the informed consent procedure inherent to ethical processes. There were definitely aspects of participant conversations that surfaced unexpectantly and unpredictably throughout the research. Any possible resulting discomfort and disruption to participants necessitated, indeed demanded, constant, careful consideration of ethical procedures to be followed.

It was important to this study that this ethical approach was upheld, and participants be informed that the conclusions to which the research may have led, may have proven to be both unpredictable and variable. So as to ensure this approach, adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC, 2018) was maintained right throughout the research. Ethical compliance with the NHMRC demands sufficient acknowledgement of issues about recruitment, enrolment, informed consent, protection of privacy and confidentiality, no use of deception and avoidance of harm (2018 pars: 5.1.18 – 5.1.23). In particular, the ethical standard of 'beneficence' was strongly adhered to. This principal encompasses both the anticipation and elimination of risk of harm to a participant, and the maintenance of welfare for those involved (Kvale, 1996). In order to comply with legal and ethical requirements, authorisation to conduct the research was granted in writing by the Academic Director from the participating educational institution. Both academic and ethics approval was also granted by my place of study prior to commencing the recruitment phase.

There was also a need for awareness of special problems, or 'risk context', faced by participants engaged in a study involving an online medium, for example, the vulnerability

of group participants, and the level of intrusiveness of the researcher. While the research was not designed to be overly intrusive in nature, it was considered a potential risk that some students may feel uncomfortable when talking about their transitional experiences. Working with possibly vulnerable participants necessitated a cogent appreciation of the risks that the research could have compounded or created (NHMRC, 2018, Chapter 2.1).

5.1.3. Data Protection, Security, Confidentiality and Anonymity

The identity of the university and the participants has been protected as far as possible. Consent to being recorded was sought verbally from participants at the start of each session. Data collected from the interviews in the form of digital audio recordings was transcribed verbatim and files were transferred across to a secure area of the university network immediately following each session. Data collected from the journals was transcribed verbatim. All data were then checked with the individual participants for respondent validation and then transferred to the secure university network. The secure storage area is password protected, requires a network log on and is only accessible by the researcher. A backup copy was also made on Dropbox (Cloud storage service) and encrypted. These measures also applied to transcriptions which were all completed personally by the researcher and also anonymised using pseudonyms.

5.1.4. Triangulation, Credibility and Trustworthiness

It is not the aim of qualitative research, nor this study, to produce data that is statistically generalisable, or even externally valid. Rather, the intention was to build a richly nuanced understanding of how these adult students perceived their early transition into the online higher education space and the experiences they faced in so doing. In order to give consideration to the multiple ways of establishing truth, this section will look at triangulation, credibility, trustworthiness and crystallization in qualitative research.

The term ‘triangulation’, common to the phraseology of research, refers to the numerous and often varied approaches to analysis used to safeguard “rigor, breadth,

complexity, richness and depth" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p.5). Triangulation is commonly used in quantitative studies for confirmation and generalization of research. However, there is disagreement amongst researchers concerning the benefit of triangulation to qualitative research.

Mishler (2000) and Barbour (2008) argue the need for triangulation to be strictly defined from the perspective of the qualitative researcher in interpretive studies. Richardson (1994) argues against the need for triangulation in qualitative research by styling qualitative research as being akin to a crystal reflecting the multiple nuances of description already inherent in this approach. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) succinctly explain, "There is no 'correct' telling of this event. Each telling, like a light hitting a crystal, reflects a different perspective of this incident" (p. 6).

Silverman (2019) suggests that using the terms 'validity', 'reliability' and 'triangulation' when considering qualitative data determined by the researcher's ability and skill in searching for a participant's perceived truth does not reflect the value of the theoretical underpinning of interpretive research or method. Finally, Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintain that trustworthiness should be credited as an alternative to the established quantitative concepts of validity, reliability and triangulation in order to be relevant from a qualitative point of view.

Trustworthiness of a qualitative study depends upon establishing credibility by means of methodological transparency. The achievement and maintenance of transparency and, therefore, credibility in this interpretive study were ensured by various means. Chapter 4 discussed the written reflective journals, and the logs generated within the NVivo program that supported the exploration of thought processes and data handling throughout the journey of this study. Other means included collecting data from these reflective journals and two sets of semi-structured interviews, ensuring multiple respondent perspectives, providing detailed information regarding methods and methodological

choices, and grounding findings in the data. The myriad of diverse voices heard throughout these approaches echo the "infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionalities and angles of approach" evident in this study (Richardson & Adams-St. Pierre, 2005, p.963).

Nevertheless, the standpoints and conclusions that emerged from this study may not mirror the experience within other tertiary settings, thereby impacting external validity. Indeed, as happens so frequently in qualitative research, what this study manifests, is a situated truth positioned within intricacies of moment and circumstance – a window of opportunity (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). Yet, the research just may have the potential to increase the understanding of the transitory experience of the participants in a way not accessible by other methods. The outcomes may also indicate points of reference able to be researched by future studies (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

5.2. PARTICIPANTS

In accordance with IPA practice (Smith et al., 2009), the participants were a homogenous sample, purposively selected so that they might provide a depth of quality data on the phenomena being investigated – adult students 25 years +, transitioning into online higher education. In IPA-informed studies, a sample size of between two and twenty-five is standard practice (Smith, 2017). Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) recommend these sizes because "fewer participants examined at a greater depth is always preferable to a broader, shallow and simply descriptive analysis of many individuals" (p.756). The aim was to become saturated with information on the subject as opposed to maximizing numbers (Padgett, 2004). As this study was being informed by IPA, the total of twenty-four participants who took part fitted this sample size and still enabled a diversity and depth in the range of data.

5.2.1. Recruitment

Recruitment activity only began after appropriate ethics approval had been established. Participants were recruited from the non-traditional online student intake into classes not being taught by myself. Students, none of whom I had taught or would be teaching, were invited to express interest in participating via a short presentation and an information document delivered by email to new students several weeks before the start of trimester. Students were informed, as far as possible, about the nature of the study and to enable each possible participant to consider their decision to become involved with the study (See Appendix B). Consent forms were included.

Initial contact consolidated one week later by emails from Student Services prompted students about the project and made another call for volunteers. At this time, the information sheets, including the consent form, were again made available to all relevant students. Each student considering participation was also apprised within these documents of the right to withdraw from the research at any time and guaranteed that his/her involvement in the study would have no negative consequences with regard to any potential future interactions with the researcher and the university. This right to withdraw was further emphasised by means of a 'cooling-off period' between the initial briefing and commencement of the interviews.

Should any signs of stress have become evident, a further verbal reminder was given to participants at both interviews that they were not compelled to participate, that there would be no negative consequences for not taking part, and that they were entitled to take a break. It should be noted that only one of the participants, Mattie, chose to exercise their right to withdraw after the first interview. This withdrawal was a consequence of the student leaving the course and the university entirely.

5.2.2. Participant Overview

Twenty-four participants were recruited from a variety of undergraduate courses. The participants' ages ranged from 27 to 46 years, with a median age of 36.5 years, so all classified as adults in accordance with the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The participants were a mixture of nationalities but all of them were Australian citizens or residents at the time of the research interviews. Before starting each of the interviews, participants were required to complete a form to gather important background information, including age, postcode, marital status, parental status, previous education, and education levels of immediate family.

5.2.3. Pathways to Study

As is evidenced in Table 7 (see p. 173), a non-traditional learning pathway to the undergraduate degree was not uncommon among these older students. These pathways involved earlier study with various providers. In particular, several participants in this study had undertaken earlier certification within the government-run Technical and Further Education (TAFE) tertiary education system. By way of explanation: during the interviewing period of this research, TAFE offered Vocational Education and Training (VET) accredited training courses in Australia both online and on-campus for professions requiring skilled workers. The courses were certified by the federal government's Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA).

A brief breakdown of the twenty-four participants based on this data capture (see further details in Table 7) is as follows: fifteen participants had completed various vocational education (VET) courses with Technical and Further Education (TAFE), some completing several VET certificates predominantly in face-to-face (F2F) mode: eight had completed Certificate 2; four had completed a Certificate 3; three had completed a Certificate 4 and one had begun but not completed a level 4 certification. Two participants had completed a university undergraduate degree (one of whom had also completed an

Advanced Diploma in Commerce at university) and two others had completed one year and two years of an undergraduate degree, respectively. One participant had completed a Diploma of Art Administration at university, and another had completed a Diploma of Business at university. Three had completed a VET Advanced Diploma in Hospitality at the institution they were now enrolled in for the bachelor's degree, and one a Diploma of Design through TAFE. Two had not studied since leaving Year 12 High School. Of the original twenty-four participants, sixteen were parents, of whom seven were single parents. Thirteen resided with their partners.

The following table was created to briefly introduce each of the students who engaged in the interviews. The table does not depict the vivid detail of these participants' lives, which will unfold more in chapters 6, 7 and 8. However, this introduction does act as a mise en scène to the data analysis presented in these later chapters. Table 7 indicates each participant's pseudonym arranged alphabetically for ease of reference, the course being undertaken, and background, marital, and parental status of each of the participants. It also tables the diversity of participant background, indicators of their responsibility outside their study, their reasons for their decision to study, and their reasons for studying online. These details are important to this study in terms of setting the scene.

Table 7: Participant details (Author)

Pseudonym and age	Online Bachelor Course	Background	Partner	Single	Children	Sole Parent
Adrian 32	Business P/T	Completed an Arts degree at the University of Sydney; completed an Advanced Diploma in Commerce both F2F. Wanted to learn how to manage his own business. Working full-time. Online study a necessity due to work and time constraints.	✓			
Antonia 38	Multi-Media Design P/T	Completed two F2F VET Certificates 2 in Food and Beverage and Leadership in the Workplace at TAFE. Wanted to get into hospitality management. Single mother		✓	✓	✓

		to two children, 10 and 7 years old. Lives in country NSW. Wanted a course specialising in hospitality so had to do it online.				
Ava 28	Event Mgt. P/T	Completed a F2F VET Cert 2 in IT, at TAFE, straight out of high school. Works P/T as shift event co-ordinator at local RSL. Wants to improve chances of event manager's job. Online study allows some home time.		✓	✓	✓
Ayla 34	Event Mgt. F/T	Completed a VET Cert 2 in IT, at TAFE, straight out of high school – blended online and F2F. Wanted to have better career options. Not working. Two primary school-aged children. Online study allows home time.	✓		✓	
Brendan 46	Business P/T	Has worked full time in admin at a large hospital for 12 years. Wife studying to be a nurse. Completed several F2F Certificate 3 courses through TAFE. Would like to be in a supervisor's role in hospital admin. Three children – two at school and one working P/T and living at home. Online study a necessity due to work and time constraints.	✓		✓	
Chris 28	Hospitality Mgt. P/T	Has worked as a chef for ten years. Wants to find a job that – or a career that's not going to be as physically taxing but able to use experience. Poor health – bad back due to past work. Did distance learning Cert 2 courses through TAFE. Online study a necessity due to work and time constraints.		✓		
David 36	Hospitality Mgt. P/T	Completed Advanced Diploma in Hotel Management (VET) F2F. Has a lot of hotel experience but wants to be qualified to apply for management roles. Works full time. Online study a necessity due to work and family constraints.	✓		✓	

Hafiz 40	Business P/T	Self-employed marketing Consultant works from home. Worked in hardware medical IT overseas but there's no work in Australia in this. Changed to marketing and did some digital marketing courses, and social media marketing courses at TAFE. All Cert 3 level and all F2F. Doing the degree to possibly go home to elderly parents and a degree is very important to work in his country. Did not speak English on arrival in Australia six years ago. Two small children. Wife does not drive. IELTS score of 6.5. Online study a necessity due to work and time constraints.	✓		✓	
Jenine 32	Hospitality Mgt. P/T	Completed Advanced Diploma in Hotel Management (VET) F2F. Has a lot of hotel experience but wants to be qualified to apply for management roles. Works full time. Online study a necessity due to work and time constraints.		✓		
Jess 28	Business P/T	Completed a few art-related certificates and a Diploma of Art Administration at University of Queensland F2F. Working full time as Junior Supervisor at an art gallery. Travels a lot for work. Needs a business degree to work at management level in any gallery of note. Online study a necessity due to work and time constraints.	✓			
Joan 30	Business F/T	Completed Certificate of Preschool Teaching in the USA, F2F (Equivalent to Certificate 4 in Australia). Wants to be competitive in the job market in Australia. Has Australian husband's family for support with small children. Works shift work. Online study fits in with family life and shift work better than F2F.	✓		✓	

John 27	Marketing P/T	Completed F2F TAFE Certificate 2 in admin skills. First formal study since leaving school. Previous work has been in management in retail and supervision in hospitality. Currently working in HR admin in a 5-star hotel. Needs degree to further work prospects. Wife works P/T. One young child. Works full time. Online study a necessity due to work and time constraints.	✓		✓	
Kate 39	Accounting P/T	Completed Certificate 4 in Bookkeeping and GST and BAS certificate units F2F. Works full time. Online study a necessity due to work and family responsibilities.	✓		✓	
Kelly 29	Event Mgt. P/T	Completed Certificate 3 in Childcare at TAFE on leaving school. Completed Certificate 2 in Hospitality – both F2F. After three children (8, 6 and 5 years) she became tired of working in childcare and wanted a new career. Single mother. Currently working shift work as housekeeper in 5-star hotel mostly at night. Online study because it's easier to work study around kids than kids around study.		✓	✓	✓
Kim 46	Event Mgt. P/T	Completed a TAFE Certificate 4 in Office Management F2F. Volunteering on events with NFP agencies in South Australia. Main goal is to one day to work at mega events somewhere in the world. Two children, single parent so online study works out much better with work/life balance than anything else.		✓	✓	✓
Len 28	Hospitality Mgt. P/T	Completed TAFE Advanced Diploma in Hospitality (VET) both online and F2F. Working full time in banquets at 5-star hotel. Wants to get ahead in the hotel industry, expects to be taught by industry experts.	✓			

		Online study a necessity due to work and time constraints.				
Lianie 29	Event Mgt. F/T	Completed a F2F Diploma of Business and one year of multi-media after the diploma at the University of Melbourne. Working as debt collector for two years full time. Wants to do music events. Single mother with two primary school-aged children. Online study a preference to study at her own pace and fit in with the children and work. Studying full time.		✓	✓	✓
Luke 30	Multi-Media Design P/T	Completed F2F Diploma in Design at TAFE. Working part-time at Apple. Fiancé also studying graphic design. Doing degree to get a foot in the door of the industry. Prefers online study.	✓			
Mallory 30	Event Mgt. F/T	Began working at a media company in the events department straight out of high school. Worked in events in hospitality and in Cairns on a newspaper which had a heavy event content. A degree will make it easier to find a job in the industry. Lives with partner and his six-year-old daughter. Online study means she can volunteer to work on events as well.	✓		✓	
Mattie 38	Tourism P/T	Got to second year of a Bachelor of Social Work at university and got sick – changed her life. Started a Certificate 4 Tourism course F2F at TAFE and didn't finish. Single mother of three children of school age. Not happy with online learning but feels it's a necessity due to time constraints. Looking for a job. *Left the course after 6 weeks. Did not participate in the second interview.*		✓	✓	✓
Monique 40	Event Mgt. P/T	Completed an Arts degree F2F majoring in psychology straight out of school. Did a lot of promotional work part-time and enjoyed the event		✓		

		industry. Completed F2F VET Certificate 3 in dental nursing at TAFE. Working as a dental nurse full time currently. Wants to learn the business side of events. Lives in Queensland town with no event courses. Online study is the only option but also enables work.				
Nicole 30	Hospitality P/T	Works at the local (country) RSL Club as a Supervisor/Manager. Club has paid for VET Certificate 2 courses in bar, gaming, reception, office admin and functions through local community adult education and TAFE. Wants a formal qualification to get into Wedding Planning. Currently consults to brides. No option but online study but it's also good when doing shift work. Four-year-old stepdaughter. A lot of family support.	✓		✓	
Symeon 27	Business P/T	First study since leaving school (8 years previously). Works full-time in the HR department of the Coffee Club. She has been a retail manager. Online study a necessity due to work and time constraints.		✓		
Taylor 30	Event Mgt. P/T	Completed VET TAFE Certificate 2 courses in Care, IT, and Nursing (Aid). Wants to do a degree because it's looked down upon if you don't have one and he enjoys the learning. Works a lot as a freelancer in large events. Single father. Online study gives him access to the children (10 and 12) and access to work.		✓	✓	✓

5.3. CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has aimed to situate the study by providing information on the context and design of the research. The following three chapters capture a multitude of aspects of the first twelve weeks of Trimester 1 voiced by a diverse medley of participants; a 'corpus'

of narrative, where no one story is favoured over another and which is cognizant of the researcher's subjective positioning and perspective. By continually looping back to the data, the aim is to shed light onto how the participants experience their transition into the online study space. As the findings chapters continue, the data that materialises could both confront and expand current practices owing to the richness of detail often only possible with smaller qualitative studies.

CHAPTER 6:
FINDINGS: THE PRE-LIMINAL STAGE – INTO THE TUNNEL

The greatest danger facing us is ourselves, and our irrational fear of the unknown. There is no such thing as the unknown. Only things temporarily hidden, temporarily not understood.

(James T. Kirk, The Corbomite Maneuver Stardate 1512.2.)
(Star Trek – The Original Series;
Season 1, Episode 10. November 10, 1966)

The participants in this study were presented with the opportunity to examine the motives and subsequent decisions that impacted their transition into the online learning space. However, there is no formula for human motivation. It cannot be qualified in absolute terms. The online space is a liminal space (Savin-Baden, 2016). Turner (1969) called those in the liminal state 'liminal personae', meaning 'liminal people', whose attributes are "… necessarily ambiguous, slipping through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (p. 95). As I suggested in Chapter 3, an interpretation involving liminality is critical to an understanding of the participants' transition into ambiguous environment of the online learning space and the variation in their responses.

6.1. OVERVIEW

Using the Threshold Concepts Framework as a lens, an analysis of the transcripts elicited the identification of three superordinate themes. These themes are presented as separate chapters:

Chapter 6 – The Pre-liminal Stage – Into the Tunnel presents a detailed insight into the variation in the participants' perception and experience of their early encounters with the online liminal space. It offers insights into the first, second and fourth sub-questions:

1. How does one group of adult learners describe their first weeks of study in an online environment?

2. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?
4. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

Chapter 7 – The Liminal Stage – Inside the Tunnel presents a comprehensive coverage of the variation in the participants' negotiation of the online liminal space – how they made sense of their later experiences. It offers insights into the second, third and fourth sub-questions:

2. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?
3. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?
4. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

Chapter 8 – The Post-liminal Stage – The End of the Tunnel? illustrates variations in the participants' journey, including the passage out of the liminal space and into a "new conceptual space" (Meyer, Land & Davies, 2008, p. 68). This chapter also suggests an experiential threshold concept relevant to the participants' transition into the online higher education space. It offers insights into the third and fourth sub-questions:

3. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?
4. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

The data in each of the three chapters are presented as carefully structured sections and sub-sections aligning with the superordinate themes, sub-themes and the various research questions to which they relate. However, while Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are designed

to present insights into the participants' stories by means of purposeful labelling, these insights do not always neatly correspond with each of the research questions, at times resulting in overlaps. For example, while covered in the first research sub-question, the affective aspects of Threshold Concepts are evident throughout all three chapters of the participants' narrative. Consequently, these three chapters do not suggest a definitive structure through which each participant traverses in an orderly or preordained fashion.

Nevertheless, the three findings chapters have been designed to present as logical and accessible an account of the findings for the reader as possible. Each of the three chapters utilises the three "superordinate and non-negotiable" (Land, 2016, p. 16) characteristics of the Threshold Concepts Framework as a lens: liminality, transformation and troublesome knowledge. Other threshold concept characteristics, including discourse, reconstitution, integration and irreversibility come into play as the data emerges (Cousin, 2010; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Hawkins & Edwards, 2015; Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014). The three findings chapters also make use of the double hermeneutic approach ingrained in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology (see Chapter 4). This approach and the findings that emerged provide a lens into *my* interpretations of the *participants'* interpretations of their 'pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal' thoughts and feelings (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Commensurate with the methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the approach taken in this thesis is to present findings and discussion separately (Smith et al., 2009, p.113). Consequently, the three narrative 'findings' chapters are followed by Chapter 9, the Discussion chapter. While there is a commentary linking the participants' accounts in Chapters 6, 7 and 8, Chapter 9 uses the themes identified in the study to answer the research questions and to discuss and relate the overall findings to existing literature.

6.1.1. Chapter 6 Overview

Chapter 6, the first findings chapter of the three, is informed by the findings from the participants' journals and the initial interview. The first round of interviews took place within the first three weeks of the start of the trimester, with the aim of collecting students' initial thoughts and perceptions related to enrolling in an online course. Interviews conducted at this time also captured pre-census data (census occurring at the end of the third week of trimester). Chapter 6 concentrates on the participants' motivations, preparations, and issues as they articulated their pre-liminal transition both before and during the initial stages of the online study environment.

Selected quotes and references from the participants, written in italics, are included in order to illuminate themes and sub-themes and ensure the participant voice is heard. Some participants also incorporated illustrations into their reflective journals. These images are also included in the 'findings' chapters. It is important to mention here that in the main, the participants did not cite the sources of their journal images. The information presented, be it in written form, or an image, is specific to a particular participant. Therefore, for purposes of privacy, pseudonyms are assigned in order to protect each participant's identity.

6.1.1.1. Research Questions

Primary Research Question:

How do adult learners (25 years +) experience the transition to online degree studies in higher education?

Sub-Questions:

1) How does one group of adult learners describe their first weeks of study in an online environment?
2) What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?

3) What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?

4) How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

6.2. THE PRE-LIMINAL STAGE – INTO THE TUNNEL

> *For many adults, the process of deciding to become a student is not a one-off event; rather it is a complex and extended process, and specific factors may have salience at different times*
>
> (Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004, p.293)

This chapter is based upon the findings derived from the initial interview and the early sections of the reflective journals completed by the participants. In analysing the data, four pre-liminal subordinate themes emerged, which are discussed in this chapter. These themes are: 'Motivation', 'Uncertainty, Insecurity and Lack of Confidence', 'Making the Jump' and 'Practical Preparations'.

Table 8: Pre-liminal Stage Superordinate Theme, Subordinate Themes and Relevant Research Questions (Author)

The Pre-liminal Stage: Waiting to enter the tunnel (Instigative) *Captures the participants' tacit understanding and how the threshold concept/experience originally comes into their view.*		
Superordinate Theme	**Subordinate Themes**	**Relevant Research Questions**
Into the Tunnel	**1. Motivation** **2. Uncertainty, Insecurity and Lack of Confidence** o Needing Support o Identity Disjunction o Loss of Control o Fear of Failure **3. Making the Jump** **4. Practical Preparations**	**Sub-Question 1:** How does one group of adult learners describe their first weeks of study in an online environment? **Sub-Question 2:** What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning? **Sub Question 4:** How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

6.2.1. Subordinate Theme #1: Motivation

This subordinate theme explores the first step – why the participants were motivated to enrol. Most participants identified better employment opportunities as the primary motive for beginning their online degree. Transitioning into the online study space was perceived by many participants as a chance for future advancement and, for some, the only way they could fit study into their lives:

> *What was important? Um* [pause] *getting enrolled, the accessibility, that I can keep working, and start looking at promotion, that I won't have to go to uni every day and sit in a classroom. Getting the courage to actually do it in the first place. Um* [pause] *time management around the family and work* (John, 27).

> *I work shifts. It's the only choice I have* (Joan, 30).

> *My involvement with the kids and their school sport and ballet and everything means I just can't get to uni in person. It has to be online or nothing* (Ayla, 34*)*.

Looking good to an employer, motivated Jenine (32): "They'll see I'm good with technology too because of this degree [pause]. It'll help my career"; John (27): "You can't get a job without tech these days."; and Luke (30): "I'm doing this online to work while I study. Employers like that"; and Brendan "... because at some point, I'm going to be in an interview, and I want to be able to set myself apart from everyone else". The affective threads of anticipation and motivation continue:

> *Having a formal qualification that I can go into an interview and say I have experience and also a formal business degree will hopefully make it easier to get a higher-level position. Online study means I can keep working* (Mallory, 30).

> *I want to start work in design and/or marketing while I'm studying online so I can do both* (study and work) *so I hope I get a good grounding in those two areas, be able to understand them more and be taught by people who are experts* (Luke, 30).

Kelly (29), a single parent with three children of school-age, currently working shifts, was very focused on the opportunity afforded by the degree to upgrade her skills

and secure full-time employment. She acknowledges that as an online student, her capacity to work, parent her children and pursue study have motivated her decision to transition into an online degree course:

> *...all my past part-time jobs the money goes up and down all the time and you don't have the security of holiday pay and stuff like that. This degree will be my ticket into full-time work. This could be the big break. I'm feeling alone, excited, scared and determined all at the same time. Going online will make it much more time...um... you know* [pause] *easier with the kids too* [laughs]. *As my Mum said, I'm broadening my horizons* [pause]. *I'll do this. I will.*

At first glance, Kelly's motives appear to be strongly employment-based, suggesting her commitment and motivation to make the future a success. Kelly also appears personally motivated by a desire to establish a different reality relating to personal growth and self-fulfilment. This sentiment is echoed by Kim (46), John (27) and Ava (28), as they stress the importance of "getting it right":

Figure 15: I don't know what goes in the last one YET! A job I hope!!! (Kim, 46)

> *I don't want to get this wrong. This choice I've made is pretty big. My life will be kind of torn for a couple of years between working which I have to do so I don't lose my experience and studying which I have to do to get to be manager* (John, 27).

> *It is different to work. I'm more nervous around it in some ways because getting it right is so important. I mean it's important to get it right at work too obviously, but this education caper is a whole new ballgame 'specially online* [pause] [laughs]. *What if I get it wrong? I need it to work to get ahead.* (Ava, 28).

The voices of others already working in their professional field also featured strongly in these accounts regarding the opportunities represented by the juxtaposition of study and work: "I realised that I need a degree" (Hafiz, 46); "... this covers a lot of relevant business subjects I have been advised to do by my boss" (Joan, 30). Len (28), David (36) and Jenine (32), who all want to be qualified for management roles, refer to study as being necessary to succeed in their careers:

> *I don't want to miss the boat. My boss is at me, and so are my partner and my family* (David 36).

> *I've paid the money and I'm determined to succeed but I'm scared too. If I don't do this right, I'm in deep you-know-what* (Jenine, 32)

Len's impetus came from several inputs, including successful work colleagues who really pushed him to study, learning from industry specialists, wanting promotion and not missing out:

> *I want to join the club and learn from the industry specialists. I'm hoping to get a management foot in the door of the industry. Everyone at work is telling me give it a go. I want to meet these professional people and get value for the huge amount of money I've paid for this thing. I want the lecturers to be good. I want the latest info on what the industry expects. New me coming up* [laughs]. *But seriously, failure is not an option. I want to miss nothing. It's too important to my career* (Len 28).

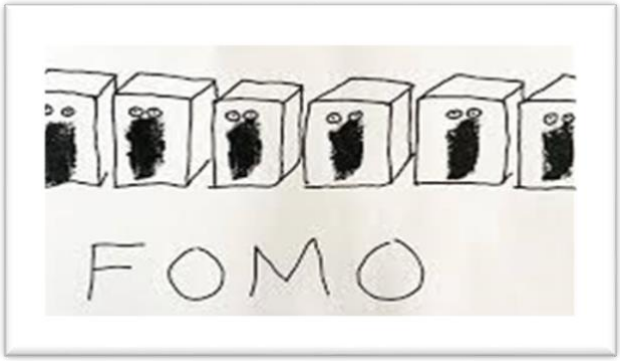


Figure 16: FOMO = Fear of Missing Out (Len, 28)

6.2.2. Subordinate theme #2: Uncertainty, Insecurity and Lack of Confidence

This subordinate theme is broken into the following sub-sections reflecting the insecurity of the participants as they face the threshold of their online study journey: *Needing Support; Lack of Control;* and *Making the Right Choice – Fear of Failure.*

6.2.2.1. Needing Support

Many of the participants displayed little understanding or knowledge regarding quite basic practices, despite an apparent assumption of knowledge on the part of the institution. Wrestling with troublesome knowledge regarding institutional procedures, including enrolment processes, financial obligations and online subject requirements generated issues for participants, triggering frustration and considerable emotional impact. As Mallory (30) commented:

> *...I think it comes down to just everyone assuming that you know what to do but I just couldn't say 'Well I don't know what to do', cos I didn't know what to do.... but I didn't know who to ask either*.

While this thesis does not suggest that the institution did not relay enrolment information, the perception of such assistance is certainly not clear from the participants' comments. Neither did the 'first year experience' activities provided for the new students, nor the orientation to the learning management system, hold much attraction for participants. Subsequently, these activities specifically targeting new students did very little to orient the participants towards feeling a part of the university. Both Ava and Jenine revealed how in their opinion, some things concerning enrolment just occurred through happenchance:

> *...I bumped into another student at day care who said 'You gotta go online at 9am to enrol'...That was just something else I didn't twig to. I should've known. But I was just* <u>so</u> *overwhelmed I missed finding out I suppose* (Ava, 28).

> *I only found that out when I rang the admin office for something else...* (Jenine, 32)

There was general agreement from the participants on their need for support both within the university and from significant others, as suggested by Mattie (38) and Ayla (34):

> *I don't know, because like – because it's online, I'm feeling pretty intimidated maybe or apprehensive, yeah* [pause] *intimated. I don't know, scared too I guess all rolled into one* [pause]. *I don't expect it to be easy that's for sure, but I thought there would be a lot more help from the uni maybe in that sense* [pause] *I'm not really sure just what I mean. Sorry* [pause]. *Bit overwhelmed* (Mattie, 38).

> *I wasn't sure as... I was...I did freak out a bit because I hadn't done assignments or anything in quite a few years. I didn't know kind of what standard that uni kind of expected and that sort of thing. So yeah, I was a bit nervous* (Mallory, 30).

> *I suppose I expect to be engaged by my lecturers. Because if I am on my own, I don't think I'll be able to cope* (Ayla, 34).

The influence of responsibility to family expectations is also evident in these accounts and images, as are the resulting challenges that the participants face. Hafiz in particular embodied this influence:

> *I haven't studied at this level or online ever before. It's a very big change for me, for the whole family really. We've all had to step up to my new life routine. None of my immediate family* [have studied an online degree] *anyway and I can't imagine the aunties and uncles or their kids doing it. Or maybe a few cousins I'm not sure. But I'm the only one from my immediate family* [laughs] (Hafiz, 40).

A powerful affective dimension to the support aspect brought with it many strong emotions. Feelings of isolation, both internal, and from others within their home and work communities, was common. The distance between individual participants and work community or familial connections was expected by the participants to widen. For example, the independence represented by their transition into online study represented two disparate and, to a large degree, separate worlds. This called for a redefinition of identity of which they were not yet capable.

> *...my friend... she doesn't study* [pause]. *For her it was really just like a foreign language where you know some of the words you use online but a lot of them are just like really different* [laughs]. *And it makes you feel really...clever I guess because you understand it and they don't. But then it can be a bit isolating when you need to talk to someone about it* (Mallory, 30).

> *I know I get stressed and a bit moody and stuff. So then when I'm all relaxed again and that sort of thing I feel bad for taking it out on him (Partner). I owe him so much. I have to really try to include him in all the new stuff but I'm not sure what to say to him or how to explain it to him even when I'm ok* (David, 36).

> *It's pretty weird. As a single mum I owe them* [pause] *my family... Mum and Dad um, so much. I have to make this work. But for myself too. They don't really understand what I'm going through. Neither do I* [laughs]. *Online* [pause] *study, making it work. I've* [pause] *I'm not too sure where I'm going to fit now. I shouldn't say this* [pause] *but what'll we* [the family] *talk about?* (Ava, 28).

Antonia (38), who had previously completed TAFE courses and lives in rural NSW, made it clear that getting ready for the transition into the study was bound to be impactful in a variety of ways:

> *It was quite stressful organising everything, making sure I have enough money and the application process is massive and getting all the stuff together and wondering if I have got it right. [pause] I'm the first girl in the family to get past high school. I'm really doing this for all of us. The whole family are there with me in my head. Got to get it right I suppose…* [pause – getting emotional]. *Can we take a quick break?*

> *It is only when you get to that point where...oh my God I have got so much to do to make this happen...you don't fathom the pressure until you get started. So six months ago I would have said oh I will be ok... but it's really... hard* [laughs].

Figure 17: Untitled (Antonia, 38)

Antonia's image also supports that idea of being 'overwhelmed'. It is clear from the comments and images that such pressure and lack of understanding amplifies the stress faced by the participants, imposes an added complexity to the process of 'becoming' a student and undermines confidence and self-esteem to a greater degree.

6.2.2.2. Lack of Control

Lianie (29) discusses her doubts about her ability to succeed, her stress-induced loss of sleep and her subsequent use of counselling support. In Lianie's case, the lack of control felt in relation to beginning an online degree at university is conveyed by reference to the 'fog' in which she feels herself to be "lost". Several participants used the term and the image of "fog" to describe and illustrate their feelings:

> *Coffee, lack of sleep, ignorance, stress and fear. Great combination! The counsellor just loves me. I'm keeping her kids in private schools* [laughs]. *Don't get me wrong. I'm excited too. [pause] But bloody foggy. Doesn't help to be lost in your own fog when you're trying to convince yourself you're competent enough to go study a degree* [pause] *and bloody online too. Bottom line this has to work. I'm chucking my job in for this* (Lianie, 29).

Figure 18: The fog inside my head (Liane, 29)

> *It is a good thing, yeah. But at the same time, you know, as I said, it is hard to manage my emotions just waiting to start. Right now, it's all a fog. A bloody great fog. After I get used to it, you know, it will become all right, yeah* [laughs]. *No worries*. [laughs] (John, 27).

Figure 19: Me at the moment (John, 27)

I had prepared although nothing can fully prepare you. To be honest it [pause] *education is a completely different thing to what you* [pause] *like at work* [pause] *or probably anything like what you expect it to be. I'm so foggy, nervous, scared really, but just so excited too. It's tiring* [laughs]. *And I'm trying not to be naïve, as I obviously don't know what it's going to be like, but I did try to prepare myself* (Kim, 46).

Figure 20: HELP!! FOG!! (Taylor, 30)

> *I know a few of my friends have told me that they don't know how I expect to do it. They find it quite difficult to consider going from being basically forced to do the face-to-face thing to a situation where they are the ones that have to be in control. But I like to be in control. Once I get over this foggy, dopey feeling I'll be ok* (Kelly, 29).

As with Antonia (38) and Mattie (38), other participants link this lack of control back to the university procedures during enrolment and early online contact. The data reveal ignorance "I feel useless and stupid with this online thing" (Kelly, 29); confusion and self-doubt: "...it was so confusing I really doubted pretty much all the time whether ... maybe I'm not as smart as I thought" (Kate, 39); and being overwhelmed "... I found it terribly overwhelming, just awfully overwhelming. I really wasn't equipped to deal with all of that online stuff ..." (Joan, 30). Symeon (27) said "I was very scared to apply. I've never attempted anything at this level before. But I had to bite the bullet as they say and apply or not do it, so I did it [laughs]." Chris (28) and Jess (28), each spoke for many of the participants in their identification of the level of expected technological expertise as being extremely intimidating. This intimidation covered issues around enrolment and online navigation.

Figure 21: Untitled (Chris, 28)

> *I am frustrated with myself because I am trying my best to understand all this online stuff I have to do to get started and it just doesn't go in... which... really frustrates me...it is* <u>*really*</u> *stressing me out. And I am not used to* [pause] *I don't want to sound arrogant or anything* [pause]*but I'm a chef. I'm not used to not understanding things or not being in control. So, when I got the point where I wasn't understanding the online system I just panicked and shut it off. All the bloody kid's stuff they wanted us to join in on was just a waste of time and distracting* (Chris, 28).

This comment by Chris clarifies the struggle that many participants encountered in coming to terms with the feeling of not understanding, having no control, and shutting down upon being faced with this unfamiliar situation. The panic to which he referred was also palpable in both his interview and his journal. His preconceptions of online higher education study were causing him to doubt his own ability. This doubt was clearly unusual for him. As previously mentioned (p. 188), the participants seemed confused by prepared assimilation and orientation offerings from the university rather than understanding the reasons for the institutional communication.

> *I was so nervous I ended up acting like a real dumbo. Lost all my confidence and I actually shook when I logged on to fill in the application. THEN* [participant's emphasis] *I had to find stuff online... you know, classes and who was what and where. I even feel sick now just thinking about it* [pause*]…can you believe it?* (Ayla, 34).

> *All that other kid's stuff [pause] I mean online… REALLY,* [participant's emphasis] *give me a break. Who's got time to do all that orientation stuff? I'm not a kid anymore and I haven't got time to be doing extra bits and pieces about the computer* (Jess, 28).

6.2.2.3. Making the Right Choice – Fear of Failure

This section explores how different students conceptualised this concern: Luke (30), Brendan (46), Monique (40), David (36) and Jess (28) discussed and/or drew their fear, confusion and lack of confidence around having made the right choice for the future by enrolling in an online degree:

> *Mmmm* [pause] *I sound so confused and that's interesting because I hadn't consciously realised that before this interview. Ok let's think. I'm 30. I want to get married. I want to be qualified to get the job I want. Did I make the*

right choices to get where I'm going? It's different starting all this [pause] *God….at my age* (Luke, 30).

I just don't feel part of it all yet. Most of this fitting in stuff seems to be done for the kids. But that doesn't mean I don't want to study and if it proves to be full of useful info I'll cope. But [pause] *if it turns out to be stuff I know or I don't need, and just basic technology I'm not likely to stay. It's expensive. It's a bloody pain in the neck. Will it be what I want, or more important, what I need?* (Brendan, 46).

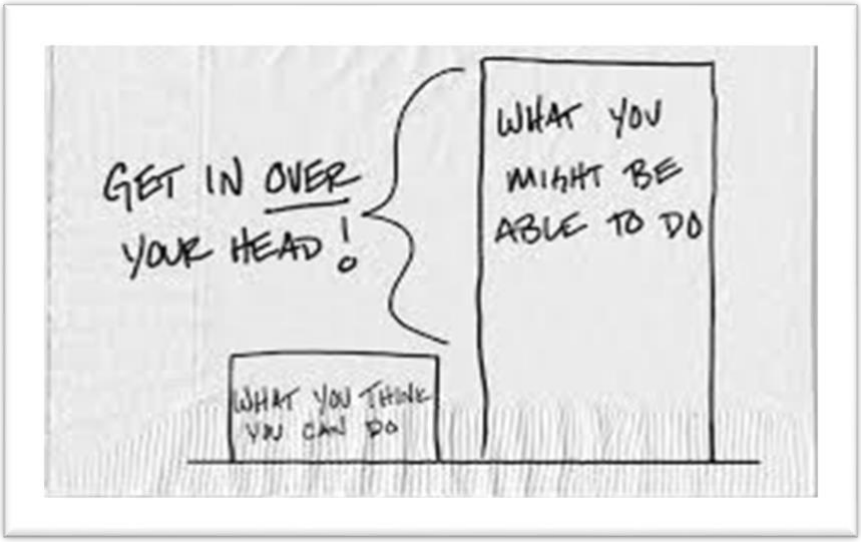


Figure 22: Untitled (Monique, 40)

Have I chosen the right place to study? Jesus [pause] *the stress. I actually feel pretty unsettled. It's not that I can't do it, it's that I want to get on with it. Get stuck in. Find my best way to study and get the info I need. Just bloody start I guess. Just stop the fluff and get on with it* (David, 36).

Figure 23: Follow the yellow brick road (David, 36)

Taylor (30) displayed this fear of failure in his emotional comment, made in the first interview and referring to his choice of study, enrolment and wondering if he had made the right choices. The profound feeling of this pressure was evident in his anxious final sentence:

> *Even though you're making these decisions… are they the right ones…? It's so much to take in, it can certainly mess with your head and... drag you down when you start thinking too much about it. There's so much pressure...on you because it's your future...it's just quite overwhelming really and you just want to ...well you need to get it right...well...or...it's...you know...it's honestly all hanging on it...*

Figure 24: Untitled (Jess 28)

However, Nicole (30) expressed feelings of excitement and power: "I feel excited, scared, but very excited too. It was a huge step for me to start this course. I feel powerful just for applying. Bring it on!! [laughs]". Symeon (27) concurs, adding intelligence and pride to the emotional mix:

> *I feel scared, excited, determined to succeed, apprehensive and a bit frightened that I've made the wrong choices. Time will tell* [pause] *but I also feel proud of myself – sort of more mature and maybe more intelligent if that makes sense* [laughs].

Monique (40) shares her image of opening the door to the future. She includes two elements: the 'head part' is opening the door and the 'foot part' is closing and stopping the door. She explains it as:

...half of me wants to go through and half of me wants to stop myself going through. The lock bits are all on the bottom half of the door. My door is opening though, so I suppose my 'head part' eventually wins the battle. My God, how complicated is that!!!

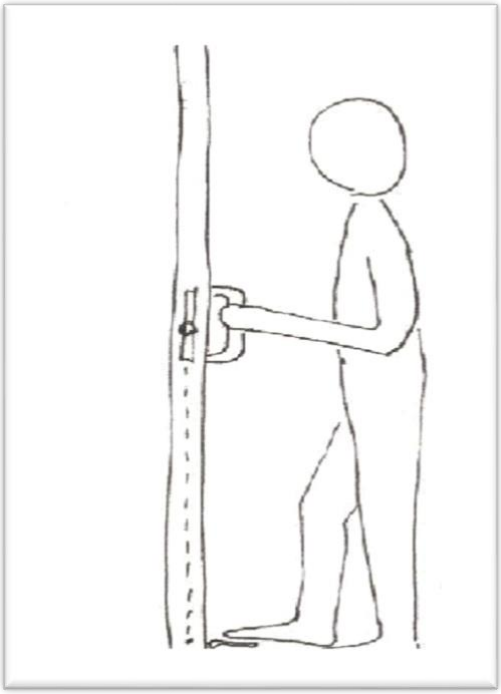


Figure 25: Door to the Future (Monique, 40)

Kate (30) draws her visions of overpowering the 'Fear Monster':

Figure 26: Vision v Fear Monster (Kate, 30)

6.2.3. Subordinate Theme #3: Making the Jump

Several participants voiced feelings using the 'jump' as an analogy for their feelings about their new situation "...it's an absolutely ridiculous jump" (Symeon, 27), "It is so...hard...that jump is huge, and you don't realise" (Mallory, 30). However, while all of the participants were impacted by the transition to online study to some degree or another, no-one was so markedly affected by the transition as Mattie (38). In the first interview, she reflected on her transition. As she described her journey, a sense of urgency and disquiet came to the fore:

> *It's crazy, absolutely beyond belief crazy... they're...it's...it's this absurd Jump ...it's an absolutely bizarre jump.*

The emphatic repetition of terms such as 'crazy', 'absurd' and 'bizarre' convey a feeling of shock, as if her experience were in some way surreal. Mattie was exhausted both physically and mentally. Subsequently, she sought medical assistance, ascribing her illness to her troublesome transitional experience and accompanying personal issues. She spoke about the moment she understood that she could not continue:

> *I went...I had to go to the doctor, because... I pretty much woke up one day and just couldn't stop crying. I couldn't...it was like...I can't do it anymore. I actually, physically can't do this anymore; I have to stop.*

The emphasis on certain words, particularly 'can't', expresses Mattie's anguish throughout her recollection. For Mattie, the transition to an online degree – the 'jump' – was just too much to confront and manage. Due to her perception of her transition into the online learning space as being overly troublesome, Mattie left the university at around six weeks into the first trimester. She did not participate in the second round of interviews, nor did she use a journal; she did, however, agree to her first interview and her journal being used in this study. She was the only participant to leave during the first trimester.

The experience of the transition to online study at degree level had such an intense impact on Brendan that he made it clear that he would not want to experience that shock again unprepared. Even his drawing seems to represent caution, despite the title:

> *So... I know it's going to be a huge jump because when you go from not having studied for so long, and when it's online... it is huge.... it all changes. I know it won't be like TAFE and I don't want to go through this upheaval again. It's been a real shock to the system* (Brendan 46).

Figure 27: (Brendan, 46)

There was also a sense of being overwhelmed from Chris (28), a chef for whom preparation and job stress are not uncommon. Expecting little change in his lifestyle, it was the realisation of just how momentous his readjustment to the 'jump' would be; that really daunted him:

> *I'm a chef. I am used to hard work and preparation. I thought, oh it can't be that much harder, doing both. I can carry on my life the same...but it's really not...*[laughs]*...there's a huge jump adding study to the mix. Just getting ready and enrolling like.... it really did take me by surprise.... Yeah full-on. Mind blowing.*

Other participants, such as Kate (39) and Kim (46), appeared to be more self-reliant. Nevertheless, so compelling was the jump that each described it and imaged it as a 'leap of faith'. However, as the first few weeks of the trimester progressed, they seemed able to adapt more easily to their transition in spite of finding it a great challenge:

It was quite overwhelming actually. Making a decision about a very different future you might say… A sort of leap of faith [laughs]. *Being on the edge of something huge. It's all going to be different. Good but different. That's ok though* (Kim, 46).

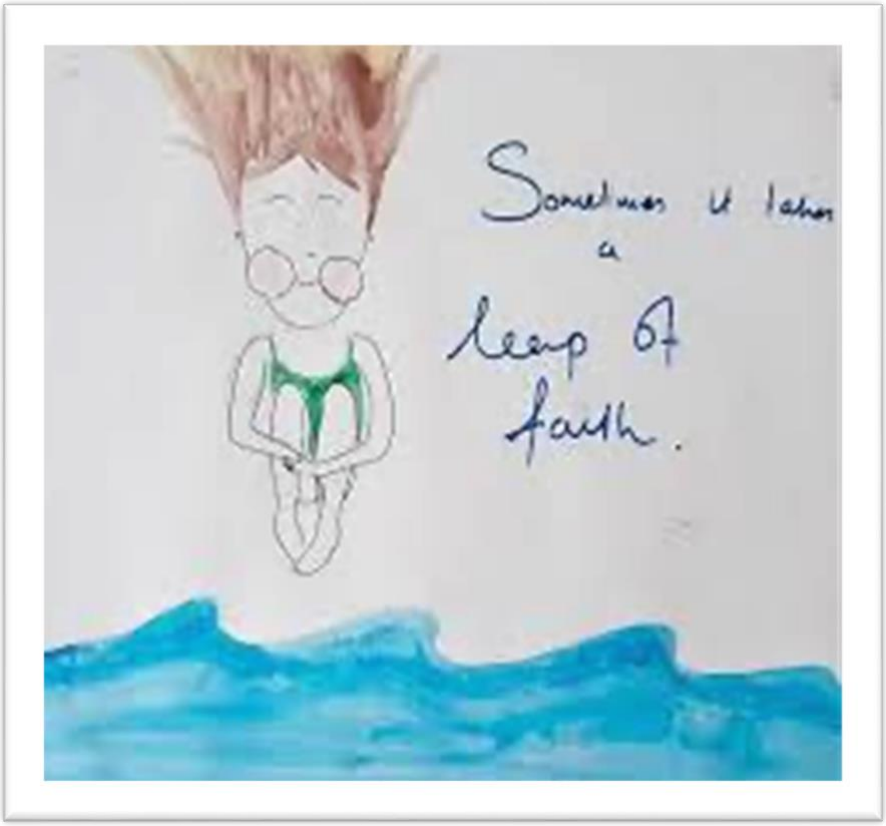


Figure 28: Leap of Faith (Kim, 46)

I was really anxious making the decision to actually do this. It's a real feeling of jumping off into nothing, but with good stuff on the other side. it's down to you...to go away and find out about the stuff you need to know. It's about you working out the bits that you don't get, to ask and find out what to do. I'm like Indiana Jones style [laughs]. *You know… his test to get the holy grail and this was mine. My leap of faith. He's better looking though* [laughs]... (Kate, 39).

While revealing just how tough she found the transition, Kate's laughter also indicated a resolute determination to find the "good stuff on the other side".

Figure 29: ☺ (Kate, 39) – Cited as "Pinched from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade ☺"

The following words and images from Brendan (46), Adrian (32), Joan (30), and Ayla (34) support this idea:

> *…kind of like a test of my own on myself because I'm ok with stuff like social media…like Instagram and stuff but not education… I just knew that if I did it…signed up and just made the plunge it'd help all of us in the long run.* (Brendan, 46).

> *Sort of jump in with both feet. It's scary… shit yeah, but it's exciting. … I suppose I was subconsciously… was getting ready to change… to just jump straight in. No that's not right.* [pause] *It's jumping but sort of slowly like falling in slow motion once you jump. Exciting I suppose and scary too… Really exciting though. Time to make a change* (Adrian, 32).

Figure 30: Slow Motion (Adrian, 32)

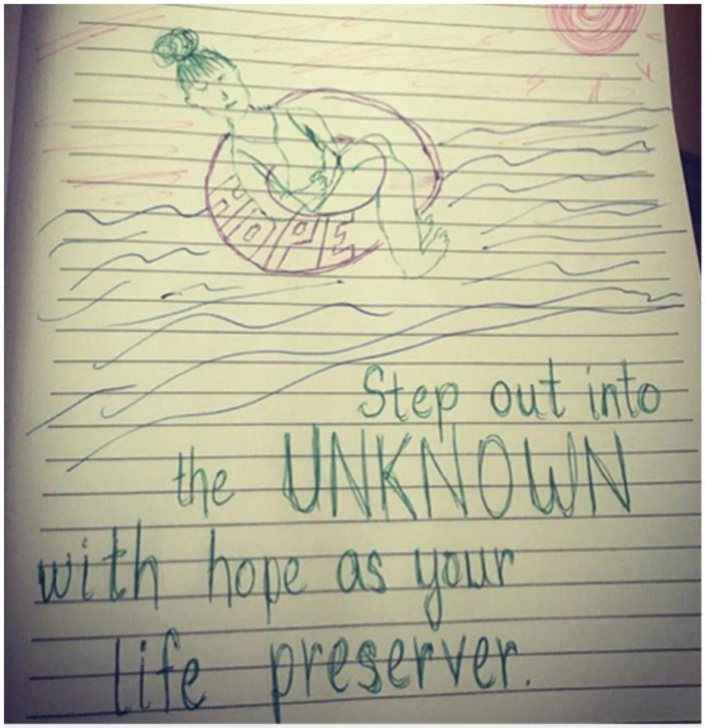


Figure 31: Hope (Joan, 30)

I did this online study for me and my family and our future. I had no time to worry too much…just jump in and get on with it. It was a big decision… make a difference. This move is full of opportunity… and scary as hell. Kind of sink or swim [feigns crying] (Joan, 30).

So, I remember telling myself that this was going to be maybe something so different that I just couldn't understand till I was actually there, so stop trying to understand…just do it, just jump right in. Bloody scary though... (Ayla, 34).

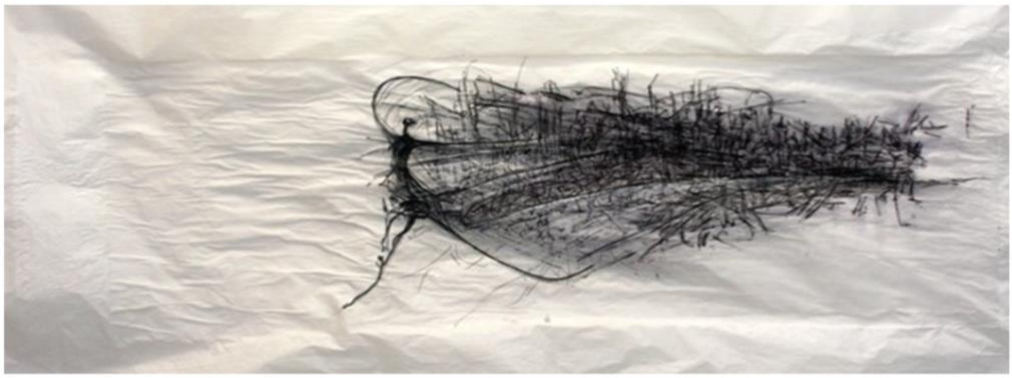


Figure 32: Untitled (Ayla, 34)

6.2.4. Subordinate Theme #4: Practical Preparations

As indicated earlier (pp. 185–187), for adult students, the decision to enrol in higher education online was one determined by a complex range of reasons. Theirs had been a decision that had already incorporated complicated negotiations and often represented the realisation of an enduring requirement, ambition or aspiration. They were uncertain what to expect. They did realise, however, that they would experience a new phase in their lives and were motivated by a desire to experience this change. They also anticipated being changed as a result.

Before beginning the online study experience, participants undertook thorough practical preparations. These ranged from the practical aspects of creating dedicated study spaces, ensuring sufficient access and available technology, time management around work and family responsibilities, and ensuring sufficient financial back-up. Interestingly, these comments came very late in the first interview. It appeared to be a way to have achieved something tangible after discussing their issues. Preparations also included mentally preparing themselves and their families and workplaces for the experience. These preparations were evidence of both anticipation and a demonstration of commitment and motivation to undertake online study. For them, this practical preparation offered an island of control in a chaotic journey. Interestingly, these comments hold overtones of the "one step forward, two steps back" narrative so common at this pre-liminal stage:

> *I would say probably about* [pause] *being realistic, probably about three to six months to prepare myself for the study experience. It wasn't something that I fell into really quickly because I had to balance out my life with my children. Get us all mentally ready. I procrastinated for sure. Scared to actually get started I suppose* (David, 36).

> *I organised baby-sitting and Mum helping with meals. I actually [laughs] did it all like I did before I had each of my kids. I nested* [laughs]. *I got my little work area all fixed up. I even painted the room* [laughs]. *I got some new furniture. Now I'm so scared of using it I don't want to go in there* [laughs]. *It's the symbol of this huge step I'm taking… and it's SCARY!!* [Participant emphasis] (Kate, 39).

Figure 33: Selfie feeling unprepared (AND OMG with no hair!) ☺ (Kate, 39)

Kim and Ava personify the feelings of nervous anticipation prevalent among the participants. These comments also show the depth of the commitment being undertaken:

> *Making sure the family is ok. Just not having studied for a long period of time, trying to get myself and everyone into a regular routine. Facing all new stuff and understanding what it is I have to do as a student. Learning to read all over again [laughs]. This is a real opportunity for me. Can't wait. [laughs]* (Kim, 46).

> *Nearly everything is brand spanking new. New life, new computer* [laughs]. *New desk and chair. New desk lamp. New laptop. It helped to look as if I knew what I was doing. Then maybe … maybe I could convince myself* [laughs]. *And if you spend money you* [pause] *I* [pause] *had to make sure it won't be wasted. At least I look like a real techno-head student.* [laughs] (Ava 28).

Figure 34: Me as an online student – prepared – sort of!!! (Ava, 28)

Nicole's nerves are kept at bay with detail and concentration on aspects she can control. However, despite her detailed verbal explanation, her image actually does not include any such detail in her own new study space, which is indicated by an arrow at the bottom of a detailed map and designated still as her 'consulting room' rather than her study area:

Figure 35: My Dream Layout. Follow the arrow ☺. (Nicole, 30)

> *I have set up a corner of our shed now as my own little office, fitted with my desk, my filing cabinet. I have a bookcase in there. I find that really helpful. I see my brides in there already, and I've added a new computer. It's not always quiet and you can probably imagine with a four-year-old and a regular visiting teenager, it will be quite hard trying to just study sometimes. But it's a comfortable space. Good light and ventilation all help to build the atmosphere for studying and having a clear mind. It has kept me focussed when I'm setting it up and helps me forget my nerves* (Nicole, 30).

6.3. CHAPTER SUMMARY

The following word cloud indicates the participants' commonly used words and the frequency with which those words occupied the participants' response in the pre-liminal stage of their journey:

Figure 36: Word cloud supporting Chapter 6 data (Author)

Chapter 6: <u>The Pre-Liminal Stage – Into the Tunnel</u>, focused on the variation in the participants' early perceptions and experiences of their encounters with the online space. This was the participants' pre-liminal stage which marked their breaking with the old before coming to terms with the new (Turner, 1969). This disjunctive pre-liminal stage in the transition into online study presented difficulties that could not be easily integrated within the participants' mental schema. Encounters with enrolment and preparation for the

online transition resulted in the participants experiencing detachment to varying degrees. The two frequently used analogies in Chapter 6 were ‘jumping into the unknown’ and being in a ‘fog’.

Chapter 6 offers insights into the first, the second and the fourth sub-questions:

1. How does one group of adult learners describe their first weeks of study in an online environment?
2. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?
4. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

The objective of this study was to journey alongside the adult participants as they transitioned prior to, into, and through the online space of a foundational trimester of higher education. This chapter has presented the findings of the first stage of that transition, which is considered as the pre-liminal stage. As this chapter has established, becoming reconciled to the struggle of their initial experiences of risk, sacrifice and the resulting self-doubt had considerable impact on the participants and resulted in intense emotions and pressure. By foregrounding the participant voice, this chapter has presented individual versions of their pre-liminal transition experiences: “…in my long life experience, I’ve never been through something like this” (Hafiz, 40); “... going online is completely out of my comfort zone” (Nicole, 30); “Still trying to function as a family member will be an uphill slog. <u>But</u> [sings] <u>I will survive!</u>” (Taylor, 30). The next chapter maintains the exploration of the myriad experiences encountered by the participants as they face the liminal stage of their transition into the online study space. As previously mentioned, the discussion in Chapter 9 will present the overall findings and relate identified themes to existing literature and the research, including implications of the study.

CHAPTER 7:
FINDINGS: THE LIMINAL STAGE – INSIDE THE TUNNEL

> *"I cannot think why this wall is here nor what it is made of," the Scarecrow said. "Rest your brains and do not worry about the wall," replied the Woodman, "when we have climbed over it, we shall know what is on the other side".*
>
> (Vidor, Fleming, Cukor, Thorpe, Taurog & LeRoy, 1939. *The Wizard of Oz*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.)

While the previous chapter focused on the participants' experiences in the initial pre-liminal stage of their first trimester, Chapter 7 delves into the findings from the participant data, which indicate a second stage to their transition. This chapter explores the nuances of the participants' mid-trimester experiences within the higher education online space. This was a transformative and challenging in-between time and place where identity and the order of things were suspended. Some participants transitioned from one state of being to another while others recursed between states (Turner, 1969). It reveals a sense of the participants' shifting perceptions of themselves as students and learners, and of their learning environment.

The twelve-week trimester delivery boundary, the number of participants being interviewed, and their availability to be interviewed, all meant that the first interviews were extended over and into the end of the third week of the trimester. For some participants, this timeframe meant their liminal stage was already beginning. Consequently, this chapter is based upon findings derived from the later initial interviews, the early second interviews and the participants' ongoing reflective journals. It offers insight into the second, third and fourth sub-questions:

2. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?

3. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?
4. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

Looking through the lens of the Threshold Concept Framework, the Tunnel continues to be an appropriate analogy. This is evidenced by the four subordinate themes that emerged at this liminal stage. Three of these sub-themes, 'Identity Disruption', 'Perceived Barriers' and 'Adapting' were indicative of the strong affective dimension influencing the participants' multi-layered journey. The main sub-theme 'Making Sense of a Different Reality', although not the Superordinate Theme, was definitely an interwoven thread highlighting the variation between their expectations and dawning realisation. As shown in Table 9, this sense-making is evident throughout all contexts of the liminal transformative journey, and links each of the other sub-themes.

Table 9: Liminal Stage Superordinate Theme, Subordinate Themes and Relevant Research Questions (Author)

The Liminal Journey Stage: Within the tunnel (Re-constitutive) *Captures how the participants make sense of their experience and deal with the integration of different perspectives*		
Superordinate Themes	**Subordinate Themes**	**Relevant Research Questions**
Inside the Tunnel	**Making Sense of a Different Reality & Identity Disruption** ↓ **Perceived Barriers:** • Being controlled • Language: • Being Stuck **Adapting:** • Spaghetti and a Jigsaw • More Stairs	**Sub-Question 2:** What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning? **Sub-Question 3:** What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies? **Sub Question 4:** How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

Rather than the sense of separation, anxiety and expectation evident in the pre-liminal stage recognised in Chapter 6, there is a sense both of progression and regression in Chapter 7. Here we see the variation in movement – even the chaos – of the participants' vacillating transition into, and through, this liminal stage of online learning. Just to set the scene and introduce the liminal stage, this comment by Chris the Chef is very telling. His pre-liminal image from Chapter 6 is also set next to his liminal image from this chapter to reinforce his observation:

> *I like a good solid physical thing to work on. Give me a knife and a chopping block any day, but I'm sticking it out for now 'cause I think that's what's best for me. BUT I think I'm making more mess the further I get into it all ...but it's good mess maybe. Hey, you know ... it's just like cooking, some mess is inevitable* [laughs] (Chris, 28).

Figure 37: Chapter 6 – Untitled (Chris, 28)

Figure 38: Chapter 7 –Untitled (Chris, 28)

7.1. Overarching Sub-Theme:

Making Sense of a Different Reality

> *...not any place they were in before and not yet any place they would be in".*
>
> (Turner, 1988, p. 25)
>
> *...neither here nor there; ... betwixt and between.*
>
> (Turner, 1995, p. 95)

It also became obvious that the general pre-liminal 'foggy feelings' described in Chapter 6 were becoming focussed on more specific issues as the trimester progressed. There was more a sense of 'hunkering down' to deal with specific issues that were taking shape. Metaphorically speaking, the fog wasn't lifted but points of light could be seen through it. This was evident from the clusters of reactions that emerged from the interviews and the journals. The following headings and sub-headings demonstrate these clusters, and their alignment with the Threshold Concepts, transformation, troublesome knowledge and liminality, which 'swam into view' as they shared their stories and images.

7.1.1. Subordinate Theme #1: Identity Disruption

> *Liminality results in "a transformation of personal identity, a reconstruction of subjectivity" including an affective component, "a shift in values, feelings or attitude*".
>
> (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 7)

The following section shows several patterns in the shifting ebb and flow of participants' identity positions, between the identity disjuncture of the pre-liminal stage and the identity disruption of this liminal stage. It also looks at the alignment between the concept of liminality (Turner, 1969) and the participants' position 'on a threshold' between one identity and another as they developed new and transformative understandings.

> *I assumed that doing this online course would be challenging and that I would enjoy the challenge. However, I had also assumed that I wouldn't have to struggle too much. But my struggles are not with the content, but with the challenges to me as a learner, a professional and a single parent* (Ava, 28).

The journal entries, along with the images chosen, or drawn, by the participants during these mid-trimester weeks, indicated a confused sense of how to 'be' in or how to

‘operate’ in the online space. Several participants who had shown earlier enthusiasm and who had been keen to get started now showed far less confidence in their choices and their understanding about themselves and how they fitted into the identity of an online student.

> *Now, I’m... I know more about what’s expected of me I’m even more worried. I should be able to do this. I’m ... I’m actually surprised by my... my, um, inertia. I’m just still not sure if I can live up to my commitment. I think it’s getting better but am I up to this? Is this who I really am?* (Ayla, 34).

> *I’m experienced enough as a learner to know what I have to do to get through the course, but I’ll admit it, there are things I’m avoiding* (Monique, 40).

> *Sometimes it’s hard to keep up* [pause] *being online makes that harder in one way and not so hard in another. I’m surviving. I think, because I have started to work out who I am, what I want and the ‘me’ that is doing this.* [Laughs] *Fake it till you make it I guess. Not so much of an imposter maybe? Yeah, maybe.* [pause] *maybe not.* (Adrian, 32).

Several others also showed evidence of continued disruption and confusion. Some journal entries, such as Jenine’s faceless self-portrait, revealed snapshots catching a ‘moment of being’ at various moments in their journey. In her comment, Jenine found herself re-examining her position.

Figure 39: Searching for my identity (Jenine, 32)

> *Sometimes I experience my own uncertainty like a disconnect between me and me, a sense of confusion as to who I am as a person* ~~*who is*~~ [participant's edit] *and as an online student. This is emotionally draining and isolating. This drawing is inspired by my own lack of confidence in my abilities (which surprises me) and an absence of knowing who I am right now. I'm in the middle of something happening to me and around me. I feel my 'sense of myself' will return, but I don't know when. I hope I know it when it happens* (Jenine, 32).

> *It knocks you a bit when you are not being the real you, or... don't feel like the real you. Like an imposter I suppose* (Lianie, 29).

> *This online caper is not my natural way of working. I guess I started out really anxious. But I'm a very practical person and I am getting less anxious. When I realised I was shooting myself in the foot by being so worried and by procrastinating I tried hard to stop. I just have to find myself and get on with it* (Taylor, 30).

> *I thought I'd be ok. Hard to explain really. I'll have to think about that. Maybe I should know more than I do, or maybe do more? In the start of the course, I just tried to cope as best I could. Now I have to find out who and what... I can do. Where I actually fit in and how* (David, 46).

Despite the participants' sense of control being clearly out of focus most of the time, not having a physical classroom presence was regarded as occasionally opportune. The idea of a shift in identity or role perception was still evident; however, issues and concerns started to be seen and heard by some participants in new and different ways. Jess (28) found that being able to decide where she should or could 'be' was an opportunity to explore. Deciding not to participate in the online discussion forum gave her a level of control which actually increased her confidence as an online learner:

> *I* [pause]*wonder if it matters that I haven't joined my group in the discussion page. I sort of feel it does matter but I'm enjoying not being there because I'm having a good time playing with other stuff online. I suppose I'm still clueless and insecure about what I'm doing but I'm sort of more confident too. There is more fascinating stuff to follow up than I have time to do. Sort of an adventure.*

Figure 40: This says it all! (Jess, 28)

While prior understandings and self-awareness were discarded or lost by some (Land, 2016; Rattray, 2016), others used their own inherent skills to begin to come to terms with who they were and where they were going.

> *I feel sort out of control when I can't access the site for any reason because of work and other commitments. But I'm finding that I can get some control back by prioritising what I have to do, like completing assignments. I suppose it's normal to feel out of control, but I understand better now how to get a handle on it all* (Joan, 30).

Luke (30) identified the need to adapt his ways of adjusting to online learning quite early on, using the image of a staircase. His approach was a linear and logical progression through the trimester, each step building on the next in a sequence.

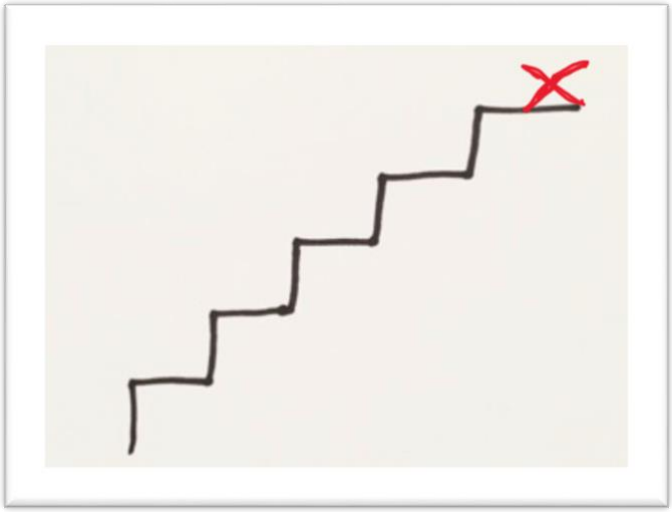


Figure 41: Untitled. Luke (30)

Assignments Plan: make a plan two or three weeks before the assignment's due of everything that needs to be done and the hours I'll need, work out how long each section is going to take and what I need to do from my weekly work, and then just really chop away at it in small sections. At least that's the plan. It's a kind of staircase. One step up might take a while and I can still fall backwards but it should get me where I want to go (Luke, 30).

While other participants took longer to fully appreciate the 'step' up, and some students found it harder to adapt, each of them searched for their own way of coping. Kim and Kelly dealt with the situation by trying to stay organised and positive.

I guess I was so scared at the start that I just wanted to run away. Then I started thinking that to chuck the study completely would not be a good thing for my career. I've also started to get used to online. I'm still not a huge fan but I'm starting to find my feet and it does serve a purpose. Maybe I can have the best of both worlds? I've got the app on my mobile now where I get notifications of everything happening. This is good. This is actually very good. So I always know if there's an announcement or a message. I've never experienced that type of school communication before (Kim, 46).

I realised today that I also need to think about all this differently. Don't get me wrong, I have had moments where I just think this is too hard, I can't juggle this with three kids and a job, I don't think that I'm going to get anywhere. But then I go, you know what? You've done this, you've got here, and you don't want to throw that away. This is your opportunity. So, I just – the mentality, like I just turn myself around and say no, you've done this, you're here, you can't turn back now. I mean I also saved up and paid for this myself and that's important too. It's my thing you might say. It's for me and that'll help my kids too. They'll see it can be done (Kelly, 29).

Figure 42: Broken but OK! Kelly (29)

Kelly's image was particularly sensitive to the complexity and disjunction of the liminal experience. Being a learner in the online space constantly challenged her to question her student identity and what it meant to 'be' a learner in these kinds of spaces: broken and ok at the same time.

7.1.2 A Perceived Barrier: Being Controlled

A subtext of feeling controlled is evident in many interview responses. For several participants, this issue had only got worse as the trimester continued.

> *I spend so much time in my office getting these subjects done. It is very time consuming getting adjusted to what is expected of me. Understanding the work is not always easy and getting responses to my questions takes too long I feel. I end up asking other students what some things mean, and they aren't too sure either* (Len, 28).

> *I have to steal some time at work to study and do online discussions etc. I don't think they're very happy with me at work. Or at home for that matter. This is a hell of a lot more demanding and complicated than I thought. It's a bloody steep climb up some bloody steep stairs. Trouble is, you fall down a few before you make it anywhere up* (Nicole, 30).

Figure 43: Feeling out of it. Ava (28)

The analogy of steps appeared in several participants' accounts. In terms of feeling controlled, Lianie (29) explained her rationalisation of the expectations of learning in the higher education online space by drawing a staircase. Launched into liminal spaces, she felt that she was *being* positioned, rather than able to position herself in relation to the online experience. She explained that, for her, there was no logical progression or flow to what and how she was expected to learn as such, and that ... "sometimes these links suddenly appear and sometimes they lead off nowhere". She likened this staircase to those found in Harry Potter's Hogwarts – moving and changing, sometimes making sense, and sometimes not. In her journal, Lianie also mentioned the "one step forward and two steps back" sensation she was feeling at this point nearly mid-way into the trimester.

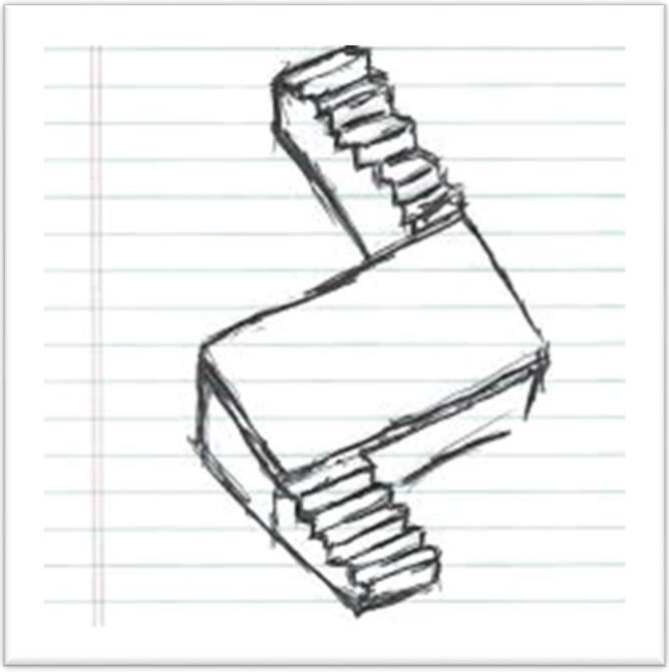


Figure 44: Hogwarts, Lianie (29)

7.1.3. A Perceived Barrier – Language

> *Language and speech do not mirror experience: They create experience and in the process of creation constantly transform ... that which is being described. The meanings of a subject's statements are, therefore, always in motion.*
>
> (Denzin 1997, p. 5)

Troublesome terminology and discursive requirements emerged as significant causes of difficulty for many who perceived specific 'online' language to be a barrier to learning in a range of different ways. For some participants, the 'noise' within the online learning space became overwhelming as the trimester progressed. The intensity of links, information, readings and the speed of communication and learning caused anxiety.

> *The most frustrating is getting [pause] having to get in all the assessments at once. Why can't they stagger the bloody assessments? This workload is getting bloody silly. Bloody links everywhere. You've got to find everything, make sure it's the right one. Check everything works and get everything in on time. I used to totally disbelieve the saying the dog ate my homework but I'm starting to believe the computer ate my bloody assessment* (Chris, 28).

Joan's account of her early encounters with specific 'online' language was typical among the participants, most of whom mentioned feeling intimidated by unfamiliar terminology at some point even into the fifth and sixth weeks:

> *At the beginning of the trimester the university jargon and the online jargon scared me and put me off because I wasn't used to it...I'm getting more used to this new um... new lingo. It's a whole new language almost* (Joan, 30).

Kate (39) explained that part of the issue with acclimatising to a new online learning vocabulary was the difference in detail when compared to everyday social media language. She also acknowledged how important it was to develop a deeper knowledge of online terminology.

> *I'm a businessperson. I understand the concept of satisfaction. If you can't understand what you're being asked to do... Look, for people new to online learning, the terminology can sound like nonsense – a major source of student dissatisfaction. It's simply not the same as social media terminology. We need to learn what these terms mean. We have to be able to easily use this online learning terminology every day to understand what is being read, written, or communicated to us as students and be able to communicate back.*

Len (28) agreed*:*

> *It really helps to build a strong vocabulary that can help you get through your study. A firm grasp of online terminology is vital whether you spend every day at a computer or not. Quality communication among all members of an online class reduces the number of mistakes we make.*

Having to struggle with and remember myriad word-forms and styles of communication often left the participants feeling stressed. The following account from Mattie (38) exemplifies this. It was one of her last comments before pulling out of the course and the university after the first six weeks.

> *I'm thinking, to myself... Please, stop stop stop! Do we have to use those fandangly words? Not only was the lecturer using new words, but it was also all about stuff I had no idea about. It could have been in Greek for all the use it was. Of course, I didn't have the guts to speak up. I'm sure I wasn't the only one, but I didn't want to look like the dill in the group so what d'ya know... I said nothing.*

From her comments, it was unmistakable that Antonia (38) had also struggled with both understanding and then remembering the key terms in both her online procedures:

> *I was taking notes about how to use the discussion forum or something during an online class, when I realised I had no idea what was going on. I'll admit I'm a bit better now, but you can't take your eye off the ball. It's like double Dutch a lot of the time. (Antonia, 38).*

However, later in the (first) interview, she also expressed the idea that she was slowly accommodating to the 'new' language. She added that this was because she had to, and that she would be able to cope with it, given enough time – whatever time that may be. She also noted that this "new" language was just one ongoing issue among many.

> *O.k. I have a choice. I know that. Stick it out and find out or lose out, however long that takes I suppose. I've got to say though, that it is not an easy thing to be expected, to understand what is essentially a whole new online language PLUS* [participant's emphasis] *new subject lingo. Look, I'll get there eventually, I have to, but it's a lot to take in when you're constantly going through everything else* (Antonia, 38).

7.1.4. A Perceived Barrier – Being Stuck

The following snapshots highlight and provide an insight into another strong and apparently contradictory pattern of response. Adrian's image of being stuck displayed the concept of 'a bottleneck' (Cousin, 2008), clearly:

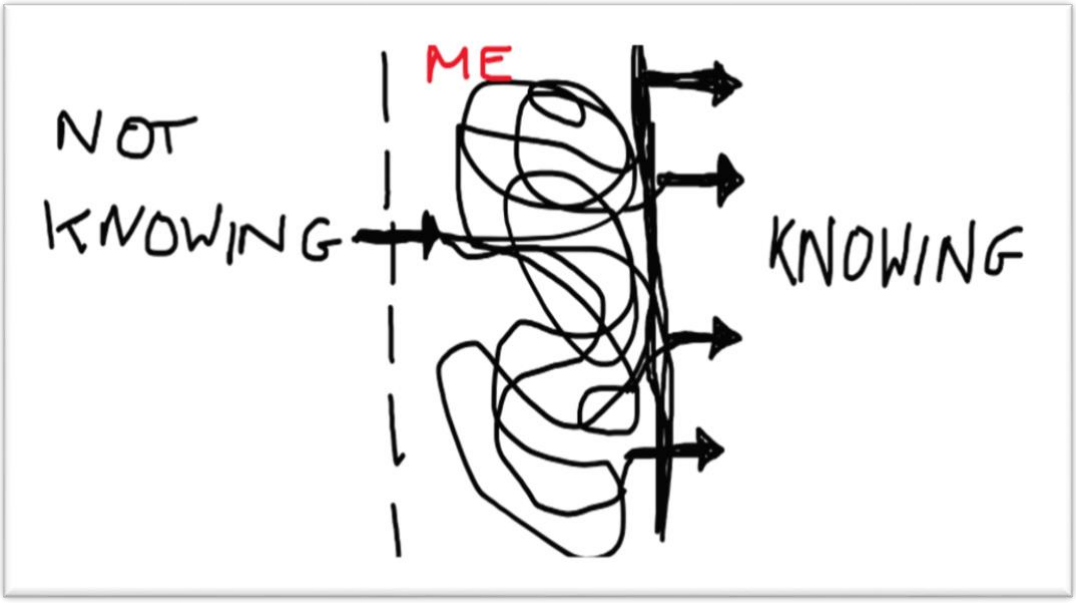


Figure 45: Stuck in the middle with ME! Adrian (32)

Several of the participants detailed concepts, processes and knowledge that they found difficult to grasp, or where they felt stuck as they tried to assimilate new information, in terms of contradictory and uncertain vacillation:

> *It's like one step forward and two steps back. I'm stuck. I just want to feel like I'm actually getting somewhere* (Symeon, 27).

> *I am trying my best and I am trying to understand what I have to do, and it just doesn't go in... or it goes in and then...sort of gets lost, which...really frustrates me...it really stresses me out. It's so damn messy. I get it then I don't.... then I do. I'm really stuck* (Jenine, 32).

Brendan (46) described the particular procedure of assessment submission as being very uncomfortable for him. At the beginning of the trimester, he thought he'd have no problems with this process, but in reality, he felt out of his depth and overloaded from "all sorts going on" as the trimester proceeded:

> *I really thought I'd be so much better at this. But you know the first time I sent the submission wrong without even realising it. You have to get these things right online. That wasn't fun! That was hard...yeah...there were all sorts going on. I felt really stupid and sort of helpless. But, you know, I'm learning from doing it wrong. Till I get it wrong again that is... I'll get it eventually.*

These issues were identified by some as being the lecturer's fault, with the perceived interplay between participant and facilitator evident from the interviews and the journal entries. Following on from his issues with submission, Brendan's next comment and image reveal a highly emotional reaction to the liminal 'rupture in knowing' including the blame he vigorously assigned to the lecturer:

> *Listen, I work bloody hard in the hospital. I know what organisation looks like. And it's not when it's all put together by some twit who loads classes up with links that don't work, videos that don't play, and strange linked modules where you don't have a way to get back to the main site. I'd prefer just to read a text and look at diagrams than look at a blurry video with mashed up sound that doesn't make any sense. My mind constantly wanders yeah... I try to take notes to try to focus but I have to read sections over and over because I space out. I just want to stab myself because a 1 hour lecture takes literally all day to prep for* [groans].

Figure 46: Stabbed!!, Brendan (46)

Ava also displayed confusion and attributed blame to the lecturer:

> *When stuff was explained to me, I just didn't understand it...and it was different, and I just wasn't used to thinking about doing things in that way because of my previous... I don't know... my previous experience online. I was thinking that can't be right, it doesn't make sense, he's got it wrong* (Ava, 28).

David and Joan explained their feelings about the 'stuck' situation:

> *As a student, you want to be sure that this is the right answer, ok, I mean, which area you should answer. So, when they give you a question, the*

question is more general, especially a discussion forum. They put general questions. It's like being stuck and not knowing which way to go. Sometimes you may answer the question but you're answering in a different area, which you don't realise is wrong (David, 36).

Figure 47: [Untitled] Joan (30)

While their 'stuckness' was mostly exhibited by lack of clarity and confusion, sometimes it manifested as blame, anger and frustration, knowing "... there must be better ways of doing this stuff..." (Nicole, 30), but not really knowing where to start, Chris's comment exemplified the feelings of confusion and dawning awareness that the workload had quickly stepped up and was continuing to step up in difficulty:

It was hard when I first tried explaining anything. I mostly ended up talking rubbish. Bloody mess. I hadn't realised it would get so hard so quickly. Not just the stuff itself… the content, but the ways of doing everything. How fast you have to learn what goes where and how and when.

For many participants, this included a deepening realisation: perhaps fear of their own shortcomings, fear of their decision to study online, confusion about handling their 'real life' and their study together, and/or their lack of experience.

Ok let's set the scene here. This is not my scene guys!!! I'm still scared as hell. I sign in. I stick it out. I still feel alone but not quite so sick every time I go online. It's not my favourite way to learn but I cope. That's a step forward isn't it? (John, 27).

In a later comment, Brendan (46) continued to rail against the lecturer when having to confront the idea of having to 'get my head round it', implying his emerging understanding that he would need to work differently in an online context:

> *I just don't get what he was explaining, and he's online, offline, online, offline, you don't get a response within 24 hours, so you have to stay on top of your study, and it stews in my head and then I sit there, and I have to try and work it out myself, get my own head around it. He really* [pause] *lets you down.*

This meant that for these participants, isolation, dilemmas, complications and concerns were seen, heard and dealt with, in new and different ways. Some of these were transformative.

7.1.5. Adapting – Spaghetti and a Jigsaw

Symeon (27) explained that, although he found himself occasionally slipping back into old ways of thinking and working, he realised that he would have to change the way he worked, "taking a much more independent approach to solving problems". In his comments, he referred not only to having to identify the "stuff I don't get" but went on to suggest that learning in the online space required him to investigate "... why I didn't get it". This was a real indicator of adapting to his circumstances.

Kate's resilient and practical approach helped her to come to terms with change. She described and drew the relationships between elements of online study in a very interesting way representing online space as a bowl of spaghetti and describing links forming a web across and within subjects. In her explanation, these links are hidden from view until they become uncovered by digging into them. Joining these links is messy.

> *.... like a bowl of spaghetti all stirred up and messy before you get down into the good stuff. I guess that's why it's called "the web",* [laughs] *but I don't mean just* <u>*that*</u> *web* [participants' emphasis]. *It's our own online web with our own links. Our own spaghetti* [laughs].

Kate's relief at having overcome her habit of slipping back into old ways of working and thinking came across in her later comment, particularly in her use of terms such as

"pattern", "our web" and her reference to not being able to 'un-see' the complicated structure she was working in:

> *I know it's more detailed and yeah .... Getting used to it all is complicated and yeah, messy. It comes and goes, when I understand stuff and what it is I have to do but it is [long pause] possible. I think* [pause] *a pattern will be clear in a while. It's starting to make sense. But I can never think of it in an uncomplicated way again. I feel part of our web even if I can't completely figure it out yet* (Kate, 39).

Figure 48: Me and my messy spaghetti, and backwards sauce! ☺ Kate (39)

Hafiz explained his way of coping with the integrative nature of the online learning space by implying an initial mess, similar to Kate's web analogy. However, he went further to clarify how he could discover order within the mess by creating a mental "three-dimensional jigsaw" and moving and linking the pieces in his mind. This offered Hafiz a degree of control to help stabilise his learning journey and make use of his previous knowledge schema in an organised and positive way.

> *It was almost like a three-dimensional jigsaw...I was just putting bits together and I just realised actually that bit can go there it goes better and I will move that bit somewhere else. It is all just like...one big jigsaw that I am putting together bit by bit in my mind and moving bits around to see where they fit... or not* [laughs]. *It helps me to control everything better* (Hafiz 40).

Monique (40) and Luke (30) included mind-maps in their respective journals that further indicated the integrative approach to their concept of online study was beginning to develop.

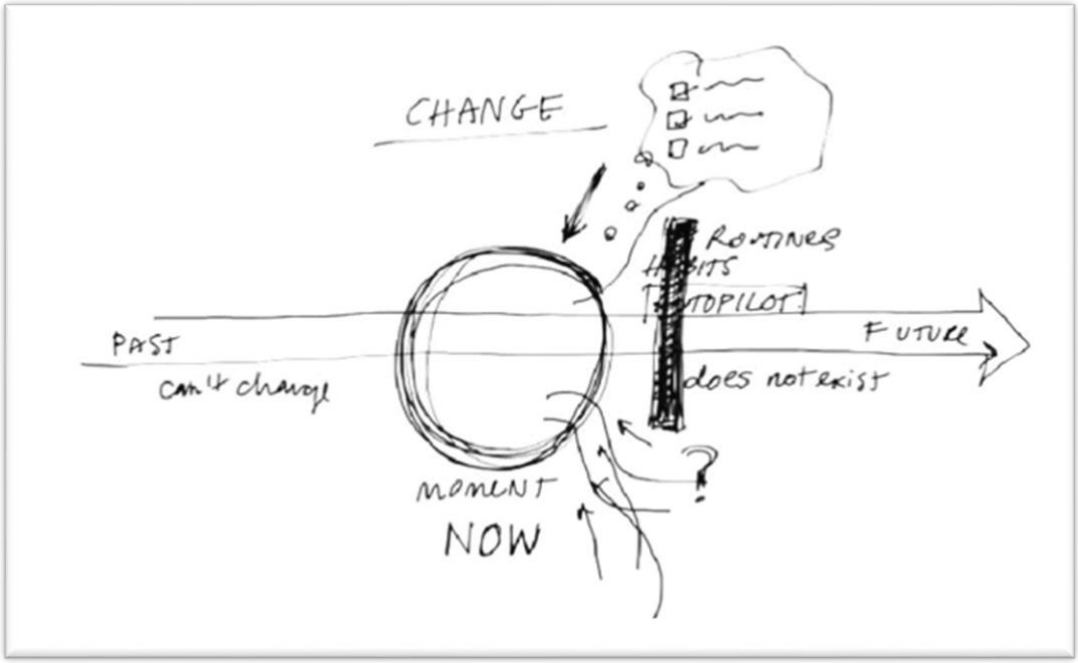


Figure 49: Moving along, Luke (30)

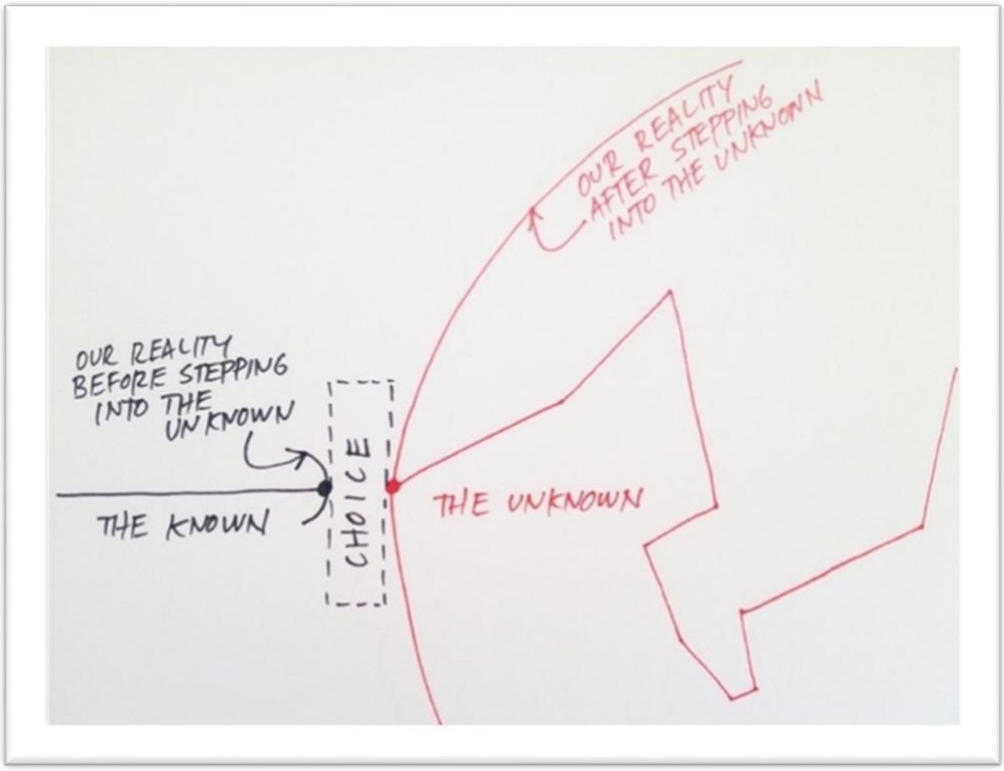


Figure 50: Monique's Mind Map

7.1.6. Adapting: More Stairs

Mallory used the image of the stairs to note the importance of motivation, using mini goals when unsure and sticking to the journey. This comment held a poignancy, shared by many participants, that exemplified the transformative elements of their liminal stage:

> *Mum always said I never finish anything. Well, I'm sort of the mum now. Doing this online thing is huge for me and for my own new family. I have a picture in my mind of actually getting somewhere. One step at a time... when I feel stuck even helps me get unstuck. I will finish this* [participant's emphasis]. (Mallory, 30).

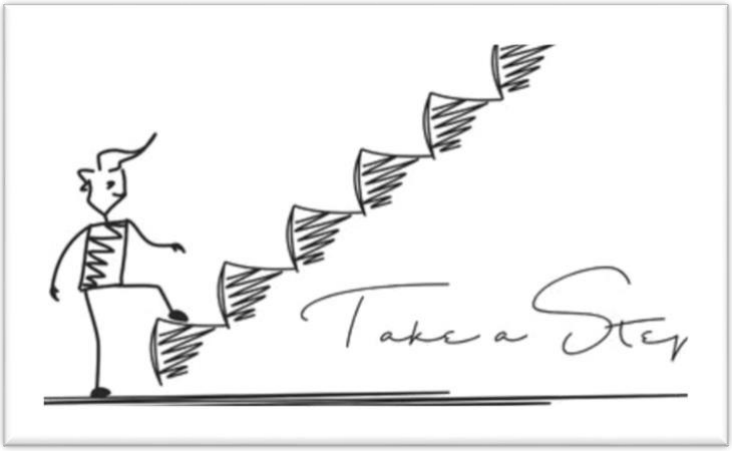


Figure 51: Upwards and onwards. Mallory (30)

7.2. Chapter Summary

Chapter 7: The Liminal Stage – Inside the Tunnel, explores the participants' continued engagement with the online learning space by highlighting the second stage of their transitional journey and offering a comprehensive overview of their identity disruption. This was the participants' non-linear and recursive transitional stage described by Turner (1969, p. 80) as "a midpoint between a starting point and an ending point". They were in the space that Turner (1975, p. 57) called an ambiguous 'time out of time', a space full of idiosyncratic and experimental possibility. The predominant analogy in the online liminal space was the staircase. It featured in several ways:

1) an inability to negotiate the transition – climb the stairs;

2) the vacillation of one step forward and two steps back;

3) a means to an end.

Chapter 7 offers insights into the second, third and fourth sub-questions:

5. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?
6. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?
7. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

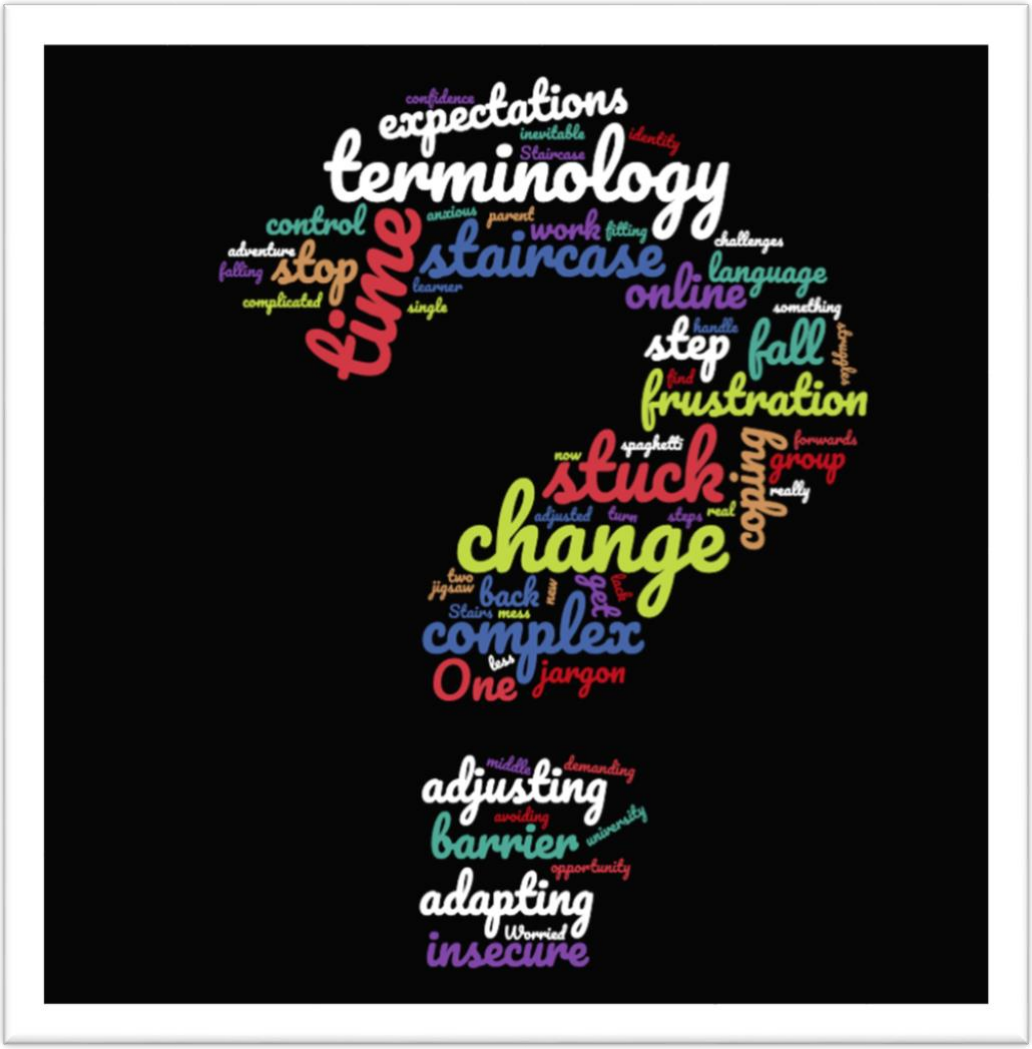


Figure 52: Word cloud supporting Chapter 7 data (Author)

The word cloud seen in Figure 52 gives an idea of some of the more dominant thoughts appearing in the participants' comments and images. For most of the participants,

transitioning and persisting within this liminal environment were significantly influenced by relational and personal processes; often, persistence was perceived as occurring despite institutional structures, rather than being supported by them. The journey was not straightforward, but rather erratic, sometimes negative, but often leading to the beginnings of positive transformation. The next chapter will move the focus onto the post-liminal stage of that journey.

CHAPTER 8:
FINDINGS: THE POST-LIMINAL STAGE
– THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

> *In [learning spaces], individuals may recognise that their perceptions of learning, teaching, knowledge and learner identity are at odds with, or bear little relationship to, their current meaning systems and hence, realise that they have to make a decision about their response to such challenge*.
>
> (Savin-Baden, 2008a, p 7)

This chapter examines where the participants were situated in terms of their transition into the online learning space at the end of their first trimester. The two interviews, combined with the reflections within the participant journals, reveal a general shift in focus expressed by the participants as the trimester progressed. However, this focal shift was by no means uniform across the cohort, hence the question mark in the title of this chapter. By then, it was apparent that while some participants in the study had remained 'stuck' and confused, others had come to welcome and embrace their identity as online students. None had found their first trimester an easy journey through the tunnel.

8.1.1. Overview

In Chapter 8, there are several revelations to be found, but one, in particular, stands out. In each of the two earlier chapters, the evidence provided by the participants indicated that they were all, to some degree or another, aligning their journey with the stages of pre-liminality and liminality at roughly similar times. Even when Mattie left the course just prior to Week 6, and thereby followed a completely different pathway to the others, her responses to the first interview questions and her journal images nevertheless displayed characteristics of pre-liminality and liminality at much the same time as her cohort. However, by the end of their first trimester of online study, individual participants had entered, occupied, negotiated, and in some instances, journeyed out of their liminal space differently. Their liminal variation (see Chap. 3, pp. 100–101) meant they experienced

different trajectories at different times. This generalised difference is represented in Figure 53, in which each figure represents an example of the diversified paths travelled by the participants on their transition into online learning.

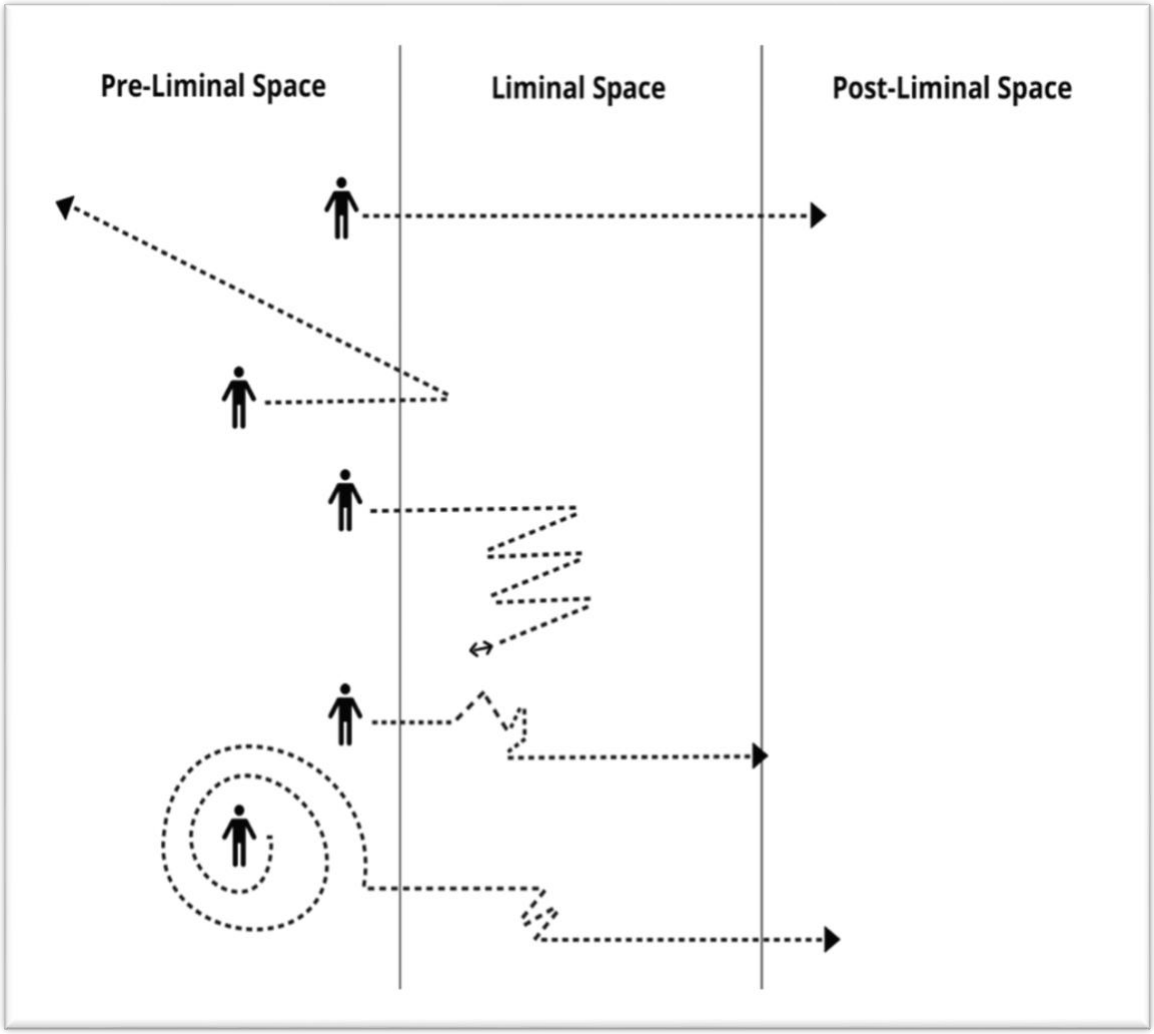


Figure 53: The online journey. (Author, adapted from Tallis Habits, Thomas Tallis School, (2016), retrieved from https://tallishabits.tumblr.com/post/143854757549/threshold-concepts-acknowledge-that-students-dont)

In order to demonstrate this diversity in the participants' transformational stages by the end of the first trimester, the third findings chapter is subsequently different in format to the two preceding it. In terms of the interviews and journal entries, the findings discussed in this chapter are supported by the second interview, the journal entries mid-trimester onwards, and research sub-questions 3 and 4 (See Table 10).

Table 10: Post-Liminal Stage Superordinate Theme, Subordinate Themes and Relevant Research Questions (Author)

The Post-Liminal Stage: The End of the Tunnel? (Consequential) *Represents how the epistemological and ontological shift in "exiting into a new conceptual space" is perceived* (Meyer et al., 2008 p. 68).		
Superordinate Themes	**Subordinate Themes**	**Relevant Research Questions**
The End of the Tunnel?	**Tiredness and Survival** ⬇ **Still-Stuck** ○ Survival = Escape **Almost-There** ○ Understanding = Survival **Crossing-the-Threshold** ○ Success = Survival	**Sub-Question 3:** What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies? **Sub-Question 4:** How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

The first section of this chapter covers the third research sub-question:

1. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?

This section conveys the praxes and traits displayed by the participants as they negotiate the last weeks of their first online trimester in three separate categories:

1) those still in a liminal stage – Subordinate Theme: Still-Stuck;
2) those transitioning into the post-liminal stage – Subordinate Theme: Almost-There;
3) and those who had reached the post-liminal stage – Subordinate Theme: Crossing-the-Threshold.

There was a clear demarcation between the three groups in the ways they articulated their motives, their perspectives and their growth and transformation. Reflecting the subordinate themes, each grouping contains comments by participants who, from interview and

reflective journal comments and images, provided evidence of his or her corresponding stage of the journey by trimester's end.

The second section in this findings chapter will cover the last sub-question:

2. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF)?

Once the data had been extensively analysed, the threshold concept characteristics found in the Threshold Concept Framework (See Chap. 3, pp. 94–95) were applied to the subordinate themes. Guided by the research questions, one experiential threshold concept (TC) became evident. This TCs was *Becoming an Online Student.* Findings regarding this TC are presented in detail in the second section of this chapter.

8.1.2. Changes to the Chapter 8 Format

Chapter 8 differs in format from the two preceding findings chapters. Compared to the more formal approach of the initial round of interviews, the second round at the end of the trimester was more conversational in nature. The conversations were still guided by the research questions but had become as equally driven by the participants as by me as the researcher. Due to having written the journals and because of the short time between interviews, the participants felt more at ease. A more obvious connection between us was evident from their responses. This outcome fitted well with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology used in this study, because as the researcher, I was able to exercise 'Eklarendes Verstehen' (Weber, 1897, cited in Elwell, 1996) and walk more comfortably with the participants along their journey, without being intrusive.

As previously noted in Chapters 6 and 7, the written reflective journals also contained images drawn or copied by the participants. These images were captioned in some cases, and the name of each contributing participant was provided as per the written contributions and interview answers. However, because of the nature of the images and the circumstances under which they were included, few if any, were formally cited.

Interestingly, the images and the written journal entries were far fewer among those who provided evidence of being in the post-liminal stage of their first trimester journey.

As was evident in Chapter 7, there was definitely an overarching subordinate theme acting as an interwoven thread throughout this final stage of the trimester. This subordinate theme in Chapter 8 was made up of two elements: tiredness and survival. Everyone was tired. The ways in which the word was expressed, however, were very different. This different emphasis was representative of the three groups and went a long way to revealing both the participants' attitudinal differences, and their stage of coping by trimester's end. The first section in this chapter will look at this last group who, at the end of Trimester 1, ostensibly remained stuck in the liminal space.

8.2. SECTION 1

8.2.1. Group 1: Those Still in a Liminal Stage

8.2.1.1. Subordinate Theme #1: Still-Stuck (Survival = Escape)

The metaphor of 'survival' equalling 'retreat' was particularly evident among the eight members of this 'Still Stuck' group: Ava (28), Brendan (46), David (36), Joan (30), John (27), Len (28), Nicole (30) and Taylor (30). By the second interview, their overall strategy continued to be largely subliminal and reactive. The focus for this group was still centred around identity disjunction and, as Brendan (46) said, "discombobulated feelings". They frequently resorted to external locus and retreat. They could not, perhaps would not, find their identity as university students. Their praxes were centred on surviving, whether that survival meant giving up or staying. The practicalities of their strategy were confused and irregular. Their most obvious personal traits involved fear and blame.

While many of the participants perceived the escape represented by deferment as a survival strategy, the stress of making even that decision was still proving to be overwhelming for them. As previously mentioned in the Literature Review (Chapter 2, p. 56), Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) describe the process of

‘identifying’ as an adult student as “a real roller coaster of confidence and emotions” (p. 567). Interestingly, four of the participants made specific reference to the tumultuous roller coaster ride they had experienced during the trimester:

> *Kind of like a roller coaster ride... The kind that doesn’t end. Backwards and forwards and back again. I just wanted to escape. Maybe I still do. I’m still thinking about it, but the alternative.... I mean deferring* [pause] *isn’t that giving up? I don’t think I’d come back. But you could if you wanted to. Can’t you?* (Len, 28).

> *Cried sometimes. Got angry. Felt ok at times. Was happy and unhappy with my marks. Hated people, then myself. Forgave them and hated them again. I can honestly say this has been the most emotionally draining roller coaster ride of my life. I hate bloody studying online* (Nicole, 30).

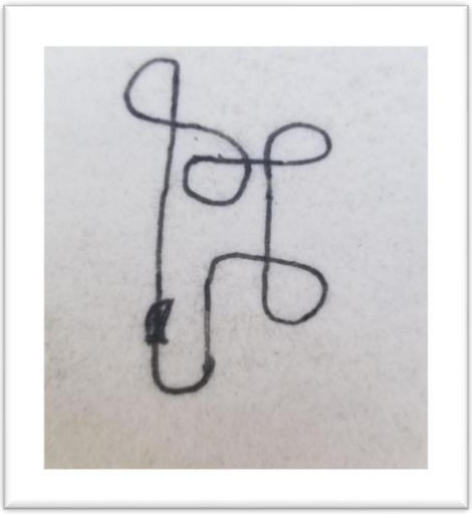


Figure 54: Roller coaster (Brendan, 46)

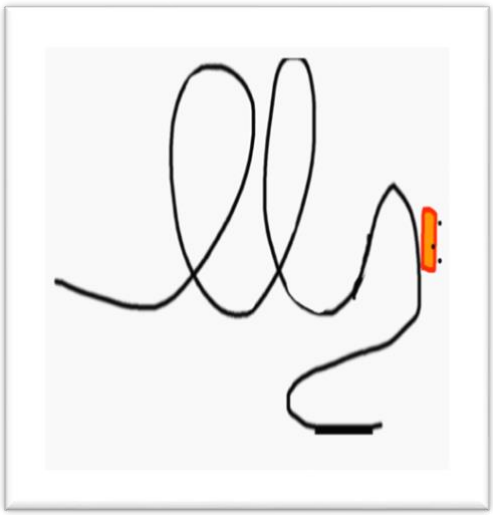


Figure 55: Untitled (Taylor, 30)

Discussion about deferment was often accompanied by confused and indecisive comments and images centred around the dominant threads of tiredness and survival. David’s overwhelming sense of tiredness and resulting confusion regarding his future plans is very evident:

> *I’m thinking of pulling out just for next trimester. I mean you need a rest, right? Then again, all that effort for nothing. I might stay.* [long pause] *I guess I’ve survived but only just. Um, no. I don’t know. I think that you’ve caught me at like a really bad time. Now I’m just – I’m just all confused. I still don’t know how to get through this. I’m just so tired* (David, 36).

Ava's comment bounced back and forth with no real conviction or plan. Even her mention of possible deferment indicates her feelings of total confusion:

> *Yeah probably, maybe defer. Like put it on hold. It depends. I don't know. Where I'm casual at the club, they've actually got a full-time role for an event executive available and I'm applying for that. So, if I got that then I would defer. But if didn't get it, then I would keep studying. I don't know what I'm doing at the moment. I sort of feel like I'm in limbo, barely surviving really. Really tired* (Ava, 28).

While John (27) appeared at first to make the best of it, he then speaks of being tired and barely surviving. His image still refers to a 'classroom' – one with insufficient room to allow him to be a part of everything going on and leaving him outside and alone:

> *I got more used to it, but I never lost that feeling of discomfort and stress. Like I was always missing something. Like everyone else knew why they were there and what they were doing but me. I never felt I had it completely. I've never really felt 'at home' online. I'm just hanging on* [pause] *just sort of surviving. I just want to rest and forget it all.*

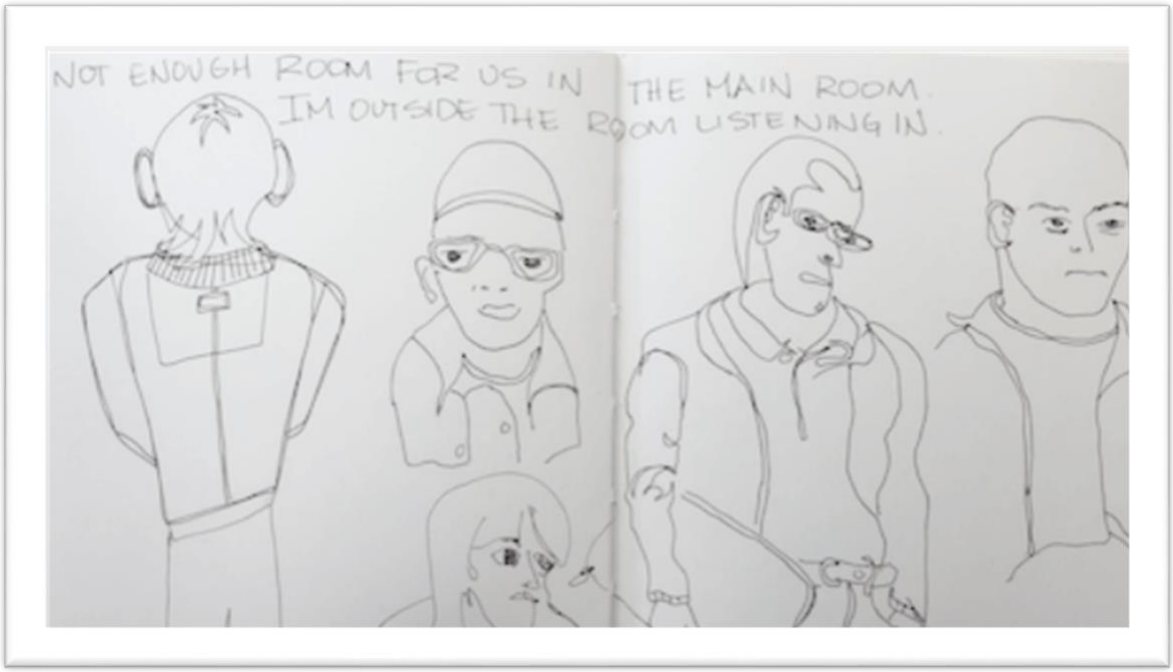


Figure 56: Untitled (John, 27)

Making the decision to defer, or indeed making any decision, also seemed difficult for David, Brendan, Ava and Joan. David's image of procrastination is simple:

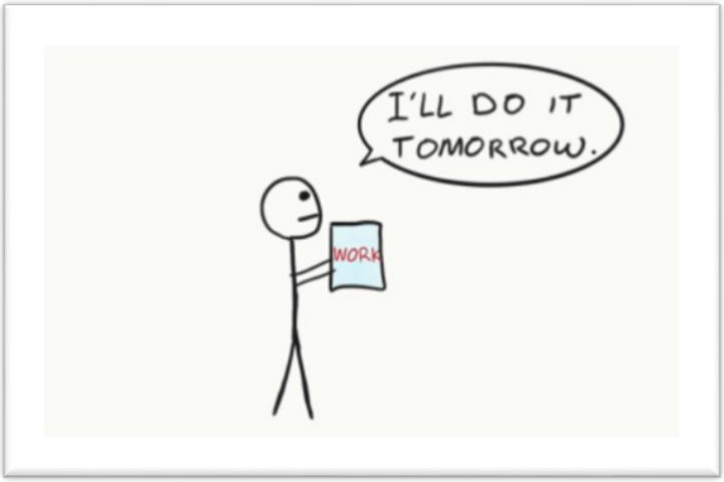


Figure 57: Untitled (David, 36)

Brendan's words in particular display a powerful dissonance:

> *It's just weird that the thing I was most confident about was the thing I lost it in. It wasn't that I couldn't do the work but when it wasn't what I wanted it to be, I turned into this whinging mess. It's only that tossing it in was so hard and one more decision to make, that I'm still around. It's all so tiring. Time to sleep!!* (Brendan, 46).

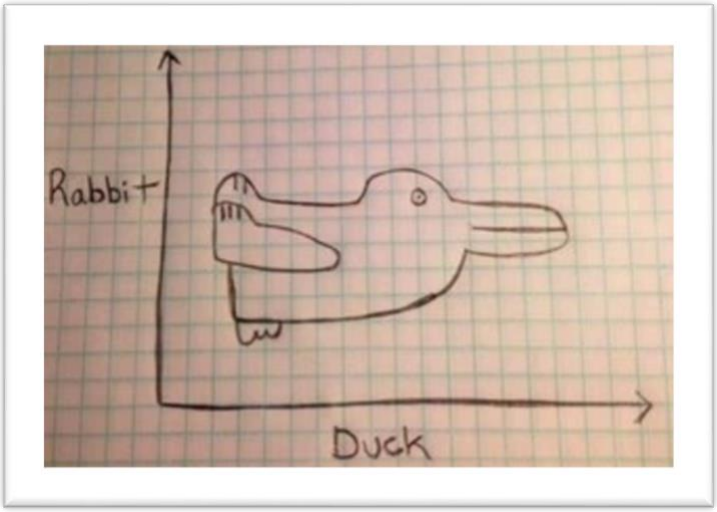


Figure 58: Another bloody decision I have to make! (Joan, 30)

Joan's image is amusing but telling. Even taking the time to complete the doodle displays depth of feeling. Ava was also finding that any attempt to modify her identity and reactions was difficult enough to cause her to suffer. She found it very difficult to try to fit herself to a context. The reference to sharing through discourse is a dominant feature of the comment.

> [Laughs] *I don't know. Probably deferring was one more decision I couldn't bear to have to make. No* [pause]. *Everyone in the family was coping with new stuff so I shut up and just suffered in silence. That's why I'm liking talking to you* [laughs]. *Can I just rest now? No more decisions for a while please?* (Ava, 28).

Len (28) could not even share a thin allusion to optimism. The fog metaphor so often alluded to in the pre-liminal stage appears again:

> *It kind of just ended up going nowhere, but it was the end of the trimester by then, and I was just, I don't care. I'm pretty sure I'm going to pass the averages with the other help I got, and once it's over it's over and I'm done with it. I don't care anymore. I want to sleep for years.* <u>*But*</u> [participant emphasis] [long pause] *if I do pass, I'll probably keep going. Shit I don't know. I still feel so lost. So bloody tired. I can't shake this foggy feeling like I'm still* [pause]... *like lost or I don't know where I'm headed.*

Taylor's image also includes the fog. While still an image of apparently moving forward, he seems to still be lost and unable to see the way:

Figure 59: Untitled (Taylor, 30)

From his comment, it was evident that Taylor was starting to see connections between cause and effect and planning. However, this recognition was still coming from a position of external locus. His comment reveals his perception of his role as the victim of circumstance:

> *I should just have taken one subject at the college. Given what I know now I wouldn't do the online study. I wouldn't do so many subjects. I'd check what the assessments were for different subjects and I'd plan my time to the minute. But I'm stuck now. If I want to survive this thing, I have to ... have a bloody rest first.*

There were no words of advice or 'closing comments' as such from members of this group. Overall, their comments at trimester's end were still 'self-facing' rather than inclusive. Nicole's comment and her powerful image are both still showing feelings of suffering, lack of control and self-blame. To herself, she is 'invisible' and needing to prove her worth:

> *I'm so insecure with what I'm doing online and it's really stressing me out. I want to chuck it all but I know I'll hate myself if I do. I have to prove myself with this online thing. I HATE THIS!* [participant emphasis] (Nicole, 30).

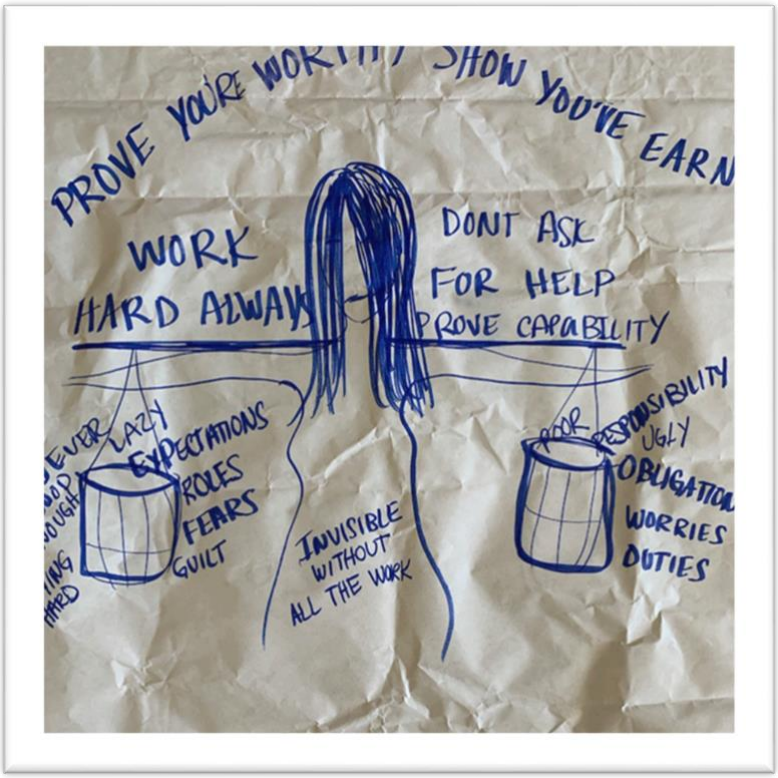


Figure 60: Untitled (Nicole, 30)

The following word cloud indicates the common words and ideas contained in the participant data from this ‘Still-Stuck’ group.

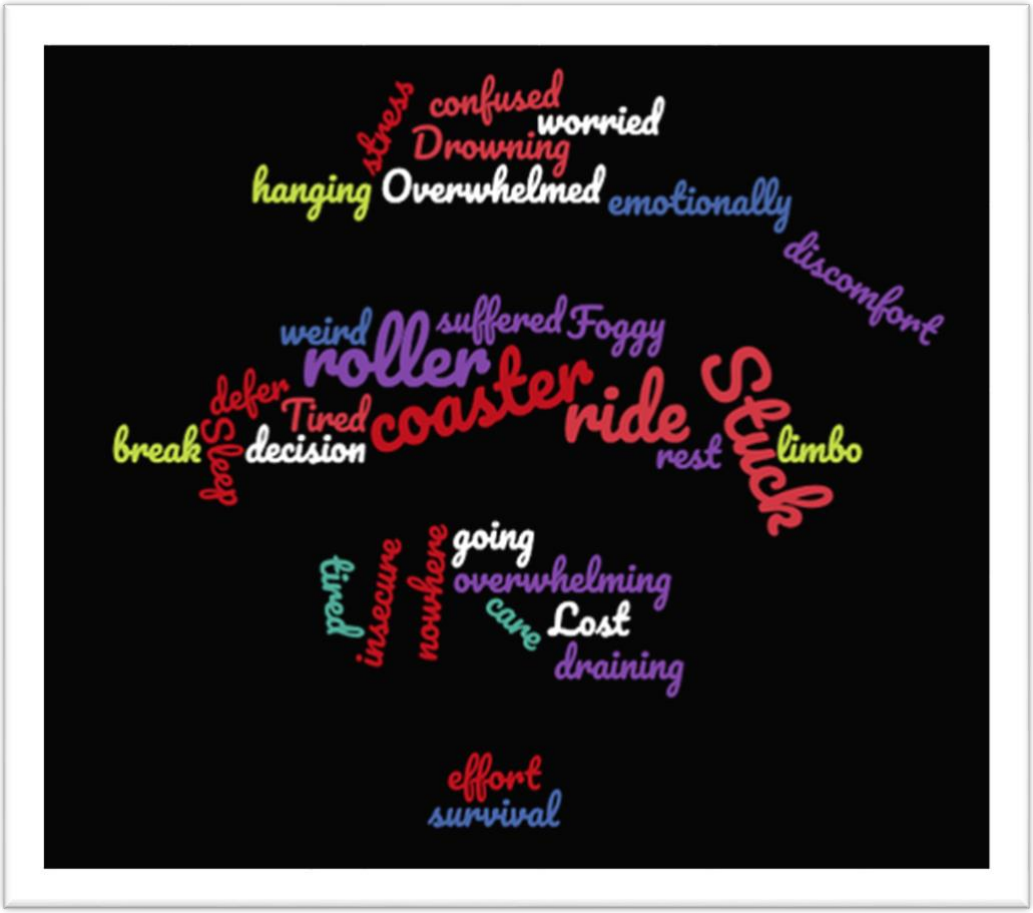


Figure 61: Word cloud – Still-Stuck (Author)

Consistent use of words such as *distress*, *tired*, *foggy*, *confused*, *anxious*, *exhausted*, *embarrassed*, *overwhelming*, *stress* and *draining* indicates a confusing mixture of feeling stuck and wanting to rest, and wanting to run away. There is a disruption to both their ability to recognise the consequences of their actions and any conviction that they had any capacity, power, or even strength to influence outcomes as a result of their own actions. Their locus of control was external. There appears to be no sense of identity as a university student evident. Fitting their identity to their new context in order to better cope was physically and emotionally beyond them.

While I have designated them as a group, there is no apparent sense from each of them of being part of any group or sharing these feelings with a group or with the

university. Each is an individual who is suffering alone. There is little to no indication that any of these participants are going to continue their study. Each is still very much in a liminal state and the end of the tunnel could be in either direction at this point.

8.2.2. Group 2: Those Transitioning into the Post-Liminal Stage

8.2.2.1. Subordinate Theme #2: Almost-There (Understanding = Survival)

There was a more positive feel to the comments and images made by the seven participants in the 'Almost-There' group: Adrian (32), Antonia (38), Ayla (34), Jenine (32), Jess (28), Liainie (29), and Symeon (27). This group's strategy was one of adaption. They made a conscious effort to understand their circumstances and use those circumstances as a reason, and an opportunity to persist.

8.2.2.1.1. Windows and Doors

> *Remember what Bilbo used to say: It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.*
>
> (Tolkien, 1937)

Turner (1974, p. 58) tells us that the perceived cognitive passage from one liminal status to another is often paralleled by a symbolic geographical transfer from one space to another. The door for centuries has been the metaphor for change; an abstract transitional zone, opening into somewhere new, opening into opportunity. In Chapter 6, the door was being opened and symbolised starting on the journey for many of the participants. In Chapter 8, it symbolises nearing the end and looking outward, and the analogy of standing at a door, opening a door or looking out a door or window was quite common to this group. While none of them actually depict or discuss themselves as crossing the threshold and passing through the door, Jess, Lianie, Symeon, Adrian, Jenine, and Antonia all used this analogy to demonstrate the long way they had come since the beginning of the trimester and how close they were to the end.

Jess made her confidence clear from her image of the open door, even adding a laptop bag to her image so she can "... make sure I'm prepared with everything I need to be an online student."!

Figure 62: Looking out the door. (Jess, 28)

Lianie's words show her poised on the brink:

> *Nearly there, nearly there. Just got to open up the door and take that step into whatever* (Lianie, 29).

Adrian is still looking out that door. He is not ready to pass through it yet.

> *It's sort of like* [pause] *being able to see out the door but not able to open it just yet. When I can do that, I'll know I have succeeded. I can see more but I'm not there yet.* [laughs] (Adrian, 32).

Jenene is walking in her image, but it is still entitled, *Looking out*. She, too, has not passed through the door. Her figure is barefooted and perhaps not ready to pass across the threshold.

Antonia is still using her fog analogy, but that fog is lifting. Her door is still closed. She is not quite ready to change or walk through that door, but she depicts herself as a survivor.

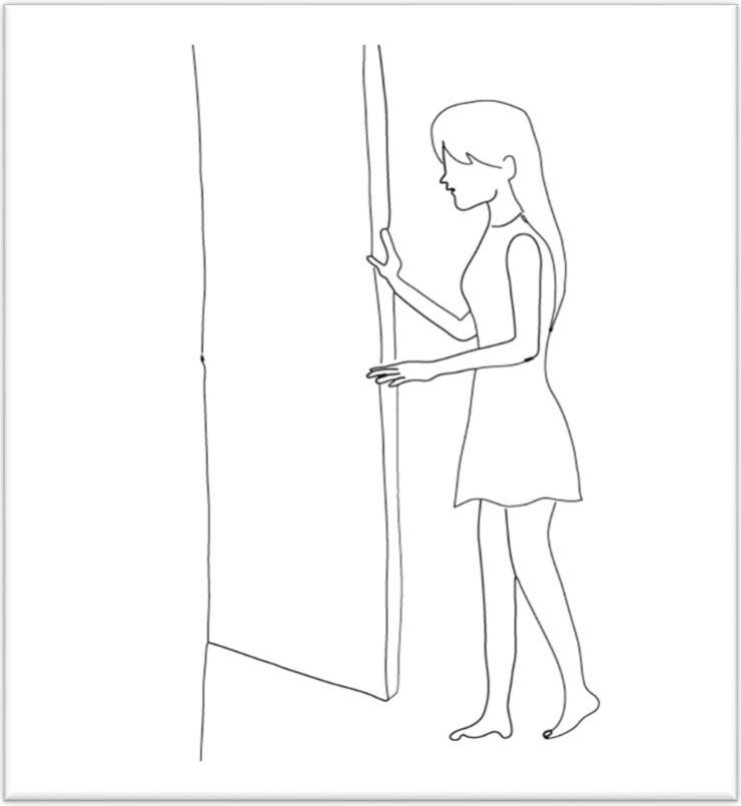


Figure 63: Looking out (Jenine, 32)

> *God here we are at the end. Well, the end of the beginning anyway. And I survived. How about that? How do I feel? Well, the fog is lifting. Not that I know what to do exactly, I'm sort of still looking out at what's coming next. Still pretty nervous but in a better place. Got to the door, now I just have to open the damn thing. I'll worry about that later though* (Antonia, 38).

Symeon's image is more a window than a door. Literally the visual bridge between inside and out (Oaklander, 1988), the window as metaphor seems less direct-action oriented and more contemplative in nature than the door. There is more of an 'inside' and an 'outside' in this image; a barrier between the viewer and the world (Bronte, 1847). The inside area is busy and full of objects, the outside is light and mostly clear. There is implied some form of interaction as he opens the curtain; some light and looking at the unknown. It's hard to see if the window is open or closed.

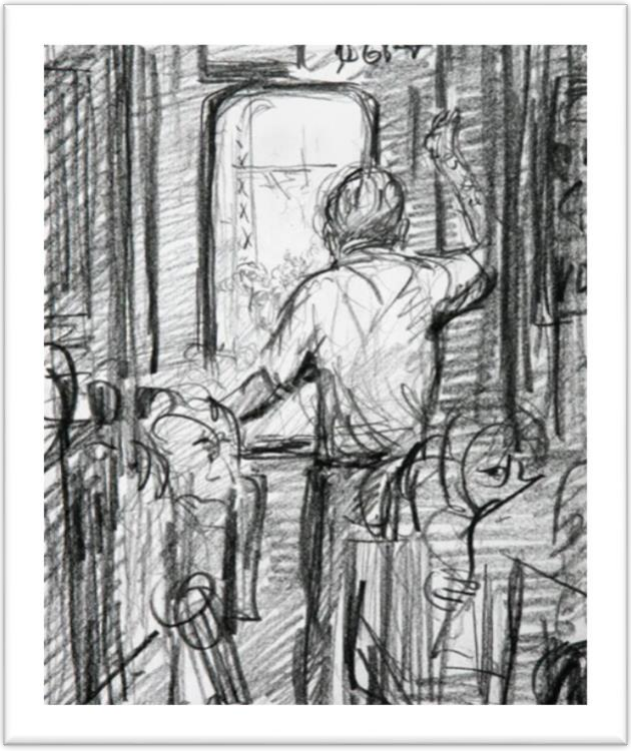


Figure 64: Untitled (Symeon, 27)

It is clear from these comments and images that at this stage of their journey, the participants in this group are each metaphorically standing in front of their door or window – the stage before the change – receptive to new ideas, vulnerable to possibilities, coming to terms with their own doorways and transitions, both figurative and literal. The door and the window are between what was and what is to come; the liminal space of transitioning out of one period of time and into something new. Yet, their commitment is not complete. Adrian, Jenine and Jess are still looking out their doors. Symeon is still looking out his window. Lianie's and Antonia's doors are still closed. While they are almost there, there is still an option to turn back.

8.2.2.1.2. Discourse, Understanding and Finding a Voice

Again, reference to survival is evident. Antonia's comment on the power of understanding the discourse involved in her study and its relationship to survival is very revealing. The developments in her ways of thinking and communicating about academia, technology and language and the relationships among and between all three seem to give

her more structure. Fear has given way to a better understanding; she can 'hear' and understand what she needs to achieve to survive:

> *Mmmm I suppose I actually feel I understand the academicness of it all better now. I know to ask if I don't understand a term or a question, but mostly I do get what they're asking or trying to get me to do now. Have to, to survive online* (Antonia, 38).

While still lacking in confidence, Ayla's positive reference to language is evidence of her developing internal locus. Her new understanding of the 'lingo' helps shape what she is able to think and know at this point in time, while also empowering her to admit to feelings of having survived:

> *Moving forward, I feel things are much better now. It's a bit hard to see a way out, but now this first lot is over I definitely feel like I could get through it all, like I can survive it all I mean. I hope I still feel like this when I start all over again next year* [laughs]. *I think just understanding* [pause] *like I understand the online lingo more now, will help. You know... what stuff means and the expectations* (Ayla, 34).

Like Ayla, Jenine's understanding of her survival and her progress is aligned with the discourse of the study being undertaken. They seem to be understanding the social and functional aspect of language as a critical element of their development as learners:

> *I think [pause] I hope* [pause] *I've grown up a lot over the past few weeks in particular. It certainly affected me though. The work just took over everything. I'm still not running but I am walking. Most important thing is I've survived, and I can sort of get an idea in my head where I'm going now. I understand a lot more about what I have to do online and what it is they're actually saying to me. I can see it and understand it more. I couldn't before* (Jenine, 32).

Jess's comment shows perhaps even more awareness of understanding the study discourse, its relationship to her learning, her survival as a student, and her health.

> *I think I can deal with my stress a lot better than what I used to. That's partly because I now get the mumbo jumbo they all talk a lot better. I don't get so frustrated with a lot of people as much as I did. I can stay calm and collected and get things done and not get so emotional or moody or* [pause] *scared. It has to happen or let's face it... you can't survive online study* (Jess, 28).

Symeon's words are full of information. He reflects on his feelings and is reflexive about his future. Once again, understanding the discourse and survival are clearly aligned. Once that connection through language is established, he seems to find the room to look forward rather than backward or inward:

> *So, what did I learn from studying online? Mmmmm. That I'm not the idiot I thought I was. I could say I've learned to organise myself but that was a response to terror* [laughs] *so is that learning or is it survival? Maybe that's it, I learned to survive? I learned to what.... look ahead instead of behind all the time? I did this for a reason, and I've got to remember that. At least I pretty much know what they're talking about now* (Symeon, 27).

The significance of these comments lies in the participants' innate recognition of the transformative force of language. Each aligning their growing understanding of the discourse of their online study with survival and with becoming different, they had managed to let go of elements of their old identity to allow the new to emerge. Their acquisition and understanding of the language associated with online study have obviously impacted and influenced their thoughts, ideas, beliefs, values, identities, and interactions with others. It has gone hand-in-hand with an easing of fear and confusion. For Ayla, Adrian, and Lianie, discourse was also important in the sense that just talking about their situation helped them understand how much they had achieved. Ayla finds her sense of herself to be very confronting:

> *It wasn't easy. My poor husband was trying to fit in with his new job and* [pause] *the kids were trying at the new school and all I could think about was the online assessments and how isolated I was in all that crowd. God now I think about it I was pretty selfish.* [laughs] *Geez talking today has opened up a can of worms hasn't it. It's just that saying stuff out loud helps me think* (Ayla, 34).

Adrian is finding the whole transitional process very intense.

> *I was really scared. Many* [emphasised] *times I would have walked away. No, make that run away. But I'll do it if I have to. After this talk with you I kinda have my head turned around.* [laughs] *Oh yes, it's good. I haven't really spoken about how I feel with anyone else. It's helping get my head straight* (Adrian, 32).

Lianie, perhaps more than her peers, is coming to terms with her overall sense of self. Again, the discursive factor is important. Being able to talk to someone is benefitting her sense of confidence that she is strong enough to keep going.

> *Oh God yes. I've had to find strength I wasn't sure I had* [laughs]. *This has been such a huge leap of faith to go online but it was the right decision for me. Now I know that I have to listen to me* [emphasised], *not everyone else and I'll get through.* [laughs] *But thank you for listening to me. It's good not to feel judged and to be understood for a change* (Lianie, 29).

8.2.2.2. Words of Advice

The connection between the sense of moving ahead and language went even further. This group, who seemed on the verge of crossing the threshold, were more open to the idea of sharing advice with others. While still 'self-facing' in content, there was evidence of more collegiality in their comments – more of a feeling of belonging to something and wanting to share. They could now look back to help others. That personal power may not be fully developed but it is clearly evident from Jess's comment:

> *Don't go into online study blind. Ask lots of questions. Don't do too many subjects. Make sure you know why you're doing it online in the first place, so you don't get too disheartened. Keeping your eye on the final outcome is always helpful* (Jess, 28).

Antonia speaks with determination and experience:

> *Stick it out because I know at the start it's very easy to lose motivation and to be like 'I have other things that I need to do', you know because you're scared to start and scared to fail and scared of the whole 'what the hell am I doing here' thing because you're so new to online study and so not part of something real yet* (Antonia, 38).

Up to a point, Symeon positions himself as being in control of the situation:

> *Expect to be confused. Things do get better. You're there for a reason, so don't forget what it is. It's only 12 weeks so it does go quickly. Make your online lecturers communicate with you. It's harder to do that than face-to-face though, so stick it out* (Symeon, 27).

Jenine and Adrian's tiredness shows through, but their advice is deliberate:

> *Speak up. Make sure they hear* <u>*you*</u> [participant's emphasis] *online. Will that do?* [pause] *It was bloody hard at times. It gets better. I hope.* [laughs] *Will that do?* (Jenine, 32).

The only closing comment was almost a 'coming together' of what they were all trying to say:

> *I am tired. I got through. I haven't been scared off by doing it online too much. In the words of Arnold, I'll be back!* (Adrian, 32).

The following word cloud indicates the common words and ideas contained in the participant data from this 'Almost-There' group.

Figure 65: Word cloud – Almost-There (Author)

Compared to the word cloud from the first group, this image reveals a growing sense of control and a greater sense of confidence to 'stick it out', as Antonia and Symeon said. Whereas the first group was predominantly emotive in their language, there is less of that emotion evident here. The overall sense that comes across here is one of being both

more contemplative and more engaged; there is more agency, less ‘feeling’ more ‘doing’; more looking before leaping, but they’re considering leaping, nevertheless. Action is indicated by words such as *schedule, prepare, walking, take*. There are also more words to do with discourse: *talking, communication, language, listening*. However, there are still words shared with the first group: *tired* and *survival,* being two examples.

The end was in sight, but they haven’t quite reached it. There is, however, far more of a feeling of being on the brink of change and welcoming that change: that deep breath before passing across the threshold.

8.2.3. Group 3: Those Who Had Reached the Post-Liminal Stage

8.2.3.1. Subordinate Theme #3: Crossing-the-Threshold (Success = Survival)

> *Fiat lux et facta est lux: Let there be light and there was light.*
>
> (Latin and English translations, Book of Genesis 1:3; B’reshith, Torah and Old Testament King James Bible)

Post-liminality refers to the end of the liminal stage and integration into new social roles and identity (Turner, 1969). This is what separated this group from their peers. These eight participants: Chris (28), Hafiz (40), Kate (39), Kelly (29), Kim (46), Luke (30), Mallory (30) and Monique (40), displayed evidence both of cognitive and affective mastery of significant aspects of their online study and their resulting identity formation. They had successfully worked their identity as university students and online learners into each of their life stories.

The post-liminal group’s strategy involved a gritty approach creating ‘safe places’ involving conscious persistence and resilience to disruption and ambiguity. Their praxes were centred on skills, tools, and strategies customarily applied as part of the online learning process and preparation, for example, collaboration, preparation, time management, and computer skills. Their most obvious trait development involved personal qualities, characteristics, and attitudes. Of these, the most obvious were perseverance, curiosity to test out alternative possibilities, agency, vision – anticipating next moves,

flexibility – adapting to challenge, and self-efficacy – the growth in their belief "… in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3).

They came to understand their motivation and fought to first find and then accept their identity as university students. While the first trimester of online study had concluded, the ongoing journey presented continuing potential as the post-liminal group considered futures enabled by their transformation. This was clearly indicated by their insightful comments. Their approach to talking to me as the researcher was noticeably open and inclusive. While still expressive, fewer images and comments were used in their reflective journals. They wanted to talk. For example, Hafiz and Mallory wanted to be more involved in the research:

> *Exhausted* [laughs]. *I read the first interview notes. Well, you know that because I signed them, but I just wanted to tell you in person that it was all very interesting for me to see my feelings on paper. It's funny how talking to someone kind of organises your thoughts. I actually appreciate talking to you. I saw the name of your study again. Very appropriate* [laughs] (Hafiz, 40).

> *No, thank* <u>*you*</u> [participant emphasis]. *Talking to you has been very helpful actually and I can't wait to read what I said this time round* [laughs] (Mallory, 30).

Those who had stepped over the threshold and henceforth considered themselves successful "survivors" (Mallory), "real online students" (Kate) and real "uni students" (Chris) displayed a much more positive turn of phrase overall, and were far more enthusiastic to discuss not only their past journey, but also their future journey, than the other sixteen participants (including Mattie). Their comments provided evidence that they had experienced a transformation.

They each now believed in his or her identity and status as university students, and capacity to belong. Any required changes between emergent and existing identities – those at home and work and that of the student – had become easier to achieve, clearer and less

ambiguous, and less of a struggle. Several asked if they could meet their fellow participants and talk to them too. They were now part of something new and they knew it.

Chris and Mallory articulated a sense of belonging, accommodation, integration and, for the first time, a sense of group identity. In particular, Chris's words show a real breakthrough; a sense of a new place in his journey. He is past the 'just surviving' stage:

> *Well, I know the study will get harder and I'll have to bite the bullet and do more than one subject next round but somehow that won't be* [pause]... *doesn't seem to me to be as hard as actually starting and surviving. It was very hard at times I promise you. It's funny though, now I'm through this first trimester I feel like a uni student now, and a bit of an online expert* [laughs] *not just a twit of a chef trying to do something and being so scared that I was sick all the time* (Chris, 28).

In fact, he's well past the 'just surviving' stage, as his later comment shows:

> *I'm so much more comfortable with myself ... being here and realising that have the right to be here. Just because I'm online doesn't change the fact that I am a uni student now.*

Mallory has also found her niche. Her self-image has changed, and this has affected her entire outlook:

> *Before this course I'd given up on three different courses, so I was kind of feeling that I was never going to get anywhere with my study and that I just would give up on everything. I thought I was just dumb. But because I actually care now about what I'm learning about, I feel like I've done well. I definitely feel I'm a real part of the uni. Not such a dumb cluck anymore. I feel like I get it now and I'm sooo* [participant's emphasis] *much more comfortable with online now. Yeah, I'm really proud of that* (Mallory, 30).

The metaphor of the fog reappeared in Kelly's comment, but it was applied as being in the past. The use of words such as *tired* and *exhausted* also resurfaced, but this time they were aligned with the positive allusion to the successful running of a marathon, not the negative alignment with failure so obvious and prevalent with the first group:

> *I feel like I've come through a fog and even though I'm not in control and I still don't know everything – not by a long shot – I just feel like I've run a marathon, but I finished it. Yay! Proud of myself. Tired. Exhausted* [laughs]… *good exhausted* (Kelly, 28).

Monique's pride in her perceived achievement was obvious:

> *.... I'm really sort of proud of myself. I feel like I've swum this huge online river and not drowned. It was touch and go sometimes but I did it and that's probably the hardest thing I'll ever have to do* (Monique, 40).

Kim's pride was also obvious, and her comment also displays her growth in confidence in herself:

> *The best thing that's happened to me was getting an 88 on a fancy online report I did in the middle of the trimester and I was so stressed because I'd never done anything like that before online. I got really good marks for it and it come out really well. It was just like that sigh of relief, like, oh, alright, it's okay* [pause] *I'm ok. I know now I can handle online study now* (Kim, 46).

There's a sense of satisfaction with a job well done in Luke's words:

> *Great marks, pride in what I'd done and a real feeling of achievement. That I'd succeeded and not made the wrong choice. That I* <u>*could*</u> [emphasised] *manage work and study online at the same time. A few things were good really. Like stuff I'd never dreamed of doing online I did well. Took a while to learn how, but I did it!* (Luke, 30).

Similarly, comments by this group in the second interview reveal a more human-centred dimension to their prevailing perception rather than the earlier technology-centred preoccupation. Words such as *lecturer, student, team* and *communication*, are found together with others that indicate greatly increased comfort, including *supported*, *understand* and *confident*. Still, other words indicating a newly found confidence also played a big part in distinguishing this group as post-liminal. Kim echoes the feelings of having made it through tough times, similar to Kelly's successful running of the marathon:

> *I feel good, and relieved, and more confident and pretty happy I've succeeded at this. There were a couple of really big online projects at the end, and the last couple of weeks were just busy and very stressful. When you have so much on at once it's hard to focus on what you have to do. But hey I've done it, and online too! What a hoot!* (Kim, 46).

While Monique's comments about the impact of the numbers of subjects are not dissimilar to those found in Taylor's in the first group, these hold much more internal locus. While Taylor blamed the subjects for his situation, Monique 'owns' the subject-choice process:

> *Now I've got the first trimester out of the way I feel more confident. More experienced. I will be careful next time about how many subjects I do online at the one time. I'll be able to plan for next trimester better because I have more of an idea of what's expected of me and what the costs will be, and how I'll cope with my health* (Monique, 40).

Hafiz's comments are reflexive and positive:

> *Very supported. I've been able to put more effort into establishing myself as a student as well as a worker. In fact, I'm hoping this experience as an online student will add to my work in lots of beneficial ways in the future and hopefully creative ways too. I'm a storyteller. One day this will all be a story too* [laughs] (Hafiz, 40).

Passion and self-discovery were other factors evident in the discussion. Intent and emotional growth are evident in Mallory's comment:

> *I think that I've learned a lot more about myself as well, and I've grown as a person. Because things that I thought before about various different topics, I've challenged them a little bit. Like with one subject in particular it's very focused around corporate social responsibility, and with that subject I kind of became very passionate about some things that I didn't realise I was passionate about before. Doing it online actually gave me more time to think it all through* (Mallory, 30).

Kate is owning her choices and her attitude with her reflective and reflexive comments about growth. She indicates the importance to her family and their reactions to her choices. These comments are insightful and determined but also show at the same time, almost a level of surprise and self-consciousness at her own achievement.

> *I've just learned so much this trimester. I'm grateful for the opportunity to do this online too. The schedule has worked out well. It's busy but I expected that. I really don't think I could have gone into college even two or three days a week. I just couldn't fit it in with the family. You have to be very disciplined online but let's face it, it's my life and I want this degree, so I make sure it works. It's now my passion to make this work* (Kate, 39).

Kate's second comment came at a slightly later part of the second interview. It shows an even more pronounced sense of achievement.

> *I've really, really thought about it. I won't hesitate to do it online again. It's my passion now. It has enabled me to be a better person and a better mother because I can do it online and still be there for my kids– cripes listen to me* [laughs] (Kate, 39).

During the second interview, various deeply personal factors that had influenced the participants in their choice to begin and persist in online study, came to light. It is important to note at this point, that almost despite the past research I had done on these factors extraneous to the university itself, the comments made by this group were highly emotional for both the participants and for me. These comments underlined their transition, their transformation, their 'successful survival', and their positivity and growth.

Monique's powerful narrative shows that her participation as an online learner had an effect upon her wellbeing and even offered a protection from her illness:

> *I'm not sure if you're aware or not Trish but I have breast cancer. When I first got diagnosed with breast cancer just before I started, I considered cutting my study limit down to one subject to see if I could juggle the chemo appointments and things like that. But I didn't cut back because I could be more flexible online. I realised that I actually still had plenty of time and I needed to be studying to get that mental motivation. Take my mind off the cancer. I guess as a distraction, but also, to empower me really. It makes me feel like if I can overcome that, if I can study while I've got breast cancer and getting treatment then I'm doing okay* (Monique, 40).

Kim speaks of her online experience as generating success through her own confidence and agency. Her comment reflects her determination to face and solve problems and keep on going.

> *I'm dyslexic. I'm not sure how I did it, maybe talking to the lecturer and my Boss, I sort of woke up, or maybe grew up, and just started taking responsibility for myself and somehow that worked. It somehow seemed that online worked for me. I'm very grateful for that. I've just done it. I don't know how but I've just done it. Like everything else in life, it's just one of those things that you know you've got to do so you've just got to do it* (Kim, 46).

Kate speaks of positive maturity. Her comment reflects her growing understanding of her identity:

> *I've grown up pretty quick... I had my first baby at 18. I think my maturity does make a difference to my choices like doing this online so I can still work and look after my family. I really understand the importance of getting the degree now and of being part of something I wasn't before this. So yeah, for people like me with responsibilities at work and at home, I guess the age factor does*…[pause] *does come into it in a positive way.* (Kate 39).

Kelly's comment again reflects the liminal journey and the transformative effect of learning. She shows resilience and a growing faith in herself and the learning process, helping her to push through her hard times. She did this study for her own growth, personal development, and fulfilment:

> *Two of my children have profound autism and obviously I'm not with the children's father anymore, so when I first started, actually during the whole twelve weeks, I was having heavy family court issues about custody and child support etc, so every success that I have here at uni is a huge feeling of accomplishment for me. It makes me stronger every single time. That's why studying online was so important. I had time to do what I had to do but it was also something for me in all this shit. I could escape* (Kelly, 29).

Monique, Kim, Kate and Kelly each acknowledged the powerful influence of her online study experience on her life over the trimester in terms of self-empowerment, resilience and transformation. Each of these women had been confronted by highly challenging life circumstances that took a toll on her self-confidence and self-belief; yet notwithstanding the added difficulty of transition into online study, it was that study that ultimately led to a sense of powerfulness which they were able to transfer to other aspects of their life. Chris's comment also epitomises such feelings. His perspective on what he could achieve from online study seems to have undergone a significant shift over the trimester and now embodies profound personal accomplishment.

> *I found going online to study was a very big self-discovery...I really learned about myself and what I am capable of, what I can actually achieve, that I could get started, get through it, that all the hard times are worth it because you just feel proud of yourself for doing it really. In fact, I can honestly say that this is the first time I'm really seeing myself as a whole person* (Chris, 28).

There was indisputable evidence of significant personal growth and improved wellbeing in this group of participants' narratives. Monique (40) saw her transition into online study as not just enabling her own self-learning, and growth in confidence but as also helping her to create a change in self-perception, "...a new sense of self". Luke similarly reflected on how his online journey was "very empowering". He felt it gave him:

> *...a space to hold and voice opinions. Once you get what is going on it's just so much easier. It's a form of taking back control in a way I suppose. It's an opportunity to really solidify my future* (Luke, 30).

8.2.3.2. Words of Advice

This group were very open to the idea of sharing their advice with others. Their words of advice were imbued with a confidence and a comfortable mix of seriousness and fun. Introspective as well as collegial, their words of advice shared with others reflected their own sense of personal motivation for studying and looking for ways to improve themselves. Their message seemed to be one of growth and self-actualisation: it's never too late to develop. They mentioned success coming from self-confidence, dedication, and working hard. Monique's words indicated a sense of dedication and determination. She was able to recommend setting realistic goals, self-belief and perseverance from a first-hand perspective:

> *Understand why you are doing it. Prepare yourself as much as you can for what it will be like. Take Valium and a stiff gin* [laughs] *no sorry* [laughs]. *Keep your goals in your mind. Ask for help and get involved. Mostly don't be too hard on yourself and give yourself time to adjust* (Monique, 40).

Kelly comes back to the importance of understanding language and being prepared:

> *I think my main piece of advice about doing online study is I think you need to be very sure too about what's expected of you. It's no use saying you didn't understand something once the deadline is over for submitting it. Learn the lingo. It's so important and to pay careful attention to what they're saying on the learning portal and through the weekly work* (Kelly, 29).

Kate encourages perseverance and open-mindedness:

> *I'd say it doesn't matter if you think you're not going to be able to focus well at the start, because most likely you're going to get better at it, but go in there with the intention that you want to learn. Because after a while it will become second nature and you will get used to it. I don't think it's ever* <u>*not*</u> [emphasised] *going to be a rocky start, for the first six weeks or so* (Kate, 39).

Although Hafiz had always displayed introspection and maturity in his comments, his perceptions of his own capability to succeed indicate profound growth and change on a deep-seated level:

> *Education is so much more than just going on Google. It's really important to your life. If you really want something and you set your mind to it, you can do whatever you want to achieve, as long as you put your mind to it. Once you realise that, you can do anything* (Hafiz, 40).

8.2.4. Final Comments

These final contributions elevate university from a means to an end to a pivotal and deeply personal undertaking. There is a sense of completeness and transformation about their comments and images. They have moved from conceptualising university as something to be done for others, to an important and fundamental part of self – an "intrinsic pleasure" (Blaxter & Tight, 1993, p. 15).

Luke looks forward:

> *No, I think that just about does it. I'm a satisfied customer [laughs]. There with bells on. I am in for the long haul now. I know it'll be like starting all over again next trimester, but it won't be the same. The real starting bit is over now. Things will be much better I reckon* (Luke, 30).

Kate can't wait to start again:

> *I'm ready and willing. In fact, I can't wait because I got through a whole trimester online ok and now, I'm feeling good. Now I have my head around it I'll be just fine* (Kate, 39).

Hafiz sees the funny side:

> *I actually put stuff up on my fridge* [laughs]. *You know those sayings you look at every day and repeat over and over. The prize comes at the end you might say. Baby steps* [laughs] *all those funny sayings. Then you just kind of look at the light at the end of the tunnel... I told you I really like that name* [laughs] (Hafiz, 40).

Although images were far fewer in number among this group, there were three that particularly seemed to represent the feelings of the post-liminal participants and have, as such, been included in the Final Comments section for this group.

Figure 66: Untitled, (Luke, 30)

Figure 67: Untitled, (Kate, 39)

Figure 68: Untitled, (Chris, 28)

These images from Luke, Chris and Kate all personify completeness, satisfaction and achievement. Persistence has paid off. And the final, Final Comment from Chris the Chef sums up the feelings of this group:

No, that covers it… I think. Just very glad it's over. I need a beer and a sleep.

The following word cloud indicates the common words and ideas contained in the participant data from this '**Crossing-the-Threshold**' group.

Figure 69: Word cloud: 'Crossing-the-Threshold' Group (Author)

The third group's use of words: *proud, happy, relieved, confident, sense-of-power*, was almost as strongly emotive as the those of the first group, but the words themselves, and the feelings behind them were from opposite ends of the spectrum – opposite ends of the tunnel. The first group's perception of being stuck, and the third group's perception of having reached the stage where they were ready to move on, each elicited far stronger emotional reactions than those of the second 'Almost there' group.

Key shifts in feelings about online study among this post-liminal group were demonstrated by shifts in word use, and the frequency of word use between the two interviews. The "changed use of discourse" (Land & Meyer, 2010 pp. 63 & 72) was again

evident. Words that occur primarily in the first interview included many connected with the specifics of online study, such as *learning-portal*, *technology* and *information*. Others included concern about the need to scale back social life and other activities outside of study. A strong preoccupation with assessments is revealed by the large number of mentions in both interviews. Initially, words including *scared, worried, overwhelmed* were often used by all the participants. However, by the second interview, the feelings of the members of the post-liminal group had changed. This was evident in emotional comments about pride and achievement and the use of words such as *coping and satisfied.* Notably, in the second interview, they typically mentioned that they were no longer nervous, having overcome their apprehension regarding online study. Becoming an online student was no longer an issue per se.

8.3. SECTION 2

> *Don't just create better versions of what people already consider valuable. Change the very understanding of what is considered valuable.*
>
> (Palumbarit, 2020)

8.3.1. The Threshold Concept: Becoming an Online Student.

This section is concerned with the fourth research sub-question:

> 4. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

Two points must be reiterated at this stage in the last findings chapter. Firstly, while recognising that there are many discipline-based threshold concepts (TCs) that might impact an adult student transitioning into higher education in the online space, this study does not identify specific discipline-based threshold concepts experienced by the participants. Secondly, a wide-ranging discourse on discipline-based TCs, including primary research and discussion of application into curricula (Barradell, 2013; Meyer, 2016), is evident in the literature. However, despite an ongoing interest in TCs, the current study has failed to find any studies which have considered or identified experience-based

TCs, particularly in association with the transition of adult students into the online higher education learning space.

This study did not set out to prove the existence of an experiential TC. There was no guarantee at the outset of the analysis that any experiential TCs would be identified from the data. Rather, a holistic approach was taken to the identification of one experiential TC. based on the impact of the participants' negotiation of the online space, and their identity disjunction and disruption as they transitioned into this learning space. This experiential TC is *Becoming an Online Student*.

8.3.1.1. The Process of Identification

Barradell (2013) warns that the identification of a TC is challenging due to the continuing evolution of the framework. In truth, it was this evolutionary aspect of the concept of the Threshold Concepts Framework that encouraged my interest to take the analysis one step further (for examples of new approaches to TCs see pp. 104–105, Chap 3: Åkerlind, McKenzie & Lupton, 2014; Baillie, Bowden & Meyer, 2013; Rattray, 2016; Sanders et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2012, 2017). To enable this identification, the following question required an answer: What conditions and characteristics would an experience need to satisfy in order to qualify as a threshold concept?

As previously stated in Chapter 3 (p. 94), the characteristics of a threshold concept (Land, Meyer & Flanagan, 2016, p. 16) are not considered a definitional checklist. Claiming it as such could hamper understanding of individual engagement with a given threshold, and the varied degree to which each characteristic might be individually experienced (Meyer & Land, 2006; Meyer, Land & Davies, 2008). However, Barradell (2013) also advises that the attribution of standard TC characteristics may be used to enable rigour of process during concept identification. The fulfilment of the eight characteristics of a TC in conjunction should therefore have the potential to explain the set of patterns involved in an experiential TC or to predict the occurrence of such a set.

Data was subsequently drawn from findings across all three stages of the participants' transitional evidence: pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal. The participants' troublesome experiences were analysed first before strengthening that identification through the exploration of the other TC characteristics. This particular choice was made because, based on the findings in the current study, the troublesome characteristic was most noticeable. It also applied to participants early in the current study. As Land (2011, p. 176) suggests, "… significant learning is often troublesome, and indeed needs to be, so as to 'provoke' learners to move on from their prevailing way of conceptualizing a particular phenomenon to new ways of seeing". Clear links to the affective dimension of their experiences reinforced this line of thinking.

In an approach similar to that of Rodger and Turpin (2011), who applied threshold concepts to determine "transformative curriculum renewal and planning" (p. 263), once the troublesome aspects of the participants' journey were identified, the other seven threshold concept characteristics were then each applied to the analysed data. This ascertained what, if any, TCs that transcend disciplinary boundaries were impacting the experiences of the participants. When applied together, the eight characteristics: liminal, transformative, troublesome, discursive, bounded, reconstitutive, irreversible and integrative, provided a cohesive description of the threshold concept, Becoming an Online Student (see Chap. 8, pp. 262–263). Table 11 (Based on Table 2, Chap. 3 pp. 94–95) aligns the evidence demonstrating the characteristics of this experiential TC, with the standard characteristics attributed to TCs and the findings of this study.

Table 11: Threshold Concept Alignment of Evidence (Author)

Experiential Threshold Concept: Becoming an Online Student	
Characteristic	*Evidence for 'Becoming an Online Student' as a threshold concept.*

Liminality:	As a liminal threshold concept *Becoming an Online Student* presented:
	• a "stuck place where [the participants] were uncertain about the identity of self and purpose in life" (Meyer & Land 2006, p. 22);
	• an ambiguous and confusing transitional space (Turner, 1967);
	• a destabilisation or loss of specific perceptions of identity, and displacement by a sense of changed identity/identities involving multiple cultural positions;
	• three stages of liminal passage:
	  ○ (1) separation, from former identities;
	  ○ (2) liminality – the in-between phase;
	  ○ (3) re-aggregation (or incorporation) (Van Gennep, 1975).

Troublesome Knowledge:	The troublesome knowledge involved in *Becoming an Online Student* and the accompanying acquisition of a new identity was: • emotionally uncomfortable; • counter-intuitive; • isolating; • unsettling; • disturbing; • disjunctive; • challenged pre-existing understanding (Perkins, 1999); • required letting go of familiar ways of seeing things.

Transformation:	As a transformative threshold concept *Becoming an Online Student* presented:
	• both an ontological and an epistemological shift – a significant change in participants':
	  ○ thinking;
	  ○ understanding;
	  ○ values or attitudes that radically changed their appreciation of themselves and their knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2005).
	• and a shift in identity incorporating:
	  ○ values;
	  ○ attitudes;
	  ○ and confidence.
	• Crossing a threshold means thinking like someone new – in this case, an online student.

Boundedness:	As a bounded threshold concept *Becoming an Online Student*: • delineated a particular conceptual space (Smith, 2017) – in this case, the online space; • resulted in an interplay of contextualised knowing, doing and being (Trowler, 2012); • applied an ontological framing for the online study, providing shape to the participants' identity and mindset (Meyer & Land 2006); • provided an insight into the particular nature of the online space and why one would think or practise in a particular way in this space.

Discourse:	Discourse provides a challenge in every encounter with a threshold concept (Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014). The threshold concept discursive characteristic was evident within *Becoming an Online Student* because: • the adoption of a new and extended language associated with online learning required the integration of new and specific verbal and/or mental formal or symbolic language (Flanagan, 2016); • the adoption of an "extended discourse" (Meyer & Land, 2005, p.375) transforming thinking was required; • the encounter and engagement with language and the [online] space in which this happens was a key factor in transformation (Vygotsky 1930-1934/1978).
Integration:	*Becoming an Online Student* • involved the assimilation and integration of new information or understanding "in varying degrees" (Land, Meyer & Smith, 2008, p. x); • enabled connections between different online phenomena and knowledge that were previously hidden from the learner's comprehension (Meyer & Land, 2005).
Reconstitution:	The reconstitutive aspects of the threshold concept *Becoming an Online Student* provided for*:* • a required and new understanding (Meyer & Land, 2005) of negotiation of the online space: "New understandings are assimilated into our biography, becoming part of who we are, how we see, and how we feel" (Cousin, 2010, p. 2)
Irreversibility:	The threshold concept *Becoming an Online Student* is irreversible in that: • For the *Crossing the Threshold* group, once in control of their identity reformation, their "change of perspective occasioned by acquisition of a threshold concept [was] unlikely to be forgotten" (Meyer & Land 2003a, p. 5).

The experiential concept of *Becoming an Online Student* was supported empirically due to its proficiency in explaining complex patterns of behaviour, one pattern for each of the other TC characteristics in the conjunctive definition (the troublesome, transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded, reconstitutive and discursive patterns). This approach supports two aspects of TC identification: firstly, the claim that this experiential concept satisfies the characteristics attributed to TCs within the Threshold Concept Framework, and specifically that *Becoming an Online Student* is an experiential TC.

8.4. CHAPTER SUMMARY

In order to provide an emerging comprehension of the participants' full journey through their initial foray into the online study space, this chapter examines two main aspects of the participants' journey into and through the first online trimester: firstly, the final shifts in perceptions of self among the three different groups, and the indications of variations in growth in their student identity; and secondly, the threshold concept identified from the findings: *Becoming an Online Student*. It concludes the findings and exploration stage of the data analysis begun in Chapter 6.

At the end of Trimester 1, it became obvious that the participants were at differing stages of their transition. Some participants had forged a sense of self and identity both within and beyond the parameters of study and were clearly post-liminal. Others had gradually acculturated to their online environment and, although still liminal, were poised on the brink of post-liminality. Still, others had remained stuck in an ongoing liminal state of resistance and fear. Persistence and motivation to continue were expressed differently between those who remained in the liminal stage, those who were on the verge of crossing the portal or threshold, and those who had reached the post-liminal stage and crossed the threshold.

The personal journey narrated by each participant provided an intricate and detailed story that, in turn, presents a multiplicity of choice for further discussion. The identification of an experiential TC also offers opportunity for further discussion and further research. So as to acknowledge this and informed by IPA (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999), the following discussion chapter will consider closely the ideas and themes revealed by the data. In response to the research questions these will be situated within wider research and literature and the aim and objectives of the study.

CHAPTER 9:
DISCUSSION

> *The beginning is the most important part of the work… for that is the time at which the character is being formed and the desired impression is more readily taken.*
>
> (Plato, c.375 BC, Book II, The Republic of Plato, 377a–b. p. 54)

Plato's words about the importance of 'beginnings' (c.375 BC, cited in Bloom 1968/2016) reflect the aim of this study: to use the Threshold Concept Framework (TCF) to explore and articulate the experience of adult students 25 years +, beginning their transition into the online higher education learning space. The TCF was used in two ways in this study. Firstly, as a conceptual framework, using as a lens the three non-negotiable threshold concept (TC) characteristics, liminality, troublesome knowledge and transformation. Secondly, the examination of participants' encounters with their liminal journey throughout this research provided an opportunity to consider whether any concepts emerged as being potential candidates as an experiential threshold concept (TC). Following the suggested format of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999), the discussion chapter presents an analysis and discussion of the current study's findings within the wider context of the literature, in response to the research questions:

Primary Research Question:

How do adult learners (25 years +) experience the transition to online degree studies in higher education?

Sub-Questions:

1. How does one group of adult learners describe their first weeks of study in an online environment?
2. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?

3. What types of strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?
4. How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework?

9.1. Overview

As noted in the literature review, there is limited information relating to how adult students 25 years and over, diverse in background, experience and age, subjectively experience and navigate their initial transition into the online higher education space. It is evident that this group is vulnerable to attrition and several studies have examined the relationship between attrition and adult student success in online study (e.g., De Paepe, Zhu and DePryck, 2018: Devlin, 2010; Devlin and McKay, 2016; Kellenberg, Schmidt & Werner, 2017; Lin & Wang, 2015; Rabourn, Shoup & BrckaLorenz, 2015, 2018; Zhai, Gu, Liu, Liang & Tsai, 2017). However, while Lin and Wang (2015) and Tinto (2017) suggest that academic achievement is a predictor of persistence, studies by Choi and Park (2018) indicate persistence and retention appear to be continually evolving as a complex set of factors within the online space. The relationship between the 'beginnings' of the adult students' online journey and early support, intervention and interception among members of this cohort at this "most important part of the work" (Plato, c.375 BC) is largely absent from current discussions. This study argues that if research is to be truly reflective of the reality faced by these students in their transition into the online learning space, and of how this initial time period impacts their identity and persistence, then it is they who need to articulate this experience at its beginning. Subsequently, while guided by the interview process, the focus of the three previous 'findings' chapters was theirs.

In order to give precedence to the voice of the participants, this study used as a lens, the three "superordinate and non-negotiable" characteristics of a threshold concept (Land, Meyer & Flanagan, 2016, p. 16), these being liminality (Turner, 1977; Van Gennep,

1960, 1975), troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 2006) and transformation (Meyer & Land, 2003a, 2003b). An analysis of the study data elicited the identification of three definitive superordinate themes aligning with the three stages of liminality: *The Pre-liminal Stage – Into the Tunnel, The Liminal Stage – Inside the Tunnel, and The Post-Liminal Stage – The End of the Tunnel?* - the 'tunnel' being the metaphor for the liminal space. These three themes became the three findings chapters. These chapters clearly reflect that the choice to study online gave rise to both challenges and changes in the participants' lives.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Turner (1995) and Van Gennep (1960) have established that 'pre-liminal' refers to an ambiguous stage of life and/or experience signifying an individual breaking with the old order and entering the new. Enrolment into higher education constitutes such a pre-liminal stage (Crane & Abbott, 2021). Chapter 6, 'Into the Tunnel', presents the stories of the motivations and practical procedures around the decision to enrol in online study – both the reactions triggered by this decision, and the perceived realities it engendered. It also covers the pre-liminal variations in the participants' perceptions, thoughts and feelings during the early weeks of the transition to online study.

Chapter 7, 'Inside the Tunnel', explores the strategies demonstrated by the participants as they became immersed in the liminal stage of their journey, providing an assessment of how they regarded new and existing relationships, identities, and expectations. According to Turner (1969; 1995), Campbell (1973) and Van Gennep (1975), the liminal space denotes the period in which an individual or community is between two distinct phases of life. Gray (2016, par. 7) explains the 'holding pattern' of the liminal space thus:

> *Any 'betwixt and between' situation or object, any in-between place or moment, a state of suspense, a moment of freedom between two structured worldviews or institutional arrangements. [it] opens the door to a world of contingency where events and meanings — indeed 'reality itself' — can be moulded and carried in different directions.*

This chapter made further contribution to the knowledge by providing depth to the exploration of the lived reality, transition and transformation narrated by the participants. It was at this liminal stage of the journey that the ‘unknown’ of the pre-liminal stage often escalated into further identity disruption. This disruption was triggered for the participants by the developing learning experience and the ongoing requirements of the online environment.

The rich description offered in Chapter 8, ‘The End of the Tunnel?’ identifies the third stage of the participants’ transitional journey as ‘post-liminal’, the period in which an individual crosses the threshold into their new identity and status (Campbell, 1973; Turner, 1969, 1995; Van Gennep, 1975). However, as the question marks in the title indicates, not every one of the participants achieved this post-liminality. Three ‘groups’ were evident by the end of their first trimester, each of whom displayed a multiplicity of differences in their experience of the three stages of liminality. Each of these groups strategised their negotiation with the transition into online learning very differently, displaying a clear demarcation between the ways in which they articulated motives, perspectives, growth and transformation. One group had remained confused and ‘stuck’ in the early pre-liminal stage; the second group was almost through their liminal tunnel; the third group had come to welcome and embrace their identity as online students in the post-liminal stage.

This transitional result has not previously been described in the literature, thereby providing a plethora of choice for further discussion. In recognition of these findings, the current chapter will focus on a range of ideas, perspectives and considerations that unfolded from the data, positioning these within the wider research and literature. This discussion will also flag the significance of this information regarding the two nexūs of this study, the transition of adult students into the liminal online learning space and the associated experiential threshold concept, *Becoming an Online Student*.

9.2. MOTIVATION

When looking into reasons as to why adults study, this study agrees with the current literature regarding adult students enrolling in the higher education online space. What is typically established in that literature is who these students are, the various and varied factors influencing their return to study and the impact of these factors on their choice to study online (e.g., Arrosagaray et al., 2019; Farini & Scollan 2019; Heagney & Benson, 2017; Kellenberg, Schmidt & Werner, 2017; Laming, Morris, & Martyn-Lynch, 2019; Lee, 2017; Rabourn, Shoup & BrckaLorenz, 2018; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; TEQSA, 2020). According to this research, the reasons an older student in Australia is motivated to enrol in university are a diverse and complicated array of self-perceived pragmatic and economic benefits and issues. These include:

- educational achievement or lack thereof;
- "significant work familial responsibilities" (Grattan Institute, 2018, p. 24);
- the number of years since the completion of previous study; and
- current employment status.

According to Devlin (2010), and Devlin and McKay (2016), typically this cohort lead complicated lives and cope with conflicting priorities. Research by Mallman and Lee (2016) into the negotiations made by adult students studying at university, argues the importance and difficulties they face when they must address both a learning identity and their motivations for commencing or returning to higher education study. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), Australia's independent national quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education, note that for the years 2017 through 2020, the predominant extrinsic social and economic forces motivating adults' increased participation in higher education have included:

- an aging and increasingly diverse population;
- later retirement age;

- rapid technological developments; and
- a global economy making constantly shifting demands upon the workplace.

Prior studies have also noted the importance of a series of competing and restrictive life conditions motivating the transition of this cohort into the higher education online study space (Australian Government Productivity Commission Report, 2019; Bimrose & Brown, 2014; Laming, Morris & Martin-Lynch, 2019; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Evidence from the first interview and the early parts of the reflective journals are in line with results from these previous studies showing that the participants were financially independent from parents or caregivers, predominantly members of the paid workforce and many were also responsible for the care of others, including family. The current study's data show that two interrelated perceived needs predominantly influenced and validated the participants' choice to enrol in higher education, these being: 1) benefits to self, and 2) relationship to others. The association between online study and family support, secure and regular job opportunities, and future employment were of particular importance to this group. Having the time to both work and study concurrently motivated many participants in order to retrain for a new role or a better job, while still working or caring for family. A need for a flexible delivery was subsequently a logical concern among the cohort and given as the most prevalent and important motivator for online study as opposed to a face-to-face delivery format. As Len (28) commented, "It's very important to my career." (Chap. 6, p. 187).

Other reasons given by the participants for specifically choosing to study online also supported findings from past research into the study of adults and included:

- acting on a long-held desire;
- taking up education that had been discontinued or previously denied;
- exhibiting experience with technology to an employer;
- improving employment status; and

- not to miss out on an opportunity, either concrete or desired.

David (36) was worried about ‘missing the boat’ (Chap. 6, p. 187), so working and studying concurrently was important. Kelly saw the online study opportunity as her “ticket into full-time work” (Chap. 6, p. 186). Achieving personal benefit, such as gaining an advantage over others and standing out in the crowd when applying for graduate jobs, stood out for Mallory (30) and Brendan (46), who saw this form of study as making it possible to “set myself apart from everyone else” (Chap. 6, p. 185).

The participants’ early narratives also indicate that their age and life experience influenced their perception of access to online higher education, equating to better opportunities and choices. Some participants understood that their responsibilities to family and jobs might limit possible opportunity. However, even within this limitation, the opportunities were still recognised. Hafiz (46) realised he needed a degree and Kim (46) understood the importance to future success of “getting it [the study] right” (Chap. 6, p. 186). It was clear that achieving this advantage by means of concurrently working and studying online did indeed add weight to many participants’ motivation by providing an accessible channel to an alternative and possibly more powerful future. Others, who were not working or worked shifts due to childcare or other family responsibilities, such as Ayla (34), Kelly (29) and Joan (30), saw online study as their only study alternative (Chap. 6, pp. 185–186).

9.3. TRANSITION

While it is recognised that transitioning through a liminal space has a potentially transformational effect, previous studies have shown that this transformation and the accompanying reformation of identity may be sudden, or it may occur over weeks, months or even years (e.g., Land, Meyer & Baillie, 2010; Meyer and Land, 2006). In some cases, it may not happen at all. This study takes these previous findings into a totally new direction

and provides an in-depth analysis of a short but vital make-or-break time period in the lived transitional experience of the participants (See Figure 53, Chapter 8, p. 230).

There is a growing trend within the threshold concepts literature for further enquiry into liminality (Rattray, 2016; Schwartzman, 2010; Thomassen, 2018). This interest centres around variation. Liminal variation affects the occupation and negotiation of a liminal space (Baillie, Bowden & Meyer, 2013). Turner (1995) maintains that we continuously revise our negotiation of a liminal space, traversing these spaces in disordered steps – individually oscillating back and forth and entering occupying, negotiating, and journeying out of a liminal space differently (Cousin, 2006a; Wenger, 1998; Meyer & Land, 2003; Sfard, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Land, Meyer and Baillie, (2010, p. xi) emphasise the 'oscillation' involved in the acquisition of threshold concepts; the "...deviation and unexpected outcomes" (Meyer, Land, & Davies, 2006, p. 202), incorporating "messy journeys back, forth, and across conceptual terrain" (Cousin, 2006a, p.5). The current study supports this aspect of liminal variation. Individual participants oscillated between their old and new understandings, thereby exacerbating the difficulties they faced in negotiating transitional uncertainty (Cousin, 2006a, p. 4).

The literature in the field proliferates with insight into students' initial reactions to the liminality encountered with the negotiation of a subject-specific TC (e.g., Barradell & Peseta, 2016; Meyer, 2016; Perkins, 2010b), and the variation therein (e.g., Baillie, Bowden & Meyer, 2013; Land & Meyer, 2010; Land, Meyer & Baillie, 2010). The drawback, however, is that far less has been written about students' pre-liminal experience in real-time as they contend with the online learning space, their issues with identity, and their need for early and focussed institutional support. Offering an alternative approach to traditional TC studies, the findings in the current study develop this area of research, establishing both the variation evident in the participants' expectations, and the affective impact of the life-changes they experience in reality.

9.3.1. The First Few Weeks

The ways that participants described their first weeks of online study indicated they were undergoing a highly affective experience. Despite the body of institutional evidence espousing guidance for enrolling students, the stories told by the participants described a misalignment between their priorities and those of the university. Tinto (2017) argues that it is up to the university to motivate and support their students. The need for clarification and standardisation of the inherent contradictions and difficulties of online information and processes, both administrative and discipline-based, was obvious. The perceived expectations that the participants would change, and adapt immediately both to the institution, and to the online delivery, also resulted in some of them feeling intimidated, isolated, excluded and that their existing identity was devalued somehow (Ivanic,1998).

Two closely related examples of the results of these expectations stood out within the participants' narratives. Firstly, while prior studies have noted the importance of educational institutions instigating supportive activities to facilitate transition and retention over the first year of an undergraduate degree (e.g., Brunton et al. 2018; Cook & Rushton, 2008; Department of Education and Training, 2018; Kift, 2015a, 2015b; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Larsen, Horvath & Bridge, 2020; Lewis, Heath, Lim & Roberts, 2020; Tinto, 2017), the participants noted that welcoming events often seemed designed for younger traditional learners. A consequence of that impression resulted in feelings of alienation. Particularly in the online context, feelings of being 'different' tended to overwhelm feelings of inclusion (Chap. 6, p. 194–195). Secondly, pre-supposed knowledge around the technology during the first few weeks of trimester proved to be troublesome to many participants. This was particularly in terms of the navigation of the learning management system and receipt of communications from the university (Chap. 6, pp. 188–189; 193–194). Subsequently, many missed out on the university-based welcoming activities for a variety of reasons: either by choice, feelings of alienation, necessity due to time

restrictions, lack of interest in the “kid’s stuff” (Chris, 28, Chap. 6, p. 194; Jess, 28, Chap. 6, p. 194) and “fluff” (David, 36, Chap. 6, p. 195), or confusion with communication. This obviously impacted their online student identity formation and sense of belonging, due as they saw it, to having to negotiate the institutional context of learners that ran counter to their actual requirements, experiences, and ways of being.

With a shifting perception of where they fitted within the online space, the wider university, and even within their own motivation for enrolling, very few of the participants’ previous learning experiences meshed with either their initial experiences or what was to come. It is evident from the first set of interviews and early instalments of the journals that much of the pressure regarding making the correct decisions was due to these feelings. Comments from some participants indicated that this pressure had a profound effect on feelings of inadequacy and, in some cases, fear. For example, Kelly felt useless and stupid (Chap. 6, p. 193), Mallory admitted she neither knew what to ask, nor who to ask for help (Chap. 6, p. 188), and Luke wondered if he had made the right choices (Chap. 6, p. 194–195). This lack of clarity and understanding was pervasive.

However, it is worth noting that Turner also depicted the state of being pre-liminal as being part of “a realm of pure possibility (1995 [1969], p. 97). A further factor influencing the participants’ early transitional experience was the excitement some of them felt at this early stage; while not the dominant emotions, feelings of determination, purpose and overcoming fear began to emerge. Several participants began to see their early experience within the online space as a place for “processes of growth, transformation, and the formulation of old elements in new patterns” (Turner, 1967, p. 99). Along with the anxious comments and evidence of uncertain decision-making, which dominated the early narratives, a feeling of anticipation was also evident from the data. While emotionally uncomfortable, the transition also represented potentially positive transformational and empowering progress (Ellsworth, 1997). Nicole (30) was excited as well as scared (Chap.

6, p. 196), as was Kate (30), who drew herself overcoming the “fear monster” (Chap. 6, p. 197).

9.3.2. The Middle Weeks

The participants’ comments and images toward and throughout the middle weeks of the trimester indicated that their pre-liminal expectations of online study had begun to change into their actual liminal experience. While there was no ordered or set manner in which each participant experienced his or her liminal stage of the transition into the online space, each of the participants displayed evidence of experiencing stages of liminality to various degrees. At this point, it is important to note that although this study fills a gap in the study of adult learners, online study, and the experiential approach to the Threshold Concept Framework as opposed to the subject-specific focus, it does echo the TC research into the process and procedures around academic liminality.

Transition into the liminal stage was provoked initially by confrontation with troublesome knowledge, including new content knowledge, language, and procedures (Perkins, 1999, 2006; Thomassen, 2018), and oscillating transformation involving an online student identity. Interestingly, according to many participants, this confrontation led to the realisation that their usual or past approaches to learning, or their existing online social use of language were no longer necessarily applicable in the higher education online space. That meant that the liminal stage was both a time variously described by the participants as being distressful, frustrating, exciting, creative, and confusing (Meyer & Land, 2005; Timmermans, 2010), while also presenting an opportunity for personal and scholarly development and the expansion of self-confidence for those who could take advantage of that aspect.

This coming to terms with the new order of learning online revealed a more metacognitive approach to negotiation of the liminal stage of transition for some. Hafiz visualised a three-dimensional jigsaw helping him piece everything together so he could

keep control (Chap. 7, p. 224). Several other participants followed suit. By means of their images, Monique (40) and Luke (30) identified that they were gradually experiencing the online space as a different reality, making sense of, and adapting to the differences they encountered. Symeon's (27) realisation that he would have to change the way he worked, "taking a much more independent approach to solving problems" (Chap. 7, p. 223), was a real indicator of movement through the liminal stage. However, it was also in this liminal stage that Mattie (38) decided to withdraw from her studies altogether in order to end the stressful disconnect between who she wanted to be, and the reality she was facing.

Not unexpectedly, in light of the discussion from the previous paragraphs, as well as the relevant literature, in this online space, the participants' usual 'ways of being' as learners did not necessarily apply. They were required to develop new strategies in order to learn and transition further. Some achieved this transition more easily and in a more straightforward manner than others. However, all the participants displayed characteristics of liminality and undergoing transformation and negotiating troublesome knowledge to some degree. For some of them, this step forward did not last.

9.3.3. The Last Few Weeks

The third stage of the participants' transitional journey is identified as 'post-liminal', the period in which an individual crosses the threshold into their new identity and status (Campbell, 1973; Turner,1969, 1995; Van Gennep, 1975). The question mark in the title of this section reflects the finding that at the end of the trimester, there were three distinct groups of participants in the study. This stage of the journey proved to be very different to the preceding two stages.

9.3.4. Those Still in a Liminal Stage

Liminality is described in the TC literature as an indeterminate, constantly oscillating state of transition (Kabo, Day & Baillie 2009). This oscillation was a reality for those participants still experiencing the liminal stage. Perhaps the incongruity of the two

descriptions so frequently used by Savin-Baden to describe the liminal state: “oscillation” and a sense of vague ‘stuckness’, or a feeling of confusion” (2008c, p. 81) perfectly describes the liminal state. The participants in this group still felt both the symbolic and practical severance from their former lives keenly. While most had prepared physically for the online study experience, this preparation offered little solace or protection from their continued disjunctive state. This feeling is further described by Orsini-Jones (2008) as experiencing darkness, and by Savin-Baden (2008c, p. 81), as “being a little bit like hitting a brick wall...alien and counter-intuitive”. In different proportions, and sometimes with different catalysts, they continued to respond to this ‘stuckness’ by avoidance, confusion, or both, causing these participants to spend longer time in the liminal space. “I’m stuck now. If I want to survive this thing, I have to ... have a bloody rest first” (Taylor, 30, Chap. 8, p. 238).

The uncomfortable ontological shift experienced by several participants had resulted in them continuing to feel lost and tired. Adjustment to their online student identity was still perceived by them as being overwhelming, “I still don't know how to get through this. I’m just so tired” (David, 36, Chap. 8, p. 234); “I don't know what I'm doing at the moment. I sort of feel like I'm in limbo, barely surviving really. Really tired” (Ava, 28, Chap. 8, p. 235). Feelings of alienation had shifted from a focus on enrolment and the first weeks of study towards the more general mechanics of online participation. These included continuing difficulties with online navigation, perceived difficulties in relating to lecturers in a non-face-to-face learning environment, excessive time commitments to isolated learning and other university-imposed expectations of effort and engagement in the online space.

While other studies (e.g., Askham 2008; Mallman & Lee 2016; Kahu & Nelson 2018; McAlpine & Amundsen 2011; O’Boyle 2015) have noted consistent identity change among participants during transition into higher education, this group of adults

transitioning into online study remained intimidated and incapable of any online student identity narrative. Their “latent or submerged” self that was “waiting to be reclaimed” (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p.185) remained submerged. Although not specifically referring to either adult students or online study, previous research into conceptual change, and into epistemological development showing that concepts in students’ minds may well have an unstable early existence is supported by this finding (Beard, Clegg & Smith, 2007; Christie 2008; Mann, 2001, 2005; Reay, 2002).

The participants’ responses were crowded with emotive descriptors, revealing that for them study seemed to be still deeply rooted in intense emotion and lack of internal locus of control with no sense of respite in sight (Chap. 8, pp. 235–239). They did not display any expectation of future success, but rather a lack of motivation, the will to achieve, or the expectation of success; chances of realising preconceived ambitions seemed out of their reach. It is perhaps not surprising then that they voiced discontent and disappointment, and that there were no words of advice to upcoming students. It is interesting to note the similarities in the current study with that of Lee, Choi and Kim (2013). In both studies, an inability to perceive the causes of their academic success or failure, a lack of metacognitive self-regulation skills and difficulties with coping with responsibility affected the participants’ outcomes. The current study took this aspect of affective reaction to perceived responsibility even further, however, by highlighting that survival for these participants equalled escape from existing responsibilities. This included the reality of study orchestrated via technology. It was not clear from their narrative, however, if such desire for escape was a permanent strategy or not. Their vacillating trajectories delayed their crossing of the threshold into the post-liminal space (Savin-Baden, 2008b) beyond the end of the trimester and, subsequently, beyond the parameters of this study.

9.3.5. Those Transitioning into the Post-Liminal Stage

The second group were still adjusting to their period of transition. The perception of developmental progress was still not quite clear, but definitely evolving in various ways. Responses in this category reveal aspects of the evolution of participant feelings about their place in the online study space and their student identity. This reaction echoes aspects of Wenger's (2009) social theory of learning, with regard to identity (learning as becoming), and community (learning as belonging). They had identified themselves as online university students but were still coming to terms with the sacrifices and the work that identity required of them. As well as trying to survive, the emphasis in this group was on the growing feeling, sometimes surprising for them, that they had survived after all.

There was more laughter among this group. The metaphorical light at the end of the tunnel was becoming visible. Their confidence had noticeably grown. Their praxes were centred on preparation, bettering their computer and communication skills and more efficient time management. Their most obvious trait development involved positive changes in their attitudes. Of these, the most obvious were curiosity, flexibility and adapting to challenge and change. However, from their comments and images, it is also apparent that none of them had actually crossed the threshold yet (Chap. 8, pp. 241–243).

Comments by several of the participants in this group indicated a growing understanding and better grasp of the discourse used within the online learning space. This new understanding was perceived as a positive factor in their transition – a factor of their 'moving on'. In addition, their words of advice to upcoming online students were mostly positive. Compared to the first group who did not, would not, and probably could not share any advice, there is less emotion and more a sense of growing personal power and agency in these comments, of having come a long way, "Expect to be confused. Things do get better. You're there for a reason, so don't forget what it is" (Symeon 27, Chap. 8, p. 246). However, while standing at the metaphorical 'door' they so frequently mentioned, their

comments and images reveal they have as yet not walked through. Almost there, they are still in a liminal stage of their journey, albeit a later, more developed stage. Approaching final transition, defined by Gale and Parker (2014) as "... a capability to navigate change" (p. 737), was still troublesome for this second group.

9.3.6. Those Who Had Reached the Post-Liminal Stage

Participants in the third group had transitioned into their post-liminal stage and had crossed the 'threshold'. They were able to critically reflect upon their initial experience of the online space, clearly comprehend those aspects that had previously proven troublesome, and work out how to deal with them. This reflection on survival had enabled many to consider how their online transition had facilitated a new sense of identity and self-worth – an outcome in some cases unforeseen but nevertheless appreciated. They each now believed in their identity and status as an online university student and their capacity to belong. The participants' perception of themselves and their online learning environment was transformed. An affective "shift in values, feelings or attitude" (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 7) clearly accompanied this change in their perspective. This transformation included a new familiarity and confidence with the procedures, approaches, experiences, and adjustments required to transition successfully through the different reality of the online learning space.

This analysis aligns with Davies and Mangan's notion that individuals move from membership of one community to another with "changes to their sense of 'self'" (2007, p. 712). As noted by Meyer and Land (2006), in their study on the results of grasping a TC, the shift in identity, values, feelings and attitudes demonstrated by participants in this group flowed from changes to ways of thinking and practising. In further support of the argument put forward by Davies and Mangan (2007), these changes shaped not only the participants' online student identity, but also their perception of past communities and possible future communities. It became evident that a critical aspect of the transformation

undergone by the members of this group was the understanding that what they were experiencing in this post-liminal stage represented only one achievable reality. While this literature supports subject-specific TC work, I reiterate that these findings from the current study support the evidence for an experiential form of TC.

Participants were able to reflect upon future possibilities within their learning context. They were able to visualise, anticipate and even predict further development and further dynamic change, and accept those possibilities. This approach to continued learning suggested that the transformation represented permanent change – not fixed – but ongoing and developing. Any required changes between emergent and existing identities – those at home and work and that of the student – had become easier to achieve, clearer and less ambiguous, and less of a struggle to navigate (Chap. 8, pp. 250–252). Realising and accepting student identity had also provided solace and determination for several participants in this group facing severe health and family issues (Chap. 8, pp. 253–254).

Extrinsic foci were now more evenly tempered with an increased self-belief, resilience and focus on an online student-identity and day-to-day learning concerns experienced in the online space. They described significant turning points in their first trimester, such as their experience of completing assignments and receiving results/feedback. These findings agree with and expand those of the Edwards (2013) study into higher education undergraduate learning practices, in which a strong sense of self-belief helped participants to negotiate their difficulties. Although this resilience varied across participants in this group, all experienced success which impacted positively on their confidence (Chap. 8, pp. 251–253). For Kim (46), receiving assessment results that exceeded her expectations increased her confidence about being an online university student, “I know now I can handle online study” (Chap. 8, p. 251). Chris described how his student identity was linked to a sense of belonging within the institution, “I’m so much

more comfortable with myself ... being here and realising that I have the right to be here" (Chap. 8, p. 250).

These findings align with the literature emphasising the strategies and negotiations an individual may use to communicate what McAlpine and Amundsen (2011, p. 45) refer to as an 'identity trajectory'. By trimesters' end, these participants were able to construct a narrative linking inherently diverse experiences into a coherent self-story merging past, present and future experiences, thus providing "a sense of direction for the student's perseverance [that] allows them to gain control over the ... transition process" (Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens 2009, p.51). Each of the participants in this group was now part of something new, and each of them knew it. Several also asked if they could meet their fellow participants. Their first trimester online was now completed but the potential presented by their post-liminal future was evident in their narrative. As Chris (28) said, "I feel like a uni student now" (Chap. 8, p. 250).

9.4. IDENTITY

Transition encompasses change and the progression from one state, stage or form to something or someone else. However, as this study shows, transition can also be a highly ambiguous phase of life. Studies by Kahu and Nelson (2017, 2018) and Stone and O'Shea (2019) indicate that adult students are a diverse group of people who have made decisions about themselves, and who are self-consciously choosing to reflexively use education to shape their own identities and the future course of their lives. Lizzio (2011) describes a sense of purpose as a factor necessary to a positive student identity. However, while participants in this study may have found that applying their life skills to negotiate the challenges of their new environment to be advantageous, often their decisions incurred a major change from or break with their past lives and past identities. The first trimester was therefore variously perceived by the participants as a time for growth, opportunity and increased confidence, and as a time full of distress, chagrin and confusion. Investigating

the identities experienced by the participants identifies some of the troublesome realities of their transition process.

Understanding how the adult participants formed and managed their identities during their early disruptive experience is vital to understanding what motivated them to become online learners, the hurdles they faced in their transition to online study, and the support they needed to persist (Askham, 2008; Ecclestone, Biesta & Hughes, 2010). Clearly, most participants had a number of competing identities when they enrolled into the online space, and as they embarked on the first trimester of study in the online space, they were variously aware of 'becoming' something new. However, few participants willingly acknowledged a 'new' student identity, finding it complex, contradictory, and positioning them as 'different' to family and friends. There was a perceived lack of fit between the expected student identity they felt they had not yet achieved, and their existing identities as parents, workers, partners, or even their own preconceived idea of 'university student'. Many had difficulty negotiating and strategising these experiences in the pre-liminal stage because the 'new' identity of being a student was not clearly visible or overt, but rather tacit or implied. Christie et al. (2008) describe this process of 'identifying' as an adult student as "a real roller coaster of confidence and emotions" (p. 567).

The student identity itself constituted a complex process requiring far more than spontaneous transformation, and subsequently was not strongly evident at this very early stage of their transition for any of the participants. In this pre-liminal stage of their journey, they were at a disjuncture as they struggled with an interpretation of 'self'. Ivanic (1998, p.11) describes this identity disjuncture and reformation as signifying "the plurality, fluidity and complexity through which people perceive their sense of self". According to Savin-Baden, this loss of sense of self is often accompanied by anxiety and confusion, resulting in anger, and a frustrating need for the "right answers" (2000, p. 87). Such absence of an obvious student identity in the pre-liminal stage definitely increased levels of

uncertainty, insecurity, and lack of confidence in the participants. Mallory (30) felt 'isolated' (Chap. 6, p. 189) from her non-university friends and David (36) was "...not sure what to say... or how to explain it" to his partner (Chap. 6, p. 190). Acclimatising to these changes and feelings took time. The struggle with identity disjunction was mostly demonstrated in their attempts to come to terms with what the participants initially perceived as 'facing the unknown' and turning it into an ordinary part of their daily "life routine" (Hafiz, 40, Chap. 6, p. 189).

What particularly differentiated the liminal stage from the pre-liminal stage was the constant construction and deconstruction of the online student identity apparent in the latter. During the liminal stage of the middle weeks of the trimester, participants left their former sense of reality behind and entered a different reality. A "rupture in knowing" in the participants' existent "meaning frames" became evident (Schwartzman, 2010, p.38). This rupture altered the perceived identity of many participants who had to let go or reconfigure their preconceptions (Baillie, Bowden, & Meyer, 2013; Land, Meyer & Baillie, 2010). In order to maintain an overall sense of coherence and avoid too great a degree of identity struggle during the liminal stage of transition, the new 'online student' identity had to be reconciled with each participant's overall story of 'who' he or she was, both to themselves and to others. They discussed having to change between identities on a day-to-day basis so as to minimise stress. This proved to be difficult for many. In line with the studies of Turner (1969 – 1995), and Van Gennep (1960, 1975), during the liminal stage, it became apparent that the participants had entered a new, highly disturbing affective and cognitive reality; a state of "ambiguity", "social limbo", and being "out of time" (Van Gennep, cited in Turner, 1982, p.24). Some participants progressed through this 'limbo' with more difficulty than others, and in a far-from-straight trajectory.

The notion of positioning themselves as online students and taking in what that meant was troublesome. This in itself was due to a confusing sense of being present, and

yet wondering at the nature of their online persona, *"*Is this who I really am?" (Ayla, 34, Chap. 7, p. 212), and "knowing who I am right now" (Jenine, 32, Chap. 7, p. 213). The way many of the participants negotiated coping was to overlay pre-existing headspace onto new online experiences by superimposing an identity they felt they already had, on what they felt they were missing, or what they felt they should be. Interestingly, uncertainty was not necessarily always described in negative terms. With several participants, liminality and uncertainty actually created an exciting learning space that Jess describes as "Sort of an adventure" (Chap. 7, p. 213).

Many terms have been used to refer to adult students in the higher education sector. Some of these terms used in university, including 'mature age student' and 'adult learner' (ABS, 2017), have become part of the political and institutional lexicon; other terms such as 'non-traditional learner' run the risk of being viewed as derogatory and suggesting a difference based on inferiority, categorising a group of people by what they are not, and highlighting the non-normative nature of the cohort's characteristics and dispositions (Chan, 2017; Chen, 2017; Deggs, 2011; Deggs & Miller, 2018; Falasca, 2011; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Even though it can be argued that this is simply institutional discourse, it became apparent several weeks into the trimester that these titles imposed by the university actually impeded the construction of a student identity, due to being confusing and alienating for those participants who felt like "an imposter" (Lianie, 29, Chap. 7. P. 213; Adrian, 32, Chap. 7, p. 212). Many of the participants began to question what it meant to 'be' an older online learner while in this liminal stage.

Archer and Leathwood (2003) assert that there is no one dimensional identity ascribed to adult students, and that individuals navigate their understandings of identity in a number of ways, meaning that it may be "embraced, resisted or, in some cases, subverted and reconstructed" (p. 177). By the end of the trimester, this study clearly shows that each of these forms of navigation was evident according to the pre-liminal, liminal or post-

liminal status of each individual participant. Those who had crossed the experiential threshold concept, *Becoming an Online Student*, had embraced their developing student identity. This development within subject-specific TCs is described by Schwartzman (2010) as being akin to experiencing a transformative state of liminality in which there is a reformulation of a learner's frame of meaning, involving both a conceptual and an ontological shift. Such a shift among adult participants transitioning into the online higher education online space has not previously been studied.

9.5. Metaphor and Image

The transitional journey is both a cognitive and a deeply embodied one. Existing fragile learner identities further exacerbated the transition to university in the online space (Stone, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). The ontological and cognitive transformations experienced by the participants were exhibited through perceptible changes in identity. Some participant narratives mentioned the considerable affective impact of these changes in both positive and negative terms. Others displayed evidence of a lack of such change, the sense of being 'stuck'. This perception of identity, be it changing or static, was often communicated by means of several common metaphorical threads interwoven through the themes. These surfaced strongly from the findings, prompted by the troublesome nature of the online space, and included analogies to 'fog', the 'jump', 'stairs', a 'roller-coaster ride' and the 'door'.

Coming purely from the participants and therefore not specifically elicited by the research questions, these affective responses indicated the multitude of expectations and coping strategies employed by the participants when dealing with the affective aspect of transition. Strong feelings were elicited, with participants demonstrating shock due to the difficulty of becoming an online student, the work involved, institutional expectations and fear of the unknown. Specifically, the metaphors and images depicted throughout the interviews and the journal entries were in response to the issues perceived by the

participants to be troublesome, for example, feelings of being controlled, having to deal with “new lingo” (Joan, 30, Chap. 7, p. 218), and the widespread feelings among the participants of ‘being stuck’ (Chap. 7, p. 219–223). The participants’ commonly used analogy of ‘the jump’ supports the argument that the early transition was challenging, even shocking. They repeatedly called the beginning of their transitional journey their ‘jumping-off’ stage. This sense of the troublesome yet exciting transitional ‘jump’ seems to have been hard to cope with initially for many. Brendan (46) calls attention to the actual degree of difficulty involved within the ‘jump’ in the pre-liminal stage (Chap. 6, pp. 20–21). The experience of the transition to online study at degree level had such an intense impact on him that he made it clear that he would not want to experience that shock again unprepared. Nevertheless, it did become evident from the first interview and from the reflective journals that some participants were also able to appreciate that a more independent approach was required if they were going to successfully experience the transition; that the idea of this being the right time to begin this education despite the anxiety, was part of their ‘jump’ (Chap. 6, pp. 22-24).

Just as with the earlier analogy of the ‘jump’, references to ‘stairs’ and ‘fog’ expressed the transitional evolution of many of the participants’ online journeys. Although not universal, and still an inconsistent and oscillating trajectory for some (Chap. 7, pp. 214, 216–217), the stairs represented both forward movement and the opportunity to explore as an online student. However, the steps also represented a lack of control where logical progression seemed out of reach (Lianie, 29, Chap. 7, p. 217). Adapting to troublesome new rigours, such as timetables, learning procedures and increased demands, generally caused unease, and were seen as interfering with life. Nicole (30) felt caught amidst a “...bloody steep climb up some bloody steep stairs” (Chap. 7, p. 216). In the first interviews and the first sections of the journals, the data reveal also early feelings of intimidation and fear as a result of uncertainty and lack of confidence (Chap. 6, pp. 194–

197). These early reactions were communicated by several participants as emotive comments and images about being lost, as John (27) said, in a “bloody great fog” (Chap. 6, p. 191).

As previously mentioned, conflicting feelings led to the frequently-used metaphor of ‘being stuck’ (Chap. 7, pp. 219–223) directly alongside the contradictory feelings of going forward, then backward. This troublesome pattern is described by Cousins (2008) as a ‘bottleneck’, a term often associated with Threshold Concepts in the literature. The participants’ narratives about being ‘stuck’ indicated deeply seated issues and yet also expressed some useful and transformative approaches to dealing with this emotional upheaval (Ellsworth, 1997; Levin, 2015; Meyer & Land, 2006; Turner, 1967). This is reflected in the similarities in their experiences and also in the differences in their responses to those experiences. Notably, for some participants, the ‘stuckness’ did not inevitably cause the displacement of identity or cause a major life-issue. It was more about negotiating identity perception. While many remained ‘stuck’, the transformation to a perceived student identity could be seen emerging in several participants, particularly when discussing adapting to change, “It’s not my favourite way to learn but I cope. That’s a step forward, isn’t it?” (John, 27, Chap. 7, p. 222). This is also reminiscent of the idea within the Threshold Concept Framework that the liminal stage represents an environment akin to a holding pattern, during which time development may be nurtured (Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014).

While the reality of the pre-liminal transition was then overwhelming for many participants, the liminal narratives began to show some resilience and determination “...one step at a time” (Mallory, 30, Chap. 7, p. 226). Unfamiliar challenges gradually involved assimilating new information into existing patterns of thought and, for some, readjusting those patterns to make room for the integration of new practices, new perspectives, and new capabilities. While this pattern was not universal among the participant group, once

some participants came to terms with relinquishing their expectations and previous conceptions of online learning, the analogies of a “mess” and “one step forward and two steps back” also appeared in more positive contexts, with far less emphasis on the “two steps back” element. It became evident by trimester’s end that those participants who had crossed the threshold would not be able to return to their old ways of looking at the online space and their role in it (Chap. 7, pp. 223–224). Rather, their growing understanding of what was expected of them as online learners, and how they would have to come to terms with that would be irreversible, another common feature of a threshold concept (Land & Meyer, 2006). Interestingly for these participants, the use of metaphors and the imagery previously common in both interviews and journals became far less frequent. This suggests that these tools were support mechanisms for which this group had no further use.

9.6. DISCOURSE

Meyer and Land (2010) suggest that the progress from the liminal to the post-liminal space is marked by the acquisition of a “level of new conceptual understanding... an irreversible transformation marked by a changed use of discourse” (pp. 63 & 72). This discursive process involves “the acquisition and use of new forms of written and spoken discourse and the internalizing of these” (Land, 2013, p. 2). The current study expands these ideas within the experiential domain. The TC characteristic of discourse presented as an issue as the trimester progressed. Davies and Mangan (2007) suggest that merging a range of prior knowledge enables an individual to ‘learn’ an almost irreversible way of thinking about phenomena (p. 712). This can be beneficial but can also make ‘re-learning’ difficult (Rattray & Land, 2017). The findings in this study support this assertion through evidence of students’ struggles with troublesome language, displaying similarities to Taylor’s study (2008) on undergraduate students’ reflections on negotiating copious first-year content, and confrontation with new forms of language. The participants’ narratives concerning their issues with what several referred to as “academic lingo” add to the body

of knowledge concerning the affective impact and consequences of troublesome language and the part it played in the liminal journey experienced by participants as they negotiated their transition.

Although a lot of the participants were very familiar with the many protocols and etiquette of the online environment, particularly in a social-media sense, other codes of usage, particularly educational codes of usage, were very new. A consistent theme to emerge from the interviews and reflective journals was the challenge caused by the emotional confrontation with what was seen as an alien, and often 'noisy' online educational language (Chap. 7, pp. 217–219). For those with little experience of online communication and language, these encounters reflected comparable burdens to those found within a cross-cultural experience involving a different language, new expectations and tacit understanding. Len (28) contemplates the need for a "firm grasp of online terminology" (Chap. 7, p. 218). Joan (30) speaks of getting used to a "whole new language almost" (Chap. 7, p. 218). However, for those participants who had crossed the threshold by the end of their first trimester, the spectrum of online discourse no longer presented difficulty, and notably, their own discourse – their descriptions of 'self' – had changed. As Chris (28) says, "I can honestly say that this is the first time I'm really seeing myself as a whole person" (Chap. 8, p. 254).

9.6.1. The Suggested Experiential Threshold Concept: Becoming an Online Student

According to the literature, a threshold concept is a transformative realisation that, once grasped, allows for a significant shift in perception and understanding (Land, Cousin, Meyer, & Davies, 2005; Meyer & Land 2003a, 2003b; Timmermans & Meyer, 2017). While the current study did not set out to prove the existence of a non-disciplinary experiential threshold concept associated with the transition of adult students into online higher education study, the recognition of the threshold concept (TC), *Becoming an Online Student* aligned extremely closely with the study's findings (see Chap. 8 pp. 261–262):

- The liminal transition into the online learning space was difficult to comprehend, absorb, negotiate or make allowance for within the participants' "orienting frame of reference" (Schwartzman, 2010, p. 30);
- Participants got 'stuck' and could not move on in their development and thinking if they could not make allowance for that TC, or it was not understood, or able to be negotiated; and
- Mastery of this threshold concept resulted in a transformative ontological shift in the learner's own identity and their view of the world, along with an affective factor such as a change in feelings or attitude (Land, 2013).

9.6.1.1. The Still-Stuck Group

By the end of the trimester, the *Still-Stuck* group remained identifiable as the "liminal personae" (Turner, 1969, p. 95) grappling with becoming online students; not much had changed since their enrolment. This group had not yet grasped the threshold concept of *Becoming an Online Student*. There was still no metaphorical 'light at the end of the tunnel' for them. The state of disjunction that had begun with the experience of thinking like an online higher education student and encountering knowledge and practices that were troublesome to grasp continued with negotiation of that troublesome experience (Cousin, 2010). This ontological shift included new online environmental processes that could not be integrated within the participants' mental schema. This shift caused feelings of alienation, confusion and even physical reaction, often related in the TC literature (e.g., Cousin, 2006b; Kiley & Wisker, 2009; Meyer & Land, 2003; Savin-Baden, 2008b).

> *It's all connected. I can't separate the online issues with the life issues unfortunately. Like I'm drowning to be honest. I worked so bloody hard I was just overwhelmed, so I'd stop. I wanted to throw it all down the toilet. I hate that damn computer. All the tech stuff, language, getting it all worked out in time etc but* [pause*] it was tough.* [pause] *Still is. I've even lost weight* (Taylor, 30).

There was still a sense of previously held beliefs and conceptual stances having been lost. The often-overwhelming sense of being 'different' remained troublesome and

highly affective – indeed, as Len (28) said, "Not being one thing or another". Indeed, it was clear from the interviews and journal images that entering 'studenthood' constituted an ongoing liminal process in itself. Attempting to master the online university "rules of engagement" that were often tacit meant drawing upon reserves of "emotional capital" (Cousin, 2014, p. 22).

> *I'm used to being in control and I hate this bloody feeling of not feeling* [pause] *not being in charge of my own life still. Not really part of anything. It's so bloody tiring and* [pause] *and I just hate it all. I mean it's so* [pause] *I'm so 'by myself'. I get this feeling overwhelming me. I can do the subjects mostly but where is* [pause] *where am I? Do they even know me? Who I am?* (Brendan, 46).

9.6.1.2. The Almost-There Group

For those in the *Almost-There* group who had 'found their feet' earlier, the uncertainty of engaging with the online liminal space did not necessarily result in negative descriptions. They displayed evidence of negotiating their way through the threshold concept, *Becoming an Online Student,* by the end of their first online trimester. While their reactions were still ambiguous, they could see the 'light at the end of the tunnel' getting closer. For these participants, there was still evidence of the impact of leaving a familiar position and moving to a new and less certain territory, still some evidence of loss and reformation of identity and loss of control. However, these feelings were accompanied by a growing sense of self-confidence, excitement, and anticipation. Asking "Now what?" they found themselves re-examining their position, entertaining new possibilities, and feeling excitement and stimulation triggered by these uncertain circumstances.

> *Well, I'm still here. Got all my fingers and toes* [laughs]. *I survived. Tired But feeling ahhh ok. Feeling good. Still not sure what's coming but I certainly feel more* [pause] *ummm, more ready to keep going online. I kinda feel I've won something.* [Laughs]*I don't really understand it myself, but kinda more satisfied with myself. Looking forward to coming back and new stuff I think* (Adrian, 32).

Grasping underlying structures of information content through the understanding and use of academic discourse had a transformative effect on many of these participants' discourse, perspectives, self-efficacy, motivation and identity:

> *Once I stopped being so debilitated by fear of actually being online, I started to understand* [pause] *I suppose* [pause] *understand the language more. Then I felt more a part of what was going on. It was like ticking a box in a way. Ok got the technology – tick. Ok got the language – tick* [laughs]. *Yeah, I mostly know what they're talking about anyway* [laughs] (Antonia, 38).

> *To be honest I'm glad this first bit is over, but I'm mostly looking forward to next trimester. Bit scared, but I know more about it now. You know, what they're all talking about. I think I'll cope much better. Should be good [laughs]* (Ayla, 34).

9.6.1.3. The Crossing-the-Threshold Group

The members of the *Crossing-the-Threshold* group had achieved a locus of control and an understanding of *Becoming an Online Student* by trimester's end. For these participants, the ability to grasp this TC was in varying degrees integrative, transformative and affective. Participants in this group had transitioned through the metaphorical liminal tunnel with regard to identity, challenge, negotiation, growth, and understanding. Their comments indicate an understanding and acceptance of their new identity and status as online university students. Luke, for example, evaluates his first trimester at university, stating:

> *I can't believe it. I am actually good at being an online student. I'm actually passionate about it now. I feel more confident. More whole. God I'm a philosopher now* [laughs] (Luke, 30).

It is obvious from the participants' comments that across the three groups, their liminal journeys did not constitute a "... simple passage in learning from 'easy' to 'difficult'...", rather it "... often involved messy journeys back and forth..." (Cousin, 2008, pp. 259-260). The experiential threshold concept, *Becoming an Online Student* and the accompanying praxes and traits demonstrated by the participants in the three groups were not separate or discrete characteristics impacting them in a formulaic, automatic or predetermined order. On the contrary, as evident from the data, they did not mean the same thing for each participant, nor were they each negotiated or strategised in the same way.

Rather, each was an integrated feature of the three stages of liminality, variously experienced and displayed by the participants during their first trimester online.

This experiential TC centres on concepts critical to adults to effectively negotiate the online higher education liminal space: identity disjunction, disruption and reformation and the ability to then understand and negotiate the online learning environment. Cousin (2010, p.2) and Meyer (2016) argue that the true nature and grasp of a threshold concept manifests itself through truly altered behaviour (transformation). It was evident from the data that changes in identity and the accompanying alterations in behaviour had taken hold only once the participants had become aware of changes in their own ways of thinking and practising. It was very evident from the findings discussed in this chapter, therefore, that by trimester's end, not all participants had grasped this threshold concept. Some had experienced and negotiated it relatively quickly and moved on, some had taken longer but were close, and several had not been able to negotiate this TC at all, including Mattie, the one who had left the course.

The next chapter, Chapter 10, presents the conclusion to this thesis. Written in the manner of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999), this final chapter explains the contribution made by the current study. It discusses the strengths and limitations of the research process and the implications for knowledge raised by this research. It closes the study with recommendations for further research and some final reflections of my own.

CHAPTER 10:
CONCLUSION

The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, and is completed.

(Bernard's final soliloquy, Virginia Woolf, 1931, p. 238)

This study is significant for several reasons. Internet-connected devices now constitute portals or conceptual gateways across a range of designed learning spaces (Ham, Richardson & Richardson, 2020). Within diverse arrangements of time and place, technology is redesigning how education is purchased, experienced, engaged with, and ultimately used. Due to the multiple roles and responsibilities adult learners face, there is increasing demand for this accessible and timely education both in Australia and worldwide, and the numbers of adults enrolling into in the higher education online learning space is burgeoning (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020b). This student cohort has a range of complex, complicated, equivocal and nuanced backgrounds, past experiences, values, cultures, ages, and beliefs. Crossing interlinked and multilayered conceptual thresholds within the online space for new adult learners is complex, and according to the literature, this group is vulnerable to attrition. This study contributes to an understanding of these challenges by using the participants' voice to shed light upon the reality of their early transition into the online higher education learning space.

10.1 Contributions to the Knowledge

This study contributes to the body of knowledge about the transition by adult students into the higher education online learning space. This has been achieved using a double hermeneutic cycle research design based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Chap. 4, pp. 161–163) in an evidence-based approach. The research design and choice of methods permitted the affective nature of this transition and encounters with the threshold concept, *Becoming an Online Student,* to be realised in real-time. Although the

study is small in scope, the methods and analytical framework applied to this research show promise for further study of the affective dimension in online higher education, particularly among those cohorts not classified as traditional.

As Frank (2010, p. 10) notes, “Stories... remind us that we have to live with complicated truths”. The truths revealed by this study – this story, *are* complicated. The primary aim was to research the experiences of adult students at a very personal level as they transition into online higher education just prior to, and during their first trimester of study, with a view to having a positive impact on the early understanding, support, persistence and retention of this growing cohort. The participants not only chose to trust me with “a time” and “a place” in their lives, but I was also welcomed to walk with them on “a journey” (Anonymous, 1993). Using the Threshold Concepts Framework as a lens, the stages of this journey have been identified, and the twists, turns and bumps in the path have been highlighted, revealing the affective nature of the participants’ significant engagement with liminality, troublesome knowledge and transformation. ‘Walking’ with the participants as they experienced the affective dimension of their experiences of transition was both illuminative and promising in terms of future research. Indeed, based on participant narratives, this original body of evidence makes several new contributions to the study of online learning.

Davies and Williams (2001) argue that for adults, transitioning into university is a challenging and emotional high-risk undertaking that involves a considerable level of personal investment. The current study, however, goes further, extending the work by demonstrating this alignment to the liminal experience within the transition into the online learning space. As the story unfolded, it became clear that the transition undergone by the participants was an ongoing metamorphosis; mercurial – an oscillating process signified by the crossing and re-crossing of the limen inherent in the troublesome nature of the online space, rather than something beginning and ending within a predetermined interval.

During their transition, the participants arrived at several realisations. Some of them ultimately found inspiration, positive challenge and a self-efficacy they had not noted in themselves previously; all of them to various degrees found that previous knowledge could not always be relied upon, expectations may not be met, isolation was a reality on several levels, and that support may not always be forthcoming. Their realisations posed significant issues eliciting affective reactions that proved almost too much for some, and that for one, resulted in the end of the journey. These findings align with Land's argument that mastery of TCs can require a disconcerting ontological shift in the learner's world view, identity and affective elements, including changes in feelings or attitude (2013). It also aligns with Meyer (2016), who posits that TCs encompass not only the ability to understand something, or the fact of understanding something, but also an altered way of viewing, living and experiencing that knowledge. However, the current study achieves these alignments *and* makes several new contributions to the scope of research into the Threshold Concept Framework (TCF) by taking a different approach to its 'usual' application.

To start with, the parameter of this study is defined by the timeframe just prior to and during the first trimester (twelve weeks). In examining this initial period of online preparation and online learning, the focus of this study differs from the direction taken in the current literature. Such literature predominantly centres upon the whole of the First Year Experience of students across the board (e.g., Kift, 2009, 2015a, 2015b; Kift, Nelson & Clark, 2010), or first-in-family students entering higher education (O'Shea, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2018, 2020a, 2020b; O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015, 2017). As such, the participants' negotiation of the online learning space at this 'beginning' stage contributes additional nuance and relevance to the study of early online learning experiences and highlights the importance of support for transitioning adults as a specific cohort in the early stages of their transition.

The descriptions by the participants in this study of the nature of their particular experience with troublesome knowledge also argue for and give credence to two new findings concerning the scope and domain attributable to TCs. Firstly, the approach to the grasping of a threshold concept and the accompanying transformed behaviour demonstrated by learners has historically been determined and circumscribed by troublesome subject content and curricula (Barradell & Peseta, 2014, p.263). While the literature in this field proliferates with examples describing discipline-based and subject-specific TCs with which I concur, this study demonstrates that these participants were dealing with yet a more universal level of transformation - that of the experiential TC within a learning space, rather than the subject-specific TC. In this case, that experiential TC was *Becoming an Online Student*.

The second finding refers to how engaging with the troublesome knowledge encountered in an experiential TC instigated a series of oscillating transformations that manifested the three stages of liminality, these being pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal. Many TC scholars (e.g., Cousin, 2010; Meyer, 2016; Rattray, 2016; Schwartzman, 2010; Thomassen, 2018) propose that the grasping of a TC is demonstrated by altered behaviour. For the group designated as remaining pre-liminal at the end of the trimester, there was very little to no evidence of awareness around shifts in identity, or alterations to previous modes of behaviour. Rather, the experience of their transition into online study left them lost, with feelings of isolation, failure and confusion. For those liminal and post-liminal participants who, in varying degrees, came to terms with the proposed experiential TC, *Becoming an Online Student*, their perceived shifts in identity and behaviour were welcomed. Nevertheless, their realisation of these changes took effect only once they had discerned, and then accepted variations in their ways of thinking and acting. Only then were they able to articulate advances in their own self-efficacy and resilience. For all the adult participants involved, whether classified into the pre-liminal, the liminal, or the post-

liminal stage of transition, I argue that the affective nature of encounters with the proposed experiential TC *Becoming an Online Student* exacerbated the difficulty and complexity of their transition into online study.

Therefore, from the point of view of empirical research, this study contributes a significant addition to reflection upon the use of the Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF). It offers a critical review as to whether the traditional discipline-based or subject-specific denotation of a threshold concept is the only possible configuration of this framework, as well as contributing an original and effective conceptual approach. Rather than employing the traditional discipline-based approach, the Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF) was reconceived as a lens in a broader sense, and from a more pragmatic perspective: a spatial framework for the liminal cognitive online learning space. Employing this reconceived TCF and concentrating on liminality, troublesome knowledge and transformation, an experiential threshold concept *Becoming an Online Student* was identified. Encounters with this threshold concept have aggravated the difficulties experienced by participants in transition. It therefore reflects the challenges faced and the interventions required for successfully transitioning liminal spaces. In so doing, as a threshold concept *Becoming an Online Student* advances a new experiential lens, through which and with which, those expediting a high-quality student experience can design and facilitate their work.

This study also contributes to TC research in terms of valid practice recommendations. In Chapter 3 (pp. 107–108), it was noted that varied applications of the TCF have resulted in levels of ambiguity concerning the definitions of threshold concepts in published research. Most of the existing literature relies on exploring discipline-based threshold concepts identified by academics (Chap. 3, p. 92). Highlighting potential contenders by means of research into learners' troublesome experiences as seen through the lens of liminality, before strengthening that identification through the exploration of the

other Threshold Concept Framework characteristics, presents an original approach contextually applicable to a range of sectors. This approach would enable researchers to participate in a dialogue using a common student-based method rather than the more commonly used facilitator-led methods of identifying threshold concepts.

In summary, there is a paucity of research focussed on adults as they transition into the online space. This study offers insights into the personal journey of adult students in their first trimester of online higher education study, the triggers, interventions and processes that may support or hinder persistence or attrition at this early stage, and the impact of the liminal aspects of that journey upon their persistence and retention. It represents a substantial contribution to our understanding of the nature of both threshold concepts and transformative ways of thinking during such periods of transition. It has contributed evidence of a broad and diverse range of emotional responses to the transition, thereby enabling insight into negotiating experiential TCs, and seeing the connections with the affective dimensions of learning in the online space which flow from those negotiations. These responses spanned intense feelings of tiredness, failure, fear and disappointment, through excitement, anticipation, perplexity and perseverance, to accomplishment, astuteness, self-efficacy and resilience. These are strong messages. With respect to the participants' experiences during their transitional journey, these messages invite both further research, and potential opportunities for institutions to address them effectively and early.

10.1.1. COVID19

Prior to the global disruption to higher education instigated by the COVID19 pandemic, minimal attention was paid within research studies in Australia to the very early transitional stages of the online student experience of older students. Since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, copious scholarly articles and institutional blogs have targeted the challenges and opportunities facing online higher education learning space during

lockdown (for example, Amir et al., 2020; Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Li & Lalani, 2020; Mishra, Gupta & Shree, 2020). Nevertheless, there are still very few that focus on the lived early transitional experiences of members of this growing cohort, many of whom are returning to education after a considerable hiatus in learning. Although the current study occurred before the onset of the global COVID19 pandemic, the findings will nevertheless contribute to the literature an original body of evidence that informs understanding by exploring the experiences of adults through this early transitional journey at a very personal level.

10.2. Strengths and Limitations of the Research Process

The use of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology proved to be an appropriate choice for this research. The design of the study allowed for several points of data collection throughout the trimester, being two interviews and the reflective journals. These methods enabled participants to reflect on their experiences and explore their own journeys in a very personal way, providing considerable data and a flexible analytical structure which allowed the aim of the study to be addressed. The approach proved to be constructive in gaining a real-time perspective while experiences were fresh in participants' minds. Many spoke to me about how being involved in the study helped them, as they felt listened to and had someone with whom to discuss their concerns. This is an effective research approach that will not prove to be difficult to reproduce.

Every research study, however, has inherent limitations. The experiences of this particular cohort of first trimester students cannot be seen to entirely replicate those engendered by other higher education contexts, or indeed by other groups of students not classified as 'traditional'. The participants' insight into the reality of online learning could not be attributed to any singular quality or inherent reasoning. Rather, it reflected an interplay of several factors. These factors included diversity of the participants'

personalities and beliefs; the prior experiences of each – educational and otherwise; the location, context and timing of the interviews; my role as the interviewer; and the interviews themselves. Each of the participants in the current study consequently had a unique viewpoint. Each of these viewpoints was characterised by personal qualities, particular circumstances and also, by the fact that, with one exception, and seemingly contrary to the literature, they persisted to the end of the trimester in spite of challenges or setbacks. While this is a kind of bias, and being a fundamental aspect of this study, must be recognised as such, there is obvious scope for applications both beyond the Australian context and for further study that could feed back into all modes of learning for mature students.

IPA methodology has been used as an interpretivist approach to present lived-experience in as natural and unfiltered a way as possible, while at the same time accepting that all interpretations are language-bound. There will always be a limitation presented by the gap between the participants' lives and the actual words that are available to describe their reality. An example of this discursive distance was highlighted by the ways in which the participants reflected upon their preparation for the online course. The "leap of faith" referred to in Chapter 6 (pp. 199–200), in fact, indicated a widespread fear of the unknown. Devault (1990, p. 97) calls this disjuncture "linguistic incongruence" and argues that there can be problems when using prevailing forms of language to accurately communicate personal reality. Rather than being transparent (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995), language can be "...persistently slippery, unstable, and ambiguous..." (Scheurich, 1995, p.240). The participants' many motives for online higher education study were articulated subjectively. Stories of transition, persistence and engagement were seldom ordered, consequently often resulting in an intrinsically messy and convoluted discourse. In order to balance this limitation and to better understand the participants, and not impose meaning upon them,

their various narratives have been meticulously reproduced and further contextualised and grounded through reference to the words of others in the participant group.

In spite of these limitations, the study provides a platform for in-depth analysis that is informed by individual experience. The intention is to evoke a personalised interpretation and response to the online transitional experience of adult students, with a view to additional discussion regarding this area. Accordingly, the validity and value of this study will, in the long run, be determined by both the readers of this thesis and by the participants themselves, many of whom appreciated the opportunity offered by the study to review and explain their transitional journey.

10.3. Practical Implications

Several practical implications can be drawn from the findings of this study. Now that online delivery has become so prevalent, my choice of focus adds to the existing scholarship in higher education around issues with transition, identity, persistence and attrition among the burgeoning adult student cohort transitioning into online higher education in Australia and elsewhere. The need to appropriately address adult student expectations before and during the first trimester in online higher education has been demonstrated in the three findings chapters. These findings have implications for institutional change, effective policymaking, decision-making, and future implementation of online learning. Crucial areas that need most attention include (but are not limited to):

- institutional policies;
- protocol and guidelines;
- technological infrastructure and resources;
- instructional delivery;
- staff development;
- potential inequalities; and

- collaboration among the key stakeholders facilitating adult learner transition into the higher education online space.

Arguably for adult students, access to role models and support in understanding the distinctive cultural and academic expectations of online study may be limited. Proactive preparation targeted at adults, for example, targeted adult support networks, including the position of an adult student-focussed Concierge, should be encouraged in any institutional/programme information, or pre-entry orientation. Affective turning points and milestones from enrolment through to the end of the first trimester and beyond must be considered to counteract the impact of negative events. Such interventions can positively impact on the adult online student identity. The conflict between different identities faced by adult students, particularly those from equity groups, should be acknowledged in this process (Webb et al., 2017).

In particular, as demonstrated in the current study, two important aspects of the communication process have practical implications. Adult students face barriers to successful transition into online study not necessarily faced by other students. Institutional stakeholders need to be made cognisant of the probability of extreme affective aspects of adult students' experiences of transition into the online space in order to flexibly prepare for this happening. Forewarning the students themselves of the affective nature of transition may help to address some of the uncomfortable emotional issues experienced prior to and throughout the first trimester. This communication should include relevant information needed to reflect on possible strategies they may employ in overcoming typical challenges in the online learning space. These include ways for the adult students to access targeted assistance with academic skills, computer skills, adult-focused counselling, and the provision of the aforementioned Concierge focussed upon this cohort and their specific needs. Clarification of what adult students do expect, what they can expect, and what the institution can specifically provide will support all stakeholders and help to

overcome unrealistic expectations. Dedicated support systems need to be set in place in order to provide this clarification.

Participant narratives illustrate that factors influencing identity formation need to be particularly targeted for recognition. I would argue that this study provides evidence that the Threshold Concepts Framework can be applied to the identification of the appropriate support systems required to address key areas of affective and identity issues faced by adult students in their transitional journey. The results from this study encourage practitioners and academics to further explore practical methods of engaging with experiential threshold concepts in providing proper interventions to address the reported challenges, particularly in the most critical areas of transitional support. In this way, our theoretical understanding is supporting ongoing practical application within student support and professional service structures.

10.4. Recommendations for Future Research

When I was a child, I read two books written in the late 1800s by Susan Coolidge, *What Katy Did* (1872/2009) and *What Katy Did Next* (1874/1994). I must confess to being influenced by the titles of these two novels when framing my research. I wanted to know what adult students did when they made the life-changing decision to transition into online higher education. A good story makes you want to know more.

The participants in the current study were palpably shocked by the experience when their pre-liminal expectations turned into their liminal realities. However, it is important to note here that my study does not presume homogeneity among adult student populations. The acknowledgement of this plurality calls for continuing exploration into this area. Further research is required to better understand the expectations, perceptions, hopes and aspirations of specific cohorts. Most importantly, in support of professional colleagues working to support the student experience, further exploration is required into the liminal stages that adult students in higher education pass through, the effect of specific

structures or interventions that may ease transitions, and the identification of other points of transition where data can be collected. Threshold concepts and liminality contribute a lens through which this further exploration and development of approaches to student experience quality are possible, both at an individual institutional level and in larger comparative studies, representative of both national and global contexts.

I suggest other areas of future research might include a comparative longitudinal investigation of how students conceptualise the outcomes of university study before starting, and the determination of the actual outcomes at the completion of the degree. It was also interesting in the current study that the motivation to study online originally articulated in job-related terms, later adopted a more experiential and personal tone. How motivations, expectations and ambitions vary between student groups, for instance, younger and older students, would also contribute to this domain and add to the collective knowledge about transition, retention and persistence. In light of the COVID19 pandemic and the resulting enforced online learning, a comparative study of learners' reactions to both online and face-to-face study would also be beneficial. However, given the profusion and diversity of university environments, future research in these areas should not only designate different student groups but also the distinct categories of institutions and delivery modes. Student experience at regional and rural universities, for example, is qualitatively different to that within an inner-city environment, and one hundred percent online delivery is distinct from the face-to-face or blended modalities.

This research has also contributed to addressing the paucity of literature around the use of experiential threshold concepts. I contend that the identification of an experiential threshold concept is viable, and a valid topic for further research. I also suggest that the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodological approach could be further employed to research students' encounters with the affective dimension of experiential threshold concepts. This could be undertaken, for example, either in relation to transition

into undergraduate studies, or by positioning that early transition experience within the more encompassing evolution of the students' journey throughout their studies, as mentioned above.

I propose the need for researchers in the field of threshold concept research to review their strategies for bringing clarity, thoroughness and shared understanding to identification. Co-ordinated research incorporating a broad scope of stakeholders could also generate the development of a common approach to the definition and identification of potential experiential threshold concepts applicable to higher education. I suggest that this approach offers significant potential for informing practice through which the adult student transitionary online experience can be enriched and through which institutions can best organise resources to achieve strategic aims for this cohort.

10.5. Personal Reflections

In this thesis, I have explored adult students' experiences of transition into the higher education online space through the lens of the Threshold Concepts Framework. I undertook this study to extend the professional and academic knowledge concerning this transitional journey, and to encourage discussion, targeted support and further research in this area, so as to ultimately assist future students with their transition. The students were not alone on this journey. My voyage as a PhD student constitutes my own liminal journey; a journey in which I have intimately experienced each of the Threshold Concept Framework characteristics. This experience, I must admit, was unexpected. As with any journey, it is frequently hard to comprehend at the beginning, just where you will finish; despite a detailed map, twists, turns and sometimes just getting lost are unavoidable hurdles.

For example, in the early days of the study, I struggled with seeing how the different components of my research (including the name of the study) would fit and interact together into the 'big picture'. Trafford and Leshem (2009) maintain that the

concept of synergy is an intrinsic element of "doctorateness" (p.308). An ontological and conceptual refashioning of my identity personally, professionally and as a student was elemental to my understanding of connections and relationships. Having established a structured framework based on the Threshold Concepts Framework early on, my communication with the participants, although challenging, was not too daunting. However, to accomplish 'doctorateness', I had to work out how to fashion this structure into a rational, logical and reasoned line of argument, a process itself identified as a threshold concept in previous study by Kiley and Wisker (2009). While this process had been discussed with my supervisors, cognitive dissonance still resulted in my understanding developing slowly. Luckily, I was also able to present my study at conferences and talk with colleagues about my research. At that point, what my supervisors were saying began to gel. Conceptual change and a reframing of my existing schema enabled me to cross a threshold as a PhD student.

While uncertainties and troublesome experiences have been constant companions, they have enabled the insights to progress along the transitional road toward 'doctorateness'. As this journey reaches a conclusion, new insight and knowledge have evolved, albeit in numerous ways different to that originally envisaged or expected. My PhD journey ultimately equates to a journey of emancipation, a redesign of my previous identity. I am facing a final threshold of transition of my own: that of a higher education senior facilitator with some experience of research, approaching and anticipating a post-liminal state as a post-doctoral senior facilitator and researcher. I hope to continue to contribute to both areas of practical and theoretical knowledge once my 'doctorateness' threshold has finally been crossed.

10.6. CONCLUSION

To sum up, this study aimed to reveal the adult student perspective on the experience of transitioning into an Australian university within the online delivery space.

This aim has been realised by means of rich, descriptive detail revealing and acknowledging the multiple and complex challenges, upheavals and achievements experienced by those involved. The voices, images and words of individual participants have been prioritised in this process, as they adapted, rejecting or revising former schema and misconceptions at differing rates, refashioning new knowledge and schema, and struggling with shifts in identity and affective impacts of the liminal journey.

This study will add depth and texture to the existing data. As yet, most research into threshold concepts and liminality has been discipline-based. The characteristics of the Threshold Concept Framework, in particular, liminality, adopted in the current study have exposed critical points in the adult student experience – that of transitioning through a new threshold into the online higher education space to 'become' online university students. I argue that this epistemological and ontological framework renders both the online liminal space and the student experience within more available to analysis. As such, it holds significant potential for informing practice in offering nuanced and accessible support structures to equip transitioning adult students to respond to change, assist them to become 'unstuck' and to navigate the transformative progression of their liminal journey (Land, Meyer & Flanagan, 2016), thereby enriching their experience and motivation to persist. I have truly appreciated the opportunity to 'walk' the journey with these adult participants.

REFERENCE LIST

Abbad, M., Morris, D., Al-Ayyoub, A.-E., & Abbad, J. (2009). Students' decisions to use an eLearning system: A structural equation modelling analysis. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, *4*(4), 4–13. https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v4i4.928

Adams, A. (2012). *Re-Awakened [Angel Creek, Book Two]*. Create Space Publishing.

Adedoyin, O. B., & Soykan, E. (2020). Covid-19 pandemic and online learning: The challenges and opportunities. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1813180

Åkerlind, G., McKenzie, J., & Lupton, M. (2011). *A threshold concepts focus to curriculum design: Supporting student learning through application of variation theory*. Australian Learning & Teaching Council. https://eprints.qut.edu.au/69603/1/69603.pdf

Åkerlind, G., McKenzie, J., & Lupton, M. (2014). The potential of combining phenomenography, variation theory and threshold concepts to inform curriculum design in higher education. In J. Huisman & M. Tight (Eds.), *International perspectives on higher education research II* (Vol. 10, pp. 227–247). Emerald Publishing Group Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1108/s1479-3628(2014)0000010017

Al-Emran, M., Elsherif, H. M., & Shaalan, K. (2016). Investigating attitudes towards the use of mobile learning in higher education. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *56*, 93–102. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.11.033

Alase, A. (2017). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative research approach. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, *5*(2), 9. https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.9

Alaszewski, A. (2006). *Using diaries for social research*. Sage.

Aldiab, A., Chowdhury, H., Kootsookos, A., Alam, F., & Allhibi, H. (2018). Utilization of learning management systems (LMSs) in higher education system: A case review for Saudi Arabia. *Energy Procedia*, *160*, 731–737. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.egypro.2019.02.186

Alenezi, A. (2018). Barriers to participation in learning management systems in Saudi Arabian universities. *Education Research International*, *2018*, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1155/2018/9085914

Alhabeeb, A., & Rowley, J. (2018). E-learning critical success factors: Comparing perspectives from academic staff and students. *Computers & Education*, *127*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2018.08.007

Allan, R., & Eatough, V. (2016). The use of interpretive phenomenological analysis in couple and family therapy research. The Family Journal, 24(4), 406–414. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480716662652

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2011). *Going the distance: Online education in the United States, 2011*. Sloan Consortium. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234606148_Going_the_Distance_Online_Education_in_the_United_States_2011

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2013). *Changing course: Ten years of tracking online education in the United States*. Babson Survey Research Group and Quahog Research Group. http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/changingcourse.pdf

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2014). *Grade change: Tracking online learning in the United States*. Babson Survey Research Group and Quahog Research Group. https://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradechange.pdf

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2017). *Digital learning compass: Distance education enrollment report 2017*. Babson Survey Research Group, e-Literate, and WCET. https://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/digtiallearningcompassenrollment2017.pdf

Allen, I. E., Seaman, J., Poulin, R., & Straut, T. T. (2016). *Online report card: Tracking online education in the United States*. Babson Survey Research Group and Quahog Research Group. https://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/onlinereportcard.pdf

Amir, L. R., Tanti, I., Maharani, D. A., Wimardhani, Y. S., Julia, V., Sulijaya, B., & Puspitawati, R. (2020). Student perspective of classroom and distance learning during COVID-19 pandemic in the undergraduate dental study program Universitas Indonesia. *BMC Medical Education*, *20*(392). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-020-02312-0

Anderson, G. (1998). *Fundamentals of educational research* (2nd ed.). The Farmer Press. http://repository.umpwr.ac.id:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/3710/Fundamentals%20of%20Educational%20Research.pdf?sequence=1

Anderson, M. L., Goodman, J., & Schlossberg, N. K. (2012). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world.* (4th ed.). Springer Publishing Company.

Anonymous. (1993). *Avondale graduation handbook*. Avondale College, NSW.

Archer, L., & Leathwood, C. (2003). Identities, inequalities and higher education. In L. Archer, M. Hutchings, & A. Ross (Eds.), *Higher education: Issues of Inclusion and exclusion*. Routledge.

Arksey, H., & Knight, P. (1999). Interviewing for Social Scientists. *SAGE Publications, Ltd*. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209335

Arrosagaray, M., González-Peiteado, M., Pino-Juste, M., & Rodríguez-López, B. (2019). A comparative study of Spanish adult students' attitudes to ICT in classroom, blended and distance language learning modes. *Computers & Education*, *134*, 31–40. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.01.016

Arvaja, M. (2014). Experiences in sense making: Health science students' i-positioning in an online philosophy of science course. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, *24*(1), 137–175. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2014.941465

Ashwin, P. (2009). *Analysing teaching-learning interactions in higher education: Accounting for structure and agency*. Continuum International Pub. Group.

Asiri, M., Mahmud, R., Abu Bakar, K., Ayub, A., & Bakadam, E. (2015). Barriers of using jusur learning management system in Saudi Arabia universities. *Journal of Research in Curriculum Instruction and Educational Technology*, *1*(4), 49–62. https://doi.org/10.21608/jrciet.2015.24539

Askham, P. (2008). Context and identity: Exploring adult learners' experiences of higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *32*(1), 85–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770701781481

Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning. (2014). *Benchmarks for technology enhanced learning*. Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE). http://www.acode.edu.au/pluginfile.php/579/mod_resource/content/3/TEL_Benchmarks.pdf

Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning. (2020, November 16). *Series 1: Learning leaders on technology enhanced learning*. Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE). https://www.acode.edu.au/mod/page/view.php?id=4072

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017, November 6). *6227.0 – Education and work, Australia, May 2017*. https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/6227.0Main+Features1May%202017?OpenDocument=

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2020a, May 20). *Research and experimental development, higher education organisations, Australia – 2018*. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/technology-and-innovation/research-and-experimental-development-higher-education-organisations-australia/latest-release

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2020b, November 11). *Education and work, Australia: Survey data over time on current or recent study, educational attainment, and employment – May 2020*. http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6227.0

Australian Government. (2008). *Review of Australian higher education: Final report*. https://www.mq.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/135310/bradley_review_of_australian_higher_education.pdf

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2018, September 10). *Older Australia at a glance*. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australia-at-a-glance/contents/demographics-of-older-australians/australia-s-changing-age-and-gender-profile

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2019, September 11). *Higher education and vocational education*. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/higher-education-and-vocational-education

Australian Skills Quality Authority. (2020). Australian Government. https://www.asqa.gov.au/

B'reshith, (n.d.). *Book of Genesis* (1:3).

Bailey, A., Vaduganathan, N., Henry, T., Laverdiere, R., & Pugliese, L. (2018). *Making digital learning work: Success strategies from six leading universities and community colleges*. The Boston Consulting Group, Inc. https://edplus.asu.edu/sites/default/files/BCG-Making-Digital-Learning-Work-Apr-2018%20.pdf

Bailie, J. L. (2014). What online students want compared to what institutions expect. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, *17*(2). https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer172/bailie172.html

Baillie, C., Bowden, J. A., & Meyer, J. H. F. (2013). Threshold capabilities: Threshold concepts and knowledge capability linked through variation theory. *Higher Education*, *65*, 227–246. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9540-5

Baillie, C., Smith, J. A., Hewison, J., & Mason, G. (2000). Ultrasound screening for chromosomal abnormality: Women's reactions to false positive results. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, *5*(4), 377–394. https://doi.org/10.1348/135910700168991

Baird, F. E. (2010). *Philosophic classics: Ancient philosophy*. Routledge.

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall.

Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. Freeman.

Banks, K. L. (2017). *Identifying online graduate learners' perceived barriers to their academic success: A modified Delphi study* [Doctoral Dissertation]. Northcentral University. https://search.proquest.com/pagepdf/1960606550

Banna, J., Grace-Lin, M.-F., Stewart, M., & Fialkowski, M. K. (2015). Interaction matters: Strategies to promote engaged learning in an online introductory nutrition course. *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, *11*(2), 249–261. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27441032/

Baptista, A. V. (2013). Non-traditional adult students: Who are they and what are the implications for higher education? *Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences*, *8*(2), 235–246.

Barbour, R. S. (2008). *Introducing qualitative research: A student's guide to the craft of doing qualitative research*. Sage Publications.

Barclay, S. R., Stoltz, K. B., & Chung, Y. B. (2011). Voluntary midlife career change: Integrating the transtheoretical model and the life-span, life-space approach. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *59*(5), 386–399. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2011.tb00966.x

Barradell, S. (2013). The identification of threshold concepts: A review of theoretical complexities and methodological challenges. *Higher Education*, *65*, 265–276. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9542-3

Barradell, S., & Fortune, T. (2020). Bounded – The neglected threshold concept characteristic. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *57*(3), 296–304. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2019.1657034

Barradell, S., & Peseta, T. (2016). Promise and challenge of identifying threshold concepts: A cautionary account of using transactional curriculum inquiry. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *40*(2), 262–275. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2014.971105

Barusch, A., Gringeri, C., & George, M. (2011). Rigor in qualitative social work research: A Review of Strategies Used in Published Articles. *Social Work Research*, *35*(1), 11–19. https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/35.1.11

Basilaia, G., Dgebuadze, M., Kantaria, M., & Chokhonelidze, G. (2020). Replacing the classic learning form at universities as an immediate response to the COVID-19 virus infection in Georgia. *International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology*, *8*(3)(3), 101–108. https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2020.3021

Bates, A. W. (2015, April 5). *Teaching in a digital age: Guidelines for designing teaching and learning*. Pressbooks. https://opentextbc.ca/teachinginadigitalage/

Bates, A. W. (2019). *Teaching in a digital age* (2nd ed.). Pressbooks. http://tecfa.unige.ch/guides/e-books/Bates-Teaching-in-a-Digital-Age-compressed.pdf

Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, *55*(4), 485–540. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543055004485

Bean, M. V., Aldredge, T., Chow, K., Fowler, L., Guaracha, A., McGinnis, T., Sae-Kleriga, G., & Parker, L. (2019). *Effective practices for online tutoring*. Academic Senate for California Community Colleges. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED601995.pdf

Beard, C., Clegg, S., & Smith, K. (2013). Acknowledging the affective in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(2), 235–252. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701208415

Bedenlier, S., Bond, M., Buntins, K., Zawacki-Richter, O., & Kerres, M. (2020). Facilitating student engagement through educational technology in higher education: A systematic review in the field of arts and humanities. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *36*(4), 126–150. https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.5477

Beer, C., & Lawson, C. (2016). The problem of student attrition in higher education: An alternative perspective. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *41*(6), 773–784. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2016.11771712016

Beetham, H., McGill, L., & Littlejohn, A. (2009). *Thriving in the 21st century: Learning literacies for the digital age (LLiDA project)*. The Caledonian Academy, Glasgow Caledonian University. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267259433_Thriving_in_the_21st_century_Learning_Literacies_for_the_Digital_Age_LLiDA_project_Thriving_in_the_21st_century_Learning_Literacies_for_the_Digital_Age_LLiDA_project

Bell, N. J., Wieling, E., & Watson, W. (2007). Narrative processes of identity construction: Micro indicators of developmental patterns following transition to university. *An International Journal of Theory and Research*, *7*(1), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/15283480701319559

Ben-Eliyahu, A., Moore, D., Dorph, R., & Schunn, C. D. (2018). Investigating the multidimensionality of engagement: Affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement across science activities and contexts. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *53*, 87–105. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2018.01.002

Berg, T., Erichsen, M., & Hokstad, L. M. (2016). Stuck at the threshold: Which strategies do students choose when facing liminality within certain disciplines at a business school? In R. Land, J. H. F. Meyer, & M. T. Flanagan (Eds.), *Threshold concepts in practice* (pp. 107–118). Sense Publishers.

Berman, J. (2013). Utility of a conceptual framework within doctoral study: A researcher's reflections. *Issues in Educational Research*, *23*(1), 1–18. https://www.iier.org.au/iier23/berman.html

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge. ISBN 9780415336390

Biesta, G. J. J., Allan, J., & Edwards, R. G. (2011). The theory question in research capacity building in education: Towards an agenda for research and practice. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *59*(3), 225–239. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2011.599793

Biggerstaff, D., & Thompson, A. R. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A qualitative methodology of choice in healthcare research. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 5(3), 214–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780880802314304

Bimrose, J., & Brown, A. (2014). Mid-career progression and development: The role for career guidance and counseling. In G. Arulmani, A. Bakshi, F. Leong, & A. Watts (Eds.), *Handbook of career development. International perspectives, and cultural psychology* (pp. 203–222). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-9460-7_11

Bimrose, J., Brown, A., Barnes, S-A., & Hughes, D. (2011). *The role of career adaptability in skills supply*. UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES). https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/publications/2011/bimrose_ca_main.pdf

Bird, C. M. (2005). How I stopped dreading and learned to love transcription. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *11*(2), 226–248. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800404273413

Birks, M., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2008). Memoing in qualitative research: Probing data and processes. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, *13*(1), 68–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987107081254

Biros, M. (2018). Capacity, vulnerability, and informed consent for research. *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, *46*(1), 72–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/1073110518766021

Birrell, B., Rapson, V., & Smith, T. F. (2010). The 40 per cent degree-qualified target: How feasible? *People and Place*, *18*(4), 13–29. https://doi.org/10.4225/03/590aa4e6128a1

Blainey, G. (1966). *The tyranny of distance: How distance shaped Australia's history*. Macmillan.

Blaxter, L., & Tight, M. (1993). "I'm only doing it to get in the black gown": Dream and reality for adults in part-time higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *17*(1), 13–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877930170102

Bliss, L. A. (2016). Phenomenological research: Inquiry to understand the meanings of people's experiences. *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology*, *7*(3), 14–26. https://doi.org/10.4018/ijavet.2016070102

Bloom, A. (2016). *The republic of Plato*. Perseus Books Group.

Blumer, H. (1986). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. University of California Press.

Blythman, M., & Orr, S. (2002a). A framework for institutional change. In A. Hayton & A. Paczuska (Eds.), *Access, participation and higher education*. Kogan Page.

Blythman, M., & Orr, S. (2002b). Learning from FE: A joined up approach to retention. In M. Peelo & T. Wareham (Eds.), *Failing students in higher education*. SRHE/OU.

Bond, M., Buntins, K., Bedenlier, S., Zawacki-Richter, O. & Kerres, M. (2020). Mapping research in student engagement and educational technology in higher education: a systematic evidence map. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education 17*(2). https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-019-0176-8

Bontekoe, R. (1996). *Dimensions of the hermeneutic circle*. Humanities Press.

Booth, A., Papaioannou, D., & Sutton, A. (2012). *Systematic approaches to a successful literature review*. Sage Publications.

Booth, S. (1997). On phenomenography, learning and teaching. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *16*(2), 135–158. https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436970160203

Boston, W. E., Ice, P., & Gibson, A. M. (2011). Comprehensive assessment of student retention in online learning environments. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, *14*(1). https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring141/boston_ice_gibson141.pdf

Bower, M., Dalgarno, B., Kennedy, G. E., Lee, M. J. W., & Kenney, J. (2015). Design and implementation factors in blended synchronous learning environments: Outcomes from a cross-case analysis. *Computers & Education*, *86*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2015.03.006

Bradbury-Jones, C., Breckenridge, J., Clark, M. T., Herber, O. R., Wagstaff, C., & Taylor, J. (2017). The state of qualitative research in health and social science literature: A focused mapping review and synthesis. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *20*(6), 627–645. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2016.1270583

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brinson, J. R. (2015). Learning outcome achievement in non-traditional (virtual and remote) versus traditional (hands-on) laboratories: A review of the empirical research. *Computers & Education*, *87*(1), 218–237. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2015.07.003

Britton, C., & Baxter, A. (1999). Becoming a mature student: Gendered narratives of the self. *Gender and Education*, *11*(2), 179–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540259920681

Broady, T., Chan, A., & Caputi, P. (2010). Comparison of older and younger adults' attitudes towards and abilities with computers: Implications for training and learning. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *41*(3), 473–485. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2008.00914.x

Brocki, J. M., & Wearden, A. J. (2006). A critical evaluation of the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in health psychology. *Psychology & Health*, *21*(1), 87–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/14768320500230185

Brontë, E. J. (2007). *Wuthering Heights*. Penguin Books Ltd. (Original work published 1847).

Brookfield, S. (1990). Expanding knowledge about how we learn. In R. M. Smith & associates (Eds.), *Learning to learn across the life span*. Jossey Bass.

Brookfield, S. (2005). Overcoming impostorship, cultural suicide, and lost innocence: Implications for teaching critical thinking in the community college. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *2005*(130), 49–57. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.195

Brookfield, S. (2015). *The skillful teacher: On technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom.* (3rd ed.). Jossey Bass.

Brothers, P., & Spies, M. (2017, August 29). *Digital transformation in higher education*. Navitas Ventures. https://blog.navitasventures.com/digital-transformation-in-higher-education-17688f19fd59

Brown, A., & Bimrose, J. (2014). Model of learning for career and labour market transitions. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, *9*(3), 270–286. https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2014.9.3.270

Brown, A., Bimrose, J., Barnes, S.-A., & Hughes, D. (2012). The role of career adaptabilities for mid-career changers. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *80*(3), 754–761. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2012.01.003

Brown, D., Taylor, C., Baldy, R., Edwards, G., & Oppenheimer, E. (1990). Computers and QDA – can they help it? A report on a qualitative data analysis programme. *The Sociological Review*, *38*(1), 134–150. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954x.1990.tb00850.x

Bruner, J. S. (2002). *Making stories: Law, literature, life*. Harvard University Press.

Brunton, J., & Buckley, F. (2020). "You're thrown in the deep end": Adult learner identity formation in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1767049

Brunton, J., Brown, M., Costello, E., & Farrell, O. (2018). Head start online: Flexibility, transitions and student success. *Educational Media International*, *55*(4), 347–360. https://doi.org/10.1080/09523987.2018.1548783

Bryman, A. (2008). *Social research methods* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Bryson, C., & Hand, L. (2007). The role of engagement in inspiring teaching and learning. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *44*(4), 349–362. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703290701602748

Burchmore, H., Irvine, N., & Carmichael, P. (2007). *Threshold Concepts: A Review of Related Literature*. Teaching and Learning Research Programme Technology-Enhanced Learning Phase. Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technologies, University of Cambridge. Retrieved 2017 from http://www.caret.cam.ac.uk/tel/downloads/tel_literature_review. pdf

Bye, D., Pushkar, D., & Conway, M. (2007). Motivation, interest, and positive affect in traditional and nontraditional undergraduate students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *57*(2), 141–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713606294235

Cacheiro-Gonzalez, M. L., Medina-Rivilla, A., Dominguez-Garrido, M. C., & Medina-Dominguez, M. (2019). The learning platform in distance higher education: Student's perceptions. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, *20*(1), 71–95. https://doi.org/10.17718/tojde.522387

Camp, W. G. (2001). Formulating and evaluating theoretical frameworks for career and technical education research. *Journal of Vocational Education Research*, *26*(1), 4–25. https://doi.org/10.5328/jver26.1.4

Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton University Press.

Campbell, J. (1968). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton University Press.

Campbell, J. (1973). *Myths to live by*. Bantam Books, Inc.

Campbell, J. (1988). *The Power of Myth*. Anchor Books.

Campbell, J. (2004). *Pathways to bliss: Mythology and personal transformation*. New World Library.

Cardak, B., Brett, M., Bowden, M., Vecci, J., Barry, P., Bahtsevanoglou, J., & Mcallister, R. (2017). *Regional student participation and migration: Analysis of factors influencing regional student participation and internal migration in Australian higher education*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Regional-Student-Participation-and-Migration-20170227-Final.pdf

Chamberlain, K. (2000). Methodolatry and qualitative health research. *Journal of Health Psychology*, *5*(3), 285–296. https://doi.org/10.1177/135910530000500306

Chamberlain, K. & Murray, M. (2017). Qualitative research in health psychology. In C. Willig and W. S. Rogers (Eds). *Handbook of qualitative methods in psychology* (rev. ed.). Sage Publications.

Chan, C. D., & Farmer, L. B. (2017). Making the case for interpretative phenomenological analysis with LGBTGEQ+ Persons and Communities. Journal of *LGBT* Issues in Counseling, 11(4), 285–300. https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2017.1380558

Chan, M. (2017). Have you been oriented? An analysis of new student orientation and e-orientation programs at U.S. community colleges. *College and University*, *92*(2), 12–25.

Chandler, P. (2018). 82 Reasons why Students Choose Online Classes. *Online Study Australia.* https://onlinestudyaustralia.com/reasons-choose-study-online/

Chapman, E., & Smith, J. A. (2002). Interpretative phenomenological analysis and the new genetics. Journal of Health Psychology, 7(2), 125–130. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105302007002397

Charteris, J., & Smardon, D. (2018). A typology of agency in new generation learning environments: emerging relational, ecological and new material considerations. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *26*(1), 51–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2017.1345975

Charteris, J., & Smardon, D. (2019). Dimensions of agency in new generation learning spaces: Developing assessment capability. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, *44*(7), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2019v44n7.1

Charteris, J., Smardon, D., & Nelson, E. (2017). Innovative learning environments and new materialism: A conjunctural analysis of pedagogic spaces. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *49*(8), 808–821. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1298035

Chase, S. (1996). Personal vulnerability and interpretative authority in narrative research. In R. Jossellson (Ed.), *Ethics and process in the narrative study of lives* (pp. 45–59). Sage Publications.

Chaubey, A., & Bhattacharya, B. (2015). Learning management system in higher education. *International Journal of Science Technology & Engineering*, *2*(3), 158–162. http://www.ijste.org/articles/IJSTEV2I3050.pdf

Chaw, L. Y., & Tang, C. M. (2018). What makes learning management systems effective for learning? *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, *47*(2), 152–169. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239518795828

Cheek, K. A. (2010). Why is geologic time troublesome knowledge? In R. Land, J. H. F. Meyer, & C. Baillie (Eds.), *Threshold concepts and transformational learning* (pp. 117–129). Rotterdam: Sense.

Chen, D. L. & Rattray, J. (2017). Transforming thinking through problem-based learning in the news media literacy class: Critical thinking as a threshold concept towards threshold capabilities. In R. Land & J. Rattray (Eds.), *Practice and evidence of the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education (PESTLHE), special edition: Threshold concepts and conceptual difficulty*, *12*(2) (pp. 272–293). https://dro.dur.ac.uk/21705/1/21705.pdf

Chen, J. C. (2017). Nontraditional adult learners: The neglected diversity in postsecondary education. *SAGE Open*. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017697161

Chesters, J. & Watson, L. (2016). Staying power: The effect of pathway into university on student achievement and attrition. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, *56*(2), 225–249.

Chipere, N. (2017). A framework for developing sustainable e-learning programmes. The Journal of Open, Distance and *E*-Learning, *32*(1), 36–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2016.1270198

Cho, M.-H., & Kim, B. J. (2013). Students' self-regulation for interaction with others in online learning environments. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *17*, 69–75. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2012.11.001

Choi, H. J., & Kim, B. U. (2018). Factors affecting adult student dropout rates in the Korean cyber-university degree programs. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *66*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2017.1400357

Choi, H. J., & Park, J.-H. (2018). Testing a path-analytic model of adult dropout in online degree programs. *Computers & Education*, *116*, 130–138. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2017.09.005

Cholbi, M. (2016). *Understanding Kant's ethics.* Cambridge University Press.

Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V. E., Hounsell, J., & McCune, V. (2008). "A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions": Learning to be a university student. *Studies in Higher Education*, *33*(5), 567–581. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802373040

Clark, R. C., & Mayer, R. E. (2011). *E-Learning and the science of instruction: Proven guidelines for consumers and designers of multimedia learning*. John Wiley & Sons. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781118255971

Clarke, R. (2004). *Origins and nature of the internet in Australia*. Xamax Consultancy Pty Ltd. http://www.rogerclarke.com/II/OzI04.html

Clarke, V. (2010). Review of the book "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research". *Psychology Learning and Teaching*, *9*(1), 57–56. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269930318_Review_of_the_book_Interpretative_Phenomenological_Analysis_Theory_Method_and_Research

Clegg, S., & Stevenson, J. (2013). The interview reconsidered: Context, genre, reflexivity and interpretation in sociological approaches to interviews in higher education research. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *32*(1), 5–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.750277

Clegg, S., Stevenson, J., & Burke, P.-J. (2016). Translating close-up research into action: A critical reflection. *Reflective Practice*, *17*(3), 233–244. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2016.1145580

Cochran, J. D., Baker, H. M., Benson, D., & Rhea, W. (2016). Business student perceptions of online learning: Using focus groups for richer understanding of student perspectives. *Organization Management Journal*, *13*(3), 149–166. https://doi.org/10.1080/15416518.2016.1218195

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research Methods in Education* (8th ed.). Routledge.

Cojocariu, V.-M., Lazăr, I., Nedeff, V., & Lazăr, G. (2014). SWOT anlysis of e-learning educational services from the perspective of their beneficiaries. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *116*, 1999–2003. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.510

Collins, H. (2010). *Creative research: The theory and practice of research for the creative industries*. AVA Publications.

Collins, M. (1987). *Competence in adult education: A new perspective*. University Press of America.

Collins, M. (1995). Phenomenological perspectives: Some implications for adult education. In S. Merriam (Ed.), *Selected writings on the philosophy of adult education* (pp. 179–189). Krieger.

Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission. (1986). *Review of efficiency and effectiveness in higher education.* Australian Government Publishing Service, National Library of Australia.

Cook, A., Rushton, S., & Staff and Educational Development Association. (2008). *Student transition: Practices and policies to promote retention*. Staff and Educational Development Association.

Cooke, A., Smith, D., & Booth, A. (2012). Beyond PICO: The SPIDER tool for qualitative evidence synthesis. *Qualitative Health Research*, *22*(10), 1435–1443. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732312452938

Coolidge, S. (1994). *What Katy did next*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1874).

Coolidge, S. (2009). *What Katy did*. Puffin Classics. (Original work published 1872).

Cooper, T., & Scriven, R. (2017). Communities of inquiry in curriculum approach to online learning: Strengths and limitations in context. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *33*(4). https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.3026

Corfman, T., & Beck, D. (2019). Case study of creativity in asynchronous online discussions. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, *16*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-019-0150-5

Costley, C., Elliott, G., & Gibbs, P. (2010). *Doing work based research: Approaches to enquiry for insider-researchers*. Sage.

Cousin, G. (2006a). An introduction to threshold concepts. *Planet*, *17*(1), 4–5. https://doi.org/10.11120/plan.2006.00170004

Cousin, G. (2006b). Threshold concepts, troublesome knowledge and emotional capital: An exploration into learning about others. In J. H. F. Meyer & R. Land (Eds.), *Overcoming barriers to student understanding: Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge* (pp. 134–147). Routledge Falmer.

Cousin, G. (2008). Threshold concepts: Old wine in new bottles or new forms of transactional curriculum inquiry? In R. Land, J. H. F. Meyer, & J. Smith (Eds.), *Threshold concepts within the disciplines*. Sense Publishers.

Cousin, G. (2009). *Researching learning in higher education: An introduction to contemporary methods and approaches*. Routledge.

Cousin, G. (2010). Neither teacher-centred nor student-centred: Threshold concepts and research partnerships. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, *2*, 1–9. https://journal.aldinhe.ac.uk/index.php/jldhe/article/view/64/41

Cousin, G. (2014). Threshold concepts as an analytical tool for researching higher education pedagogy. In C. O'Mahony, A. Buchanan, M. O'Rourke, & B. Higgs (Eds.), *Threshold concepts: From personal practice to communities of practice* (pp. 22–25). National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED558533.pdf

Crane, J., & Abbott, M.-L. (2021). Mind the gap: The relationship between liminality, learning and leaving in pre-registration nurse education. *Nurse Education in Practice*, *50*(2), 102952. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2020.102952

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

Critical appraisal skills programme. (n.d.). *Systematic review checklist*. https://casp-uk.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CASP-Systematic-Review-Checklist-2018_fillable-form.pdf

Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as learners: Increasing participation and facilitating learning.* Jossey Bass.

Crotty, M. (1996). Doing phenomenology. In P. Willis & B. Neville (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice in adult education*. Melbourne: David Lovell Publishing.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Allen & Unwin.

Crutzen, R. & Peters, G. Y. (2017). Targeting Next Generations to Change the Common Practice of Underpowered Research. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8.* https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01184

Cruz, S., Lencastre, J.A., & Cutinho, C. (2018). *Engaging students on learning tricky topics in mathematics through creative skills*. In Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Computer Supported Education (CSEDU 2018) 1 (pp. 342–349). https://www.scitepress.org/Papers/2018/67717/pdf/index.html

Cunningham, S., Tapsall, S., Ryan, Y., Stedman, L., Bagdon, K., & Flew, T. (1998). *New media and borderless education: A review of the convergence between global media networks and higher education provision.* Australian Government Publishing Service.

Dahlberg, K. (2006). The essence of essences – The search for meaning structures in phenomenological analysis of lifeworld phenomena. International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-*Being*, 1(1), 11–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482620500478405

Dahlgren, L. O., & Fallsberg, M. (1991). Phenomenography as a qualitative approach in social pharmacy research. *Journal of Social and Administrative Pharmacy, 8*(4), 150–156.

Daniel, J. (2017). *Making sense of flexibility as A defining element of online learning*. Teach Online.CA; World Conference on Online Learning: Teaching in the Digital Age. October 17-19, 2017, Toronto Canada. https://teachonline.ca/sites/default/files/toolstrends/downloads/makingsenseofflexibility.pdf

Davies, P. (2010). Transforming knowledge structures: A procedure for developing students' understanding of threshold concepts. *Third biennial threshold concepts symposium; Exploring transformative dimensions of threshold concepts*. The University of New South Wales & University of Sydney.

Davies, P., & Mangan, J. (2007). Threshold concepts and the integration of understanding in economics. *Studies in Higher Education*, *32*(6), 711–726. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701685148

Davies, P., & Williams, J. (2001). For me or not for me? Fragility and risk in mature students' decision-making. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *55*, 185–203. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2273.00182

Davies, S., Mullan, J., & Feldman, P. (2017). *Rebooting learning for the digital age: What next for technology-enhanced higher education?* Higher Education Policy Institute. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hepi_Rebooting-learning-for-the-digital-age-Report-93-02_02_17Web.pdf

De Paepe, L., Zhu, C. & DePryck, K. (2018). Drop-out, retention, satisfaction and attainment of online learners of Dutch in adult education. *International Journal on E-Learning*, *17*(3), 303–323. Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE).

Deggs, D. (2011). Contextualizing the perceived barriers of adult learners in an accelerated undergraduate degree program. The Qualitative Report, 16(6), 1540–1553. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1316

Deggs, D., & Miller, M. T. (2018). At the intersection of community expectancy and critical theory: Emerging perspective to support student needs. Community College Journal of Research and Practice, *43*(9), 653–656. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2018.1524336

Denscombe, M. (2007). *The good research guide: For small-scale social research projects.* Open University Press.

Denzin, N. K. (1994). The art and politics of interpretation. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 500–516). Sage.

Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography*: *Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Denzin, N. K. (2010). On elephants and gold standards. *Qualitative Research*, *10*(2), 269–272. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794109357367

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Sage Publications.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2018). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed., pp. 1-19). Sage Publications.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1998). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 509–535). Sage.

Department of Education and Training, & Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Authority. (2017). *Quality assurance of online learning – Discussion paper*. https://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/quality-assurance-online-learning-discussion-paper.pdf?v=1578526918

Department of Education and Training. (2015). *Higher education in Australia: A review of reviews from Dawkins to today*. https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/higher_education_in_australia_-_a_review_of_reviews.pdf

Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020a). *2019 Section 1 Commencing students*. https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2019-section-1-commencing-students

Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020b, July 14). *Higher education statistics: Selected higher education statistics – 2019 Student data*. https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2019-student-data

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2016, October 20). *Department of Education and Training Annual Report 2015–16*. https://www.dese.gov.au/about-us/resources/department-education-and-training-annual-report-2015-16

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2017a). *Completion rates of higher education students – Cohort analysis, 2005–2014*. https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/completion -rates-higher-education-students-cohort-analysis2005-2014

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2017b, June 9). *Discussion Paper on Improving Completion, Retention and Success in Higher Education*. https://docs.education.gov.au/node/44121

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2017c, November 30). *Higher education statistics: 2016 appendix 2 – equity groups*. https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2016-appendix-2-equity-groups

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2017d). *Higher education statistics: 2017 student summary*. https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2017-student-summary

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2018a). *Higher education statistics: 2018 student summary tables*. https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2018-student-summary-tables

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2018b, June 7). *Higher education standards panel final report – Improving retention, completion and success in higher education*. https://www.dese.gov.au/uncategorised/resources/higher-education-standards-panel-final-report-improving-retention-completion-and-success-higher

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2019a, October 14). *Department of education and training annual report 2018–19*. https://www.dese.gov.au/uncategorised/resources/department-education-and-training-annual-report-2018-19

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2019b). *Completion Rates of Higher Education Students - Cohort Analysis, 2005-2019.* https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/completion-rates-higher-education-students-cohort-analysis-2005-2019

Department of Employment, Education and Training (1993), *National Report on Australia's Higher Education Sector.* Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Deschacht, N., & Goeman, K. (2015). The effect of blended learning on course persistence and performance of adult learners: A difference-in-differences analysis. *Computers & Education*, *87*, 83–89. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2015.03.020

Devault, M. (1990). Talking and listening from women's standpoint: Feminist strategies for interviewing and analysis. *Social Problems*, *37*(1), 96–116. https://doi.org/10.2307/800797

Devlin, M. (2010, June). *Non-traditional student achievement: Theory, policy and practice in Australian higher education* [Keynote Address]. 13th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference 2010. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marcia-Devlin-2/publication/304628808_Non-traditional_university_student_achievement_Theory_policy_and_practice_in_Australia/links/5775a14708aeb9427e25c1bf/Non-traditional-university-student-achievement-Theory-policy-and-practice-in-Australia.pdf

Devlin, M., & McKay, J. (2016). Teaching students using technology: Facilitating success for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds in Australian universities. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *32*(1). https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.2053

Dewey, J. (1991). Logic: The theory of inquiry. In J. Boydston (Ed.), *The later works of John Dewey, volume 12, 1925–1953*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Dhawan, S. (2020). Online learning: A panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, *49*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239520934018

Dilthey, W. (1989). *Introduction to the human sciences: An attempt to lay a foundation for the study of society and history* (R. Makkreel & F. Rodi, Trans.). Princeton University Press.

Donald, J. (2001). *Learning to think: Disciplinary perspectives*. Jossey-Bass.

Dron, J., & Anderson, T. (2016). The future of e-learning. In, *The sage handbook of e-learning research* (pp. 537–556). SAGE Reference.

Eastcott, L. & Small, I. (1984). New South Wales: Getting the mixture right. In K. Smith (Ed.), *Diversity down under in distance education* (pp. 63–67). Australian and South Pacific External Studies Association. Darling Down Institute Press.

Eatough, V., & Smith, J. (2017). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In C. Willig (Ed.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 193–211). Sage. https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n12

Ecclestone, K., Biesta, G., & Hughes, M. (Eds.). (2010). *Transitions and learning through the lifecourse*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203867617

Edwards, D., & McMillan, J. (2015). *Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue?* ACER. https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1045&context=higher_education

Edwards, R. (2013). *Opening the door on student learning: using artefacts to explore pharmacy students' learning practices* [Ed.D. thesis]. https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/handle/1893/16412#.WG-Ad6OcZsM

Ellis, R., & Goodyear, P. (2010). *Students' experiences of e-Learning in higher education*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203872970

Ellsworth, E. (1997). *Teaching positions: Difference, pedagogy, and the power of address.* Teachers College Press.

Ellsworth, E. A. (2005). *Places of learning: Media, architecture, pedagogy*. Routledge.

Elwell, F. (1996). *Verstehen: The sociology of Max Weber*. http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/Theorists/Weber/Whome2.htm

Englund, C., Olofsson, A. D., & Price, L. (2017). Teaching with technology in higher education: Understanding conceptual change and development in practice. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *36*(1), 73–87. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1171300

Entwistle, N. (2008). Threshold concepts and transformative ways of thinking within research into higher education. In R. Land, J. Meyer, & J. Smith (Eds.), *Threshold concepts within the disciplines*. Sense Publishers.

Ernst & Young, (2012). *University of the future: a thousand-year-old industry on the cusp of profound change.* https://web.archive.org/web/20121119092916/http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/University_of_the_future/%24FILE/University_of_the_future_2012.pdf

Falasca, M. (2011). Barriers to adult learning: Bridging the gap. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, *51*(3), 583–590. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ954482.pdf

Farini, F., & Scollan, A. M. (2019). A hope to trust. educational leadership to support mature students' inclusion in higher education: An experience from Surrey, England. International Journal of Leadership in Education. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1657592

Farrell, E. (2020). Researching lived experience in education: Misunderstood or missed opportunity? *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*(4), 16–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920942066

Fathema, N., Shannon, D., & Ross, M. (2015). Expanding the technology acceptance model (TAM) to examine faculty use of learning management systems (LMSs) in higher education institutions. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, *11*(2), 210–232. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281842180_Expanding_The_Technology_Acceptance_Model_TAM_to_Examine_Faculty_Use_of_Learning_Management_Systems_LMSs_In_Higher_Education_Institutions

Feldman, R. (Ed.). (2018). *The first year of college*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316811764

Finlay, L. (2011). *Phenomenology for therapists: Researching the lived world*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Flanagan, M. T. (2016). *Threshold concepts: Undergraduate teaching, postgraduate training and professional development. A short introduction and bibliography*. http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html

Fleming, D. J. (2016). The threshold of conscience: A radical challenge for education in theological ethics … and beyond. Journal of Adult Theological Education, 13(2), 103–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/17407141.2016.1213950

Flick, U. (2018). *An introduction to qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.

Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2000). The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd Ed., pp. 645–672). Sage.

Foote, M. Q., & Bartell, T. G. (2011). Pathways to equity in mathematics education: How life experiences impact researcher positionality. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, *78*(1), 45–68. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10649-011-9309-2

Forsyth, R. (2003). Supporting e-learning: An overview of the needs of users. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, *9*(1), 131–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/13614530410001692086

Foucault, M. (1980). Truth and Power. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (pp. 109–133). Random House.

Francescucci, A., & Rohani, L. (2018). Exclusively synchronous online (VIRI) learning: The impact on student performance and engagement outcomes. *Journal of Marketing Education*, *41*(1), 60–69. https://doi.org/10.1177/0273475318818864

Frank, A. W. (2010). *Letting stories breathe a socio-narratology.* The University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9566.2011.01452.x

Friesen, N., Saevi, T., & Henriksson, C. (Eds.). (2012). *Hermeneneutic phenomenology in education: Method and practice*. Sense Publishers. https://www.academia.edu/2082613/Friesen_N_Saevi_T_and_Henriksson_C_Eds_2012_Hermeneneutic_Phenomenology_in_Education_Method_and_Practice_Rotterdam_Sense_Publishers_

Frost, I., & Gronow, E. (2019). Context specific language: Critical to student learning. *The Study of Food, Tourism, Hospitality and Events*, 235–244. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0638-9_21

Frost, N., Nolas, S. M., Brooks-Gordon, B., Esin, C., Holt, A., Mehdizadeh, L., & Shinebourne, P. (2010). Pluralism in qualitative research: The impact of different researchers and qualitative approaches on the analysis of qualitative data. *Qualitative Research*, *10*(4), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794110366802

Funston, A. (2012). *Non-traditional students making their way in higher education: An Australian case study.* Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne. https://education.unimelb.edu.au/yrc/assets/docs/yrc-misc-docs/RR35.pdf

Gadamer, H-G. (2004) *Truth and Method*. Crossroads. https://mvlindsey.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/truth-and-method-gadamer-2004.pdf

Gale, T. and Parker, S. (2011). *Good practice report: Student transition into higher education*. Australian Learning and Teaching Council. http://fyhe.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Student-transition-into-higher-education.-ALTC-Good-practice-report.-Gale-T-Parker-S-Deakin-1.pdf

Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2014). Navigating change: A typology of student transition in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *39*(5), 734–753. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2012.721351

Garrison, D. R. (2017). *E-learning in the 21st century: A community of inquiry framework for research and practice* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Geertz, C. (2005). Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight. *Daedalus*, *134*(4), 56–86. https://doi.org/10.1162/001152605774431563

Gergen, K. J. (1999). Agency: Social construction and relational action. Theory & Psychology, *9*(1), 113–115. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354399091007

Gergen, M. M., & Gergen, K. J. (2000). Qualitative inquiry: Tensions and transformations. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 1025–1046). Sage Publications.

Gil-Ortega, M. C., & Falconer, L. (2015). Learning spaces in virtual worlds: Bringing our distance students home. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, *7*(1), 83–98. https://doi.org/10.1108/jarhe-02-2014-0026

Gil-Rodriguez, E., & Hefferon, K. (2012). Intrepretative Phenomenological Analysis. *London IPA Training Materials*, *24*(10), 756–759.

Gill, R. (2018). Building employability skills for higher education students: An Australian example. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, *9*(1), 84–92. https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2018vol9no1art739

Gillard, J. (2009). *Universities Australia conference – 4 March 2009 – speech*. Ministers' Media Centre; Department of Education, Skills and Employment. https://ministers.dese.gov.au/gillard/universities-australia-conference-4-march-2009-speech

Gillett-Swan, J. (2017). The challenges of online learning: Supporting and engaging the isolated learner. *Journal of Learning Design*, *10*(1), 20–30. https://doi.org/10.5204/jld.v9i3.293

Giorgi, A. (1997). The theory, practice, and evaluation of the phenomenological method as a qualitative research procedure. Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 28(2), 235–260. https://doi.org/10.1163/156916297x00103

Giorgi, A. (1999). A phenomenological perspective on some phenomenographic results on learning. Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 30(2), 68–93. https://doi.org/10.1163/156916299x00110

Giorgi, A. (2010). Phenomenology and the practice of science. *Existential Analysis*, *21*(1), 3–22.

Giorgi, A. (2011). IPA and science: A response to Jonathan Smith. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, *42*(2), 195–216. https://doi.org/10.1163/156916211x599762

Giorgi, A. P. (1990). Phenomenology, psychological science and common sense. In G. R. Semin & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Everyday understanding: Social and scientific implications* (pp. 64–82). Sage.

Giorgi, A., & Giorgi, B. (2003). Phenomenology. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 20–25). Sage.

Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems*, *12*(4), 436–445. https://doi.org/10.2307/798843

Goebel, J. L. S. (2017). *Students' learning of threshold concepts in undergraduate economics* [Doctor of Philosophy Thesis]. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316543406_Students%27_learning_of_threshold_concepts_in_undergraduate_economics

Gourlay, L. (2009). Threshold practices: Becoming a student through academic literacies. *London Review of Education*, *7*(2), 181–192. https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460903003626

Grant, M. J., & Booth, A. (2009). A typology of reviews: An analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies. Health Information & Libraries Journal, *26*(2), 91–108. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x

Grattan Institute. (2017). *Higher Education*. https://grattan.edu.au/home/higher-education/

Grattan Institute. (2018). *Mapping Australian higher education 2018*. https://grattan.edu.au/report/mapping-australian-higher-education-2018/

Gray, D. (2016, March 13). *The roots of Liminal Thinking* [blog]. https://medium.com/@davegray/the-roots-of-liminal-thinking-3be4bea6fd63

Groundwater-Smith, S. (2013). Transforming disciplines: Emergent learning and threshold concepts. *Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research*. https://www.waikato.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/182637/Transforming-disciplines-Conference-report.pdf

Groves, O., & O'Shea, S. (2019). Learning to "be" a university student: First in family students negotiating membership of the university community. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *98*, 48–54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2019.08.014

Guba, E. G. (1990). The alternative paradigm dialog. In E. G. Guba (Ed.), *The paradigm dialog* (pp. 17–27). Sage Publications, Inc.

Guba, E. G. & Lincoln. Y. S. (1989). What is this constructivist paradigm anyway? In *Fourth generation evaluation* (pp.79–90). Sage Publications.

Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (2002). From the individual interview to the interview society. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research* (pp. 3–32). Sage.

Guisard, Y., Behrendt, K., Mills, P., Telfser, S., Weatley, W., Hunter, C., Acheson, R., & Bone, Z. (2012). A course approach to student transition to university: A Case Study in Agricultural Business Management. *Creative Education*, *3*, 896–902. https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2012.326135

Guiton, P., & Smith, M. (1984). Progress in partnership: External studies in Western Australia. In K. Smith (Ed.), *Diversity down under in distance education* (pp. 83–87). Australian and South Pacific External Studies Association; Darling Down Institute Press.

Gulson, K. N., & Symes, C. (2007). Knowing one's place: Space, theory, education. *Critical Studies in Education*, *48*(1), 97–110. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508480601123750

Haggis, T. (2004). Meaning, identity and "motivation": Expanding what matters in understanding learning in higher education? *Studies in Higher Education*, *29*, 335–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070410001682538

Haji Bungsu, H. J. (2014). Threshold concepts in the learning of agriculture: Quality and relevance for curriculum innovation. *Fifth International Biennial Threshold Concepts Conference; Threshold Concepts in Practice, Durham University*.

Ham, M., Richardson, S. & Richardson, C. (2020). Enhancing student learning experiences in digital learning spaces: pedagogy that works. In E. Heinrich & R. Bourke (Eds.), *Research and development in higher education: Next generation, higher education: Challenges, changes and opportunities*, *42*, 28–38. https://www.herdsa.org.au/publications/conference-proceedings/research-and-development-higher-education-next-generation-3

Hamilton, D. (1990). *Learning about education: An unfinished curriculum*. Open University Press.

Hardiman, F. (2012). *Finding a Voice: The experience of mature students in a college of further education.* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1043339.pdf

Harlow, A., & Peter, M. (2014). Mastering threshold concepts in tertiary education: "I know exactly what you are saying and I can understand it but I've got nowhere to hook it". *Waikato Journal of Education*, *19*(2), 7–22. https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v19i2.95

Harlow, A., Scott, J., Peter, M., & Cowie, B. (2011). "Getting stuck" in analogue electronics: Threshold concepts as an explanatory model. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, *36*(5), 435–447. https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2011.606500

Harrell, I. L., & Bower, B. L. (2011). Student characteristics that predict persistence in community college online courses. *American Journal of Distance Education*, *25*(3), 178–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2011.590107

Harvey, A., Brett, M. Cardak, B., Sheridan, A., Stratford, J., Tootell, N., McAllister, R. & Spicer, R. (2016). *The adaptation of tertiary admissions practices to growth and diversity*. La Trobe University & University of New England. https://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/720853/La-Trobe-NPP-TAC-Research-Report.pdf

Hase, S. (2011), Learner defined curriculum: Heutagogy and action learning in vocational training. *Southern Institute of Technology Journal of Applied Research, Special Edition on Action Research.* https://www.sit.ac.nz/Portals/0/upload/documents/sitjar/SITJAR%20AR%20edition%20A.pdf

Hase, S., & Kenyon, C. (2007). Heutagogy: A child of complexity theory. *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education*, *4*(1). https://doi.org/10.29173/cmplct8766

Hasselgren, B., & Beach, D. (1997). Phenomenography: A “good-for-nothing brother” of phenomenology? Outline of an analysis. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *16*(2), 191–202. https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436970160206

Haughey, M., Evans, T., & Murphy, D. (2008). Introduction: From correspondence to virtual learning environments. In T. Evans, M. Haughey & D. Murphy (Eds.), *International handbook of distance education* (pp. 1-10). Emerald.

Hawkins, B., & Edwards, G. (2015). Managing the monsters of doubt: Liminality, threshold concepts and leadership learning. *Management Learning*, *46*(1), 24–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507613501736

Heagney, M., & Benson, R. (2017). How mature-age students succeed in higher education: Implications for institutional support. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *39*(3), 216–234. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080x.2017.1300986

Healey, J., Nicholson, D. & Gahan, P. (2017). *The Future of Work in Australia: Anticipating how new technologies will reshape labour markets, occupations and skill requirements.* Department of Education, Future Frontiers Analytical Report. http://www.monte.nsw.edu.au/files/2615/2220/7017/The-Future-of-Work-in-Australia-analytical-report11.pdf

Hefferon, K, & Gil-Rodriguez, E. (2011). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Psychologist*, *24*(10), 756–759.

Hegel, G. W. F. (2018). *The phenomenology of spirit* (T. Pinkard, Ed. & Trans.). Cambridge University Press. https://libcom.org/files/Georg%20Wilhelm%20Friedrich%20Hegel%20-%20The%20Phenomenology%20of%20Spirit%20(Terry%20Pinkard%20Translation).pdf (Original work published 1807).

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. Harper Row.

Heidegger, M. (1982). *The basic problems of phenomenology* (A. Hofstadter, Trans.). Indiana University Press.

Heidegger, M. (1994). *Basic questions of philosophy: Selected "problems" of "logic".* (R. Rojcewicz & A. Schuwer, Trans.). Indiana University Press.

Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and time* (J. Stambaugh, Trans.). State University of New York Press. (Original work published 1927).

Henriksson, C. (2012). Hermeneutic phenomenology and pedagogical practice. In N. Friesen, C. Henriksson, & T. Saevi (Eds.). *Hermeneutic phenomenology in education: Method and practice. Practice of research method* (4th ed., pp. 119–137). Sense. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-834-6

Hersman, B., & Schroeder, N. (2017). Strategies for designing engaging online kinesiology courses based on the community of inquiry model. *Quest*, *69*(4), 480–493. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2017.1295274

Hibbert, P., & Cunliffe, A. (2015). Responsible management: Engaging moral reflexive practice through threshold concepts. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *127*, 177–188. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1993-7

Higgs, B. & Cronin, J. (2013). *Threshold concepts: Informing the curriculum.* In C. O'Farrell & A. Farrell (Eds.), *Emerging issues in higher education III* (pp. 167–177). Belfast: EDIN.

Hillier, M. (2018). Bridging the digital divide with off-line e-learning. *Distance Education*, *39*(1), 110–121. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2017.1418627

Hirschi, A. (2018). The fourth industrial revolution: Issues and implications for career research and practice. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *66*(3), 192–204. https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12142

Holley, D., & Oliver, M. (2011). Negotiating the digital divide: Narratives from the have and the have-nots. In R. Land & S. Bayne (Eds.), *Digital difference: Perspectives on online learning* (pp. 101–113). Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-580-2_8

Holloway, I. & Wheeler, S. (2002) *Qualitative research in nursing*. Blackwell Science.

Holmwood, C. & Scales, P. (2018). Liminality in higher education – Gaps and moments of uncertainty as legitimate learning spaces. In J. Taylor & C. Holmwood (Eds.), *Learning as a creative and developmental process in higher education: A therapeutic arts approach and its wider application*. Routledge.

Horrigan, L. A. (2018). Tackling the threshold concepts in physiology: What is the role of the laboratory class? *Advances in Physiology Education*, *42*, 507–515. https://doi.org/10.1152/advan.00123.2017

Hoskins, S. L., & van Hooff, J. C. (2005). Motivation and ability: Which students use online learning and what influence does it have on their achievement? *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *36*(2), 177–192. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2005.00451.x

Howard, C., & Davies, P. (2013). Attracting mature students into higher education: The impact of approaches to learning and social identity. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *37*(6), 769–785. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2012.684038

Huff, A.S. (2009). *Designing research for publication*. Sage.

Husserl, E. (1931). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology*. George Allen & Unwin.

Husserl, E. (1962). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (W. B. Simpson, Trans.). Collier.

Husserl, E. (1964). Introduction to transcendental phenomenology (Introductory essay). In P. Koestenbaum (Ed.), *The Paris lectures*. Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: An introduction to phenomenological philosophy* (D. Carr, Trans.). Northwestern University Press.

Husserl, E. (1973). *Experience and judgment: Investigations in a genealogy of logic* (L. Langrebe, Ed.; J. L. Findlay, Trans.). Routledge.

Husserl, E. (1975). Introduction to transcendental phenomenology (Introductory essay). In P. Koestenbaum (Ed.), & S. J. Bartlett & P. Koestenbaum (Trans.), *The Paris lectures*. Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, E. (2001). Logical Investigations Volume 1 (D. Moran, Ed.). Routledge. https://www.google.com.au/books/edition/Logical_Investigations/WJteRhru_5wC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=isbn:9780415241892&printsec=frontcover

Husserl, E. (2012). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (W. R. Boyce-Gibson, Trans.). Routledge.

Illeris, K. (2010). Towards a contemporary and comprehensive theory of learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *22*(4), 396–406. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370304837

Ivanic, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discoursal construction of identity in academic writing (Vol. 5)*. John Benjamin's Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1075/swll.5

Johnson, G. M. (2015). On-Campus and fully-online university students: Comparing demographics, digital technology use and learning characteristics. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, *12*(1), 10–13. https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1501&context=jutlp

Johnson, K. (2015). Behavioral education in the 21st century. Journal of *Organizational Behavior Management*, *35*(1-2), 135–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/01608061.2015.1036152

Jolliffe, A., Ritter, J., & Stevens, D. (2001). *The online learning handbook: Developing and using Web-based learning*. Kogan Page.

Jootun, D., McGhee, G., & Marland, G. R. (2009). Reflexivity: Promoting rigour in qualitative research. *Nursing Standard*, *23*(23), 42–46. https://doi.org/10.7748/ns2009.02.23.23.42.c6800

Kabo, J, Day, R, Baillie, C. (2009). Engineering and social justice: How to help students cross the threshold. *Practice and Evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 4*(2), 126–146. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306274379_Engineering_and_Social_Justice_How_to_help_students_cross_the_threshold

Kabo, J. & Baillie, C. (2010). Engineering and social justice: Negotiating the spectrum of liminality. In R. Land, J.H.F. Meyer & C. Baillie (Eds.), *Threshold concepts and transformational learning* (pp. 303–315). Sense.

Kahu, E. (2013a). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *38*(5), 758–773. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.598505

Kahu, E. (2013b). From "loving it" to "freaking out" and back again: The engagement of a mature distance student in their first semester at university. *Refereed Proceedings of the Manawatu Doctoral Research Symposium*, *2*, 59–66.

Kahu, E. (2014). Increasing the emotional engagement of first year mature-aged distance students: Interest and belonging. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, *5*(2), 45–55. https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v5i2.231

Kahu, E. R., Picton, C., & Nelson, K. (2019). Pathways to engagement: A longitudinal study of the first-year student experience in the educational interface. *Higher Education*, *79*, 657–673. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00429-w

Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C., Leach, L., & Zepke, N. (2013). The engagement of mature distance students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *32*(5), 791–804. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.777036

Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C., Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2014). Space and time to engage: Mature-aged distance students learn to fit study into their lives. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *33*(4), 523–540. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2014.884177

Kahu, E., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *37*(1), 58–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197

Kasworm, C. (2010). Adult learners in a research university: Negotiating undergraduate student identity. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *60*(2), 143–160. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713609336110

Kearney, J., Stanley, G., & Blackberry, G. (2018). Interpreting the first-year experience of a non-traditional student: A case study. *Student Success*, *9*(3), 13–23. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v9i3.463

Keegan, D. (1990). *Foundations of distance education*. Routledge.

Kellenberg, F., Schmidt, J., & Werner, C. (2017). The adult learner: Self-Determined, self-regulated, and reflective. *Journal of Pedagogy and Psychology "Signum Temporis,"* *9*(1), 23–29. https://doi.org/10.1515/sigtem-2017-0001

Kemp, D. & Norton, A. (2014). *Review of the demand driven funding system report*. Department of Education. https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-reviews-and-consultations/resources/review-demand-driven-funding-system-report

Kenner, C. & Weinerman, J. (2011). Adult learning theory: Applications to non-traditional college students. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, *41*(2), 87–96. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ926365.pdf

Kent, M. (2015). *Access and Barriers to Online Education for People with Disabilities*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/access-and-barriers-to-online-education-for-people-with-disabilities/

Kentor, H. E. (2015). Distance education and the evolution of online learning in the United States. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue, 17*(1). https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=law_facpub

Kift, S. (2009). *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first-year student learning experience in Australian higher education.* Australian Learning and Teaching Council. http://fyhe.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Kift-Sally-ALTC-Senior-Fellowship-Report-Sep-092.pdf

Kift, S. (2015a). A decade of transition pedagogy: A quantum leap in conceptualising the first year experience. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, *2*, 51–86. https://herdsa.org.au/herdsa-review-higher-education-vol-2/51-86

Kift, S. (2015b, June). *Transition pedagogy: A whole student, whole-of-institution framework for successful student transitions* [Keynote Address]. International Conference on Enhancement and Innovation in Higher Education.

Kift, S., Nelson, K., & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE - A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, *1*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v1i1.13

Kiley, M., & Wisker, G. (2009). Threshold concepts in research education and evidence of threshold crossing. Higher Education Research & Development, 28(4), 431–441. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360903067930

Kilgour, P., Reynaud, D., Northcote, M., McLoughlin, C., & Gosselin, K. P. (2019). Threshold concepts about online pedagogy for novice online teachers in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *38*(7), 1417–1431. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1450360

King James Bible. (n.d.). *Book of Genesis* 1:3.

Knowles, M. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. Association Press.

Knowles, M. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education*. Association Press & Cambridge Book Publishers. http://www.umsl.edu/~henschkej/articles/a_The_%20Modern_Practice_of_Adult_Education.pdf

Knowles, M. (1984). *The adult learner: A neglected species*. Gulf Publishing. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED084368.pdf

Knowles, M. (1985). *Andragogy in action*. Jossey-Bass.

Knowles, M. (1996). Adult learning. In R. Craig (Ed.), *The ASTD training & development handbook: A guide to human resource development* (4th ed., pp. 253–266). McGraw-Hill.

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E., & Swanson, R. (1998). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (5th ed.). Gulf Publishing.

Koehler, M. J., & Mishra, P. (2005). What happens when teachers design educational technology? The development of technological pedagogical content knowledge. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, *32*(2), 131–152. https://doi.org/10.2190/0ew7-01wb-bkhl-qdyv

Koole, M., Costello, J., & Rasmussen, K. (2014). An Introduction to Phenomenography (Workshop). *Conference: The 14th Thinking Qualitatively Workshop Series*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282852960_An_Introduction_to_Phenomenography_Workshop

Koopman, O. (2017). Phenomenology as a method in education research. In, *Science education and curriculum in South Africa* (pp. 1–24). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40766-1

Kramer, B., & Bosman, J. (2016). Innovations in scholarly communication - global survey on research tool usage. *F1000Research*, *5*. https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.8414.1

Kuhn, T. S. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd ed.). The University of Chicago Press. https://www.lri.fr/~mbl/Stanford/CS477/papers/Kuhn-SSR-2ndEd.pdf

Kumar, A., Kumar, P., Palvia, S. C. J., & Verma, S. (2017). Online education worldwide: Current status and emerging trends. *Journal of Information Technology Case and Application Research*, *19*(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/15228053.2017.1294867

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Sage Publications.

Lambert, C., Jomeen, J., & McSherry, W. (2010). Reflexivity: A review of the literature in the context of midwifery research. *British Journal of Midwifery*, *18*(5), 321–326. https://doi.org/10.12968/bjom.2010.18.5.47872

Lamiell, J. T. (1998). “Nomothetic” and “ideographic”: Contrasting Windelband’s understanding with contemporary usage. *Theory & Psychology*, *8*(1), 23–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354398081002

Laming, M. M., Martyn-Lynch, P., & Morris, A. (2016). Mature-age men's experiences of higher education: Australia and England compared. A literature review. *Society for Research into Higher Education*. http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/37295

Laming, M. M., Morris, A., & Martin-Lynch, P. (2019). Mature-age male students in higher education. In, *Palgrave studies in gender and education*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24478-1

Land, R. (2011). There could be trouble ahead: Using threshold concepts as a tool of analysis. International Journal for Academic Development, 16(2), 175–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144x.2011.568747

Land, R. (2012). *A closer look at liminality: Incorrigibles and teaching capital* [Keynote Presentation]. The National Academy's Sixth Annual Conference and the Fourth Biennial Threshold Concepts Conference.

Land, R. (2013). Liminality close-up. *Keynote speaker pre-conference think piece*. HECU7, Higher Education Close Up Research Making a Difference.

Land, R. (2014, July). Liminality close-up. *Keynote speaker pre-conference think piece*. Higher Education Close Up (HECU) 7, Fifth International Biennial Threshold Concepts Conference: Threshold Concepts in Practice.

Land, R. (2016). Toil and trouble: Threshold concepts as a pedagogy of uncertainty. In R. Land, J. H. F. Meyer, & M. T. Flanagan (Eds.), *Threshold concepts in practice (educational futures series)* (pp. 11–24). Brill Sense. https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789463005128/BP000003.xml

Land, R. & Meyer, J. H. F. (2010). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Dynamics of assessment. In R. Land, J. H. F. Meyer & C. Baillie (Eds.), *Threshold concepts and transformational learning* (pp. 61–79). Sense Publishers.

Land, R., & Bayne, S. (Eds.). (2011). *Digital difference: Perspectives on online learning*. Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-580-2

Land, R., Cousin, G., Meyer, J. H. F. & Davies P. (2005). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (3): Implications for course design and evaluation. In C. Rust (Ed.), *Improving student learning – Diversity and inclusivity, proceedings of the 12th improving student learning conference* (pp. 53–64). Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (OCSLD). https://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/ISL04-pp53-64-Land-et-al.pdf

Land, R., Cousin, G., Meyer, J. H. F., & Smith, J. (2006). Implications of threshold concepts for course design and evaluation. In J. H. F. Meyer & R. Land (Eds.), *Overcoming barriers to student understanding threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge* (pp. 195–206). Routledge.

Land, R., Meyer, J. H. & Smith, J. (2008). *Threshold concepts within the disciplines*. Educational Futures Series. Sense.

Land, R., Meyer, J. H. F. & Flanagan, M. T. (Eds.). (2016). *Threshold concepts in practice.* Educational Futures Series. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-94-6300-512-8

Land, R., Meyer. J., & Baillie, C. (2010). Editors' preface. In R. Land, J. Meyer & C. Baillie (Eds.), *Threshold concepts and transformational learning* (pp. ix-xlii). Sense Publishers.

Land, R., Neve, H., & Martindale, L. (2018). Threshold concepts, action poetry and the health professions: An interview with ray land. *International Journal of Practice-Based Learning in Health and Social Care*, *6*(1), 45–52. https://doi.org/10.18552/ijpblhsc.v6i1.517

Land, R., Rattray, J., & Vivian, P. (2014). Learning in the liminal space: A semiotic approach to threshold concepts. *Higher Education*, *67*(2), 199–217. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9705-x

Larkin, K., Rowan, L., Garrick, B. & Beavis, C. (2016). Student perspectives on first year experience initiatives designed for pre-service teachers in their first weeks of university study. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, *13*(1). https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/handle/10072/173115/LarkinPUB309.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Larkin, M., & Thompson, A. R. (2011). Interpretative phenomenological analysis in mental health and psychotherapy research. In D. Harper & A. R. Thompson (Eds.), *Qualitative research methods in mental health and psychotherapy: A guide for students and practitioners.* Wiley-Blackwell.

Larkin, M., Eatough, V., & Osborn, M. (2011). Interpretative phenomenological analysis and embodied, active, situated cognition. *Theory & Psychology*, *21*(3), 318–337. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354310377544

Larkin, M., Watts, S., & Clifton, E. (2006). Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 102–120. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp062oa

Larmuseau, C., Elen, J., & Depaepe, F. (2018). The influence of students' cognitive and motivational characteristics on students' use of a 4C/ID-based online learning environment and their learning gain. *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Learning Analytics and Knowledge*, 171–180. https://doi.org/10.1145/3170358.3170363

Larmuseau, C., Evens, M., Elen, J., Van Den Noortgate, W., Desmet, P., & Depaepe, F. (2018). The relationship between acceptance, actual use of a virtual learning environment and performance: An ecological approach. *Journal of Computers in Education*, *5*, 95–111. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40692-018-0098-9

Larsen, A., Horvath, D., & Bridge, C. (2020). "Get ready": Improving the transition experience of a diverse first-year cohort through building student agency. *Student Success Journal*, *11*(2). https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v11i3.1144

Law, M., Baptiste, S., Carswell, A., Mccoll, M., Polatajko, H., & Pollock, N. (1998). *Canadian occupational performance measure* (3rd ed.). CAOT Publications ACE.

Leathwood, C., & O'Connell, P. (2003). "It's a struggle": The construction of the "new student" in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, *18*(6), 597–615. https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093032000145863

Lee, K. (2017). Rethinking the accessibility of online higher education: A historical review. *Internet and Higher Education*, *33*, 15–33. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312399628_Rethinking_the_accessibility_of_online_higher_education_A_historical_review

Lee, Y., Choi, J., & Kim, T. (2013). Discriminating factors between completers of and dropouts from online learning courses. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *44*(2), 328–337. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2012.01306.x

Lehman, R. M. & Conceição, S. (2010). *Creating a sense of presence in online teaching: How to be there for distance learners.* Jossey-Bass.

Leshem, S. & Trafford, V. (2007). Overlooking the conceptual framework. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *44*(1), 93–105. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703290601081407

Letts. L., Wilkins, S., Law, M., Stewart, D., Bosch, J. & Westmorland, M. (2007). *Guidelines for critical review form: Qualitative studies (Version 2.0)*. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.600.223&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Levin, N. (2015). *Honor the space between no longer and not yet*. Goodreads. https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/8010342-honor-the-space-between-no-longer-and-not-yet

Lewis, S., Heath, G., Lim, L., & Roberts, R. (2020). "I'm not a number, I'm someone to them": Supporting commencing university students' through technology-mediated personalised communication. *Student Success*, *11*(2). https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.1623

Li, C., & Lalani, F. (2020, April 29). *The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how*. World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/

Li, I. W., & Carroll, D. R. (2017). *Factors influencing University student satisfaction, dropout and academic performance: An Australian higher education equity perspective.* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University.

Li, J., Wong, S. C., Yang, X., & Bell, A. (2019). Using feedback to promote student participation in online learning programs: evidence from a quasi-experimental study. Educational Technology Research and Development, 68(1), 485–510. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-019-09709-9

Lin, X., & Wang, C.-H. (2015). Factors that affect returning to graduate school for international and American adult learners. *Institute for Learning Styles Journal*, *1*. http://www.auburn.edu/academic/education/ilsrj/Journal%20Volumes/Fall%202015%20Vol%201%20PDFs/Lin%20Wang%20Factors%20Affecting%20Grad%20Students.pdf

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2018). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed., pp. 108–150). Sage.

Littlefield J. (2018). *The difference between synchronous and asynchronous distance learning*. ThoughtCo. https://www.thoughtco.com/synchronous-distance-learning-asynchronous-distance-learning-1097959

Lizzio, A. (2011). Succeeding@ Griffith: Next generation partnerships across the student lifecycle. In *Griffith University student lifecycle, transition and orientation.* Griffith University.

Lowenthal, P. R., & Dunlap, J. C. (2018). Investigating students' perceptions of instructional strategies to establish social presence. *Distance Education*, *39*(3), 281–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2018.1476844

Lucas, U., & Mladenovic, R. (2007). The potential of threshold concepts: An emerging framework for educational research and practice. *London Review of Education*, *5*(3), 237–248. https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460701661294

MacDonald, K. (2018). A review of the literature: The needs of nontraditional students in postsecondary education. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*, *5*(4), 159–164. https://doi.org/10.1002/sem3.20115

Mackey, A. & Gass, S. M. (2005). *Second language research: Methodology and design*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

Macqueen, S. (2016). *Non-traditional student narratives in Higher Education: developing, adapting and maximising capital*. AARE Conference Melbourne, 27 Nov 2016–1 Dec 2016.

Macqueen, S. (2017). *Narratives from non-traditional students in higher education* [Doctoral Dissertation]. https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:715808/s4245054_final_thesis.pdf

Madill, A., & Gough, B. (2008). Qualitative research and its place in psychological science. *Psychological Methods*, *13*(3), 254–271. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013220

Madill, A., Flowers, P., Frost, N. & Locke, A. (2018). A meta-methodology to enhance pluralist qualitative research: One man's use of socio-sexual media and midlife adjustment to HIV. *Psychology & Health*, *33*(10), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/08870446.2018.1475670

Mahieu, R. & Wolming, S. (2013). Motives of lifelong learners to choose web-based courses. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, *16*(1), 1–10.

Male, S. A. & Baillie, C. A. (2014). Engineering threshold concepts as an approach to curriculum renewal. In A. Johri and B. M. Olds, (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of engineering education research* (pp.393-408). Cambridge University Press.

Mallman, M., & Lee, H. (2016). Stigmatised learners: Mature-age students negotiating university culture. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *37*(5), 684–701. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2014.973017.

Mann, S. J. (2010). Alternative perspectives on the student experience: Alienation and engagement. *Studies in Higher Education*, *26*(1), 7–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070020030689

Mantzavinos, C. (2012). Explanations of meaningful actions. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences 42*(2), 224–238. https://doi.org/10.1177/0048393110392590

Mapping research in student engagement and educational technology in higher education: a systematic evidence map. *International Journal of Educational*

Marandet, E., & Wainwright, E. (2009). Discourses of integration and exclusion: Equal opportunities for university students with dependent children? *Space and Polity*, *13*(2), 109–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562570902999775

Marandet, E., & Wainwright, E. (2010). Invisible experiences: Understanding the choices and needs of university students with dependent children. British Educational Research Journal, *36*(5), 787–805. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920903165595

Martin, F., & Bolliger, D. U. (2018). Engagement matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. *Online Learning*, *22*(1), 205–222. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i1.1092

Martin, F., Ritzhaupt, A., Kumar, S., & Budhrani, K. (2019). Award-winning faculty online teaching practices: Course design, assessment and evaluation, and facilitation. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *42*, 34–43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2019.04.001

Martinez, P. J., Aguilar, F. J., & Ortiz, M. (2020). Transitioning from face-to-face to blended and full online learning engineering master's program. *IEEE Transactions on Education*, *63*(1), 2–9. https://doi.org/10.1109/te.2019.2925320.

Marton, F. (1981). Phenomenography – Describing conceptions of the world around us. *Instructional Science*, 10, 177–200. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00132516

Marton, F. (1986). Phenomenography: A research approach to investigating different understandings of reality. *Journal of Thought*, *21*(3), 28-49. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42589189

Marton, F. (1994). Phenomenography. In T. Husen & T. N. Postlethwaite (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (2nd ed., pp. 4424–4429). Pergamon.

Marton, F., & Säljö, R. (1976). On qualitative differences in learning: I. Outcome and process. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 46*(1), 4–11. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1976.tb02980.x

Marton, F., Carlsson, M. A., & Halasz, L. (1992). Differences in understanding and the use of reflective variation in reading. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 62*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1992.tb00995.x

Marton, F., Carlsson, M.A. & Halasz, L. (1992). Differences in understanding and the use of reflective variation in reading. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 62, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1992.tb00995.x

Mastel-Smith, B., Post, J., & Lake, P. (2015). Online teaching: "Are you there, and do you care?" *Journal of Nursing Education*, *54*(3), 145–151. https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20150218-18

May, T. (1996). *Social Research – Issues, methods and process*. Oxford University Press.

Mayer, R. E. (2018). Thirty years of research on online learning. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 33*(2), 152–159. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3482.

McAlpine, L. & Amundsen, C. (Eds.). (2011). *Doctoral education: Research-based strategies for doctoral students, supervisors and administrators*. Springer.

McIntosh, M. J., & Morse, J. M. (2015). Situating and constructing diversity in semi-structured interviews. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, *2*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2333393615597674

McIsaac, M. S., & Gunawardena, C. N. (1996). *Handbook of research for educational communications and technology: A project of the association for educational communications and technology*. Simon & Schuster Macmillan.

McLean, K. C., Pasupathi, M., & Pals, J. L. (2007). Selves creating stories creating selves: A process model of narrative self-development. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *11*(3), 262–278. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868307301034

McLean, N., & Price, L. (2017). Identity formation among novice academic teachers – A longitudinal study. *Studies in Higher Education*, *44*(6), 990–1003. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1405254

Mead, G. H. (1982). The *individual* and the *social self*: Unpublished *work* of George Herbert Mead (D. L. Miller, Ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). *The primacy of perception and other essays on phenomenological psychology, the philosophy of art, history and politics.* Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1974). The primacy of perception and its philosophical consequences & Eye and Mind. In J. O'Neill (Ed.), *Phenomenology, language and sociology*. Heinemann.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2011). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). Routledge.

Merton, R. (1972). Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*(1), 9–47. https://www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/jhamlin/4111/Readings/MertonKnowledge.pdf

Meyer, J. & Land, R. (2003a). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (1): linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines. *Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses Project*.

Meyer, J. & Land, R. (2003b). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (1): Linkages to ways of thinking and practising. In C. Rust (Ed.), *Improving student learning – Ten years on: Proceedings of the 2002 10th international symposium improving student learning.* Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

Meyer, J. & Land, R. (2006). Overcoming barriers to student understanding: Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge. Routledge.

Meyer, J. H. F. (2012). 'Variation in student learning' as a threshold concept. *The Journal of Faculty Development, Special Issue: Threshold Concepts in Educational Development*, *26*(3), 8–13.

Meyer, J. H. F. (2016). Threshold concepts and pedagogic representation. *Education + Training*, *58*(5), 463–475. https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-04-2016-0066

Meyer, J. H. F. & Land, R. (2010). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (5): Dynamics of assessment. In J. H. F. Meyer, R. Land, & C. Baillie (Eds), *Threshold concepts and transformational learning* (pp. 61–80). Sense Publishers.

Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2005). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. Higher Education, 49(3), 373–388. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-6779-5

Meyer, J. H. F., & Timmermans, J. A. (2016). Integrated threshold concept knowledge. In R. Land, J. H. F. Meyer, & M. T. Flanagan (Eds.), *Threshold concepts in practice* (pp. 25–38). Sense Publishers.

Meyer, J. H. F., Land, R. & Davies, P. (2006). Implications of threshold concepts for course design and evaluation. In J. H. F. Meyer and R. Land (Eds.), *Overcoming barriers to student understanding: Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge* (pp. 195–206). Routledge.

Meyer, J. H. F., Land, R. & Davies, P. (2008). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (4): Issues of variation and variability. In R. Land J. H. F. Meyer and J. Smith (Eds.), *Threshold concepts within the disciplines*, (pp. 59–74). Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460911477

Meyer, J. H. F., Land, R., & Baillie, C. (2010). *Threshold concepts and transformational learning*. Sense Publishers.

Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 3–33). Jossey-Bass. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.463.1039&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of transformative learning*, *1*(1), 58–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344603252172

Middendorf, J., & Pace, D. (2004). Decoding the disciplines: A model for helping students learn disciplinary ways of thinking. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, *2004*(98), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.142

Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M., (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Sage. https://vivauniversity.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/milesandhuberman1994.pdf

Mishler, E. G. (2000). Validation in inquiry-guided research: The role of exemplars in narrative studies. In B. M. Brizuela, J. P. Stewart, R. G. Carrillo, and J. G. Berger (Eds.), *Acts of inquiry in qualitative research* (pp. 119–146). Harvard Educational Review.

Mishra, L., Gupta, T., & Shree, A. (2020). Online teaching-learning in higher education during lockdown period of COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, *1*, 100012. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100012

Mohamad, N. E., Sidik, S. M., Akhtari-Zavare, M., & Gani, N. A. (2021). The prevalence risk of anxiety and its associated factors among university students in Malaysia: A national cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health*, *21*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10440-5

Moore, C. & Greenland, S. (2017). Employment-driven online student attrition and the assessment policy divide: An Australian open-access higher education perspective. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, *21*(1), 52–62.

Moore, C. & Greenland, S. (2017). Employment-driven online student attrition and the assessment policy divide: An Australian open-access higher education perspective. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning 21*(1), 52–62.

Moore, J., Dickson-Deane, C. & Galyen, K. (2011). E-learning, online learning and distance learning environments: Are they the same? *The Internet and Higher Education 14*(2), 129–135. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233779932_E-Learning_online_learning_and_distance_learning_environments_Are_they_the_same

Moore, M. G., & Kearsle, G. (2012). *Distance education: A systems view of online learning*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Moore, T., & Morton, J. (2017). The myth of job readiness? Written communication, employability, and the 'skills gap' in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *42*(3), 591–609. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1067602

Morgan, G., & Adams, J. (2009). Pedagogy first: Making web-technologies work for soft skills development in leadership and management education. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, *20*(2), 129–155.

Morgan, P. K. (2015). Pausing at the Threshold Faculty Publications. *Paper 1258. Libraries and the Academy*, *15*(1). Johns Hopkins University Press. http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/faculty_publications/1258

Moser-Wellman, A. (2002). *The five faces of genius: Creative thinking styles to succeed at work*. Penguin.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications. https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658

Mubarak, A. A., Cao, H., & Zhang, W. (2020). Prediction of students' early dropout based on their interaction logs in online learning environment. *Interactive Learning Environments*. https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1727529

Müller, T. (2008). Persistence of women in online degree-completion programs. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *9*(2), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v9i2.455

Munro, L. (2011). 'Go boldly, dream large!': The challenges confronting non-traditional students at university. *Australian Journal of Education*, *55*(2), 115–131. https://doi.org/10.1177/000494411105500203

Nathanson, C. A. (1991). *Dangerous passage: The social control of sexuality in women's adolescence*. Temple University Press.

National Health and Medical Research Council. (2018, July 18). *National statement on ethical conduct in human research (2007) - updated 2018*. https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018

Naylor, R., Baik, C. & Arkoudis, S. (2018). Identifying attrition risk based on the first-year experience. *Higher Education Research & Development 37*(2), 328–342. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1370438

Nelson, K.J., Creagh, T., Kift., S. & Clarke, J. (2014). *Transition Pedagogy Handbook* (2nd ed.). https://eprints.qut.edu.au/76333/1/Transition_Pedagogy_Handbook_2014.pdf

Neuman, W. L. (2011). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (7th ed.). Pearson Education Inc.

Newell, R. & Burnard P. (2011). *Research for evidence-based practice*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Nolan, A. W. (2018). *The effect of an historical geology course on students' attitudes towards science and their knowledge of deep time as a threshold to their knowledge of evolution* [PhD Dissertation]. https://aquila.usm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2601&context=dissertations

Noon, E. J. (2017). An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Barriers to the Use of Humour in the Teaching of Childhood Studies. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, *5*(3), 45–52. https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v5i3.255

Noon, E. J. (2018). Interpretive phenomenological analysis: An appropriate methodology for educational research? *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, *6*(1), 75–83. https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v6i1.304

Northcote, M., Gosselin, K. P., Reynaud, D., Kilgour, P. & Anderson, M. (2015). Navigating the learning journeys of online teachers: Threshold concepts and self-efficacy. *Issues in Educational Research*, *25*(3), 319–344. http://www.iier.org.au/iier25/northcote.pdf

Northcott, P. (1984). The tyranny of distance and proximity. In K. Smith (Ed.), *Diversity down under in distance education* (pp. 39–50). Australian and South Pacific External Studies Association. Darling Down Institute Press.

Norton, A. (2016). *Mapping Australian higher education 2016.* Grattan Institute. https://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/739206/Norton,-A-And-Cakitaki,-B.-2016-Mapping-Australian-higher-education-2016,-Grattan-Institute..pdf

Norton, A. & Cherastidtham, I. (2018). *Mapping Australian higher education 2018.* Grattan Institute. https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/907-Mapping-Australian-higher-education-2018.pdf

Norum, K. E. (2000). Black (w)holes: A researcher's place in her research. *Qualitative Sociology*, *23*, 319–340. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005520027445

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M, White, D., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

O'Shea, S. (2020b). Crossing boundaries: Rethinking the ways that first-in-family students navigate 'barriers' to higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 41*(1), 95–110. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1668746

O'Boyle, N. (2015). The risks of "university speak": Relationship management and identity negotiation by mature students off campus. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, *25*(2), 93–111. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2015.1018921

O'Donnell, R. (2010). *A critique of the threshold concept hypothesis and an application in economics working paper 164.* Finance Discipline Group, UTS Business School, University of Technology, Sydney. https://ideas.repec.org/p/uts/wpaper/164.html

O'Neill, O. (2003). Some limits of informed consent. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, *29*(1), 4–7. http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/jme.29.1.4

O'Shea, S. (2015a). "I generally say I am a Mum first… but I'm studying at uni": The narratives of first in family, female caregivers moving into an Australian university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 8*(4), 243–257. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038996

O'Shea, S. (2015b). Arriving, surviving, and succeeding: First-in-family women and their experiences of transitioning into the first year of university. Journal of College Student Development, 56(5), 499–517. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2015.0053

O'Shea, S. (2016). Navigating the knowledge sets of older learners: Exploring the capitals of first-in-family mature age students. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 18*(3), 34–54. https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.18.3.34

O'Shea, S. (2018). Considering the cultural strengths of older first-generation university students. In A. Bell & L. J. Santamaria (Eds.), *Understanding experiences of first-generation university students: Culturally responsive and sustaining methodologies* (pp. 143–163). Bloomsbury Publishing.

O'Shea, S. (2020a). Rethinking diversity: Combining Sen and Bourdieu to critically unpack higher education participation and persistence. In J. Huisman & M. Tight (Eds.), *Theory and method in higher education research* (*theory and method in higher education research, Vol. 6*) (pp. 115–129). Emerald Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/S2056-375220200000006008

O'Shea, S., May, J., Stone, C., & Delahunty, J. (2017). *First-in-family students, university experience and family life: Motivations, transitions and participation*. Palgrave Macmillan. http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58284-3

O'Shea, S., Stone, C. & Delahunty, J. (2015). "I 'feel' like I am at university even though I am online." Exploring how students narrate their engagement with higher education institutions in an online learning environment. *Distance Education, 36*(1), 41–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2015.1019970

Oaklander, V. (1988) *Windows to our children: A gestalt therapy approach to children and adolescents.* The Gestalt Journal Press.

Open Universities Australia, (2015). *2015 Year in Review*. https://www.open.edu.au/media/yearinreview2015/index.html

Open University, (n.d.). *History*. http://www.openuniversity.edu/why-the-ou/quality/history

Orgill, M. K. (2007). *Theoretical frameworks for research in chemistry/science education*, Prentice Hall.

Orlando, J., & Attard, C. (2015). Digital natives come of age: The reality of today's early career teachers using mobile devices to teach mathematics. *Mathematics Education Research Journal*, *28*, 107–121. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13394-015-0159-6

Orsini-Jones, M. (2008). Troublesome language knowledge: Identifying threshold concepts in grammar learning. In R. Land, J. H. F. Meyer, & J. Smith (Eds.), *Threshold concepts within the disciplines* (pp. 213–226). Sense Publishers.

Osborn, M., & Smith, J. A. (1998). The personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, *3*, 65–83. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8287.1998.tb00556.x

Osborne, M., Marks, A., & Turner, E. (2004). Becoming a mature student: How adult appplicants weigh the advantages and disadvantages of higher education. *Higher Education 48*(3)**,** 291–315. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:HIGH.0000035541.40952.ab

Ouyang, F., Chang, Y.-H., Scharber, C., Jiao, P., & Huang, T. (2020). Examining the instructor-student collaborative partnership in an online learning community course. Instructional Science, 48(2), 183–204. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11251-020-09507-4

Padgett, D. K. (2004). *The qualitative research experience*. Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Palmer, M., O'Kane, P. & Owens, M. (2009). Betwixt spaces: student accounts of turning point experiences in the first-year transition. *Studies in Higher Education, 34*(1), 37–54. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075070802601929

Palmer, R. (1969). *Hermeneutics*. Northwestern University Press.

Palumbarit, G. R. D. (Sept. 14, 2020). Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/100573671574594/posts/dont-just-create-better-versions of-what-people-already-consider-valuable-change/184797966485497/

Panadero, E. (2017). A review of self-regulated learning: Six models and four directions for research. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*, 422. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00422

Parahoo, K. (2006). *Nursing research: Principles, process and issues* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Park, C. L., Boman, J., Care, W. D., Edwards, M. & Perry, B. (2009). Persistence and attrition: What is being measured? *Journal of College Student Retention, 10*(2), 223–233. https://doi.org/10.2190/cs.10.2.g

Park, J. H., & Choi, H. J. (2009). Factors Influencing Adult Learners' Decision to Drop Out or Persist in Online Learning. *Educational Technology & Society, 12*(4), 207–217. www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/jeductechsoci.12.4.207

Parker, I. (2008). Criteria for qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 1*(2), 95–106. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088704qp010oa

Parliament of Australia. (2010). *Budget 2009-10: Education*. https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/BudgetReview200910/EducationHigher

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods.* Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.1002/0470013192.bsa514

Peachey, A. (2010). The third place in second life: Real life community in a virtual world. In A. Peachey, J. Gillen, D. Livingstone, S. Smith-Robbins (Eds.), *Researching learning in virtual worlds* (pp. 91–110). Springer.

Penley, J. (2018). A phenomenological study on teacher perception of change in school culture as a result of the implementation of mindfulness. *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/3366

Perkins, D. (1999). The many faces of constructivism. *Educational Leadership, 57*(3), 6–11. https://fdocuments.net/reader/full/perkins-the-many-faces-of-constructivism

Perkins, D. (2006). Constructivism and Troublesome knowledge. In J. H. F. Meyer & R. Land (Eds.), *Overcoming barriers to student understanding: Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge* (pp.33–47). Routledge.

Perkins, D. (2010a). Foreword. In J. H. F. Meyer, R. Land, & C. Baillie (Eds.), *Threshold concepts and transformational learning*. Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460912078_001

Perkins, D. (2010b). *Threshold experiences: Moving concepts from object to instrument to action.* 3rd Biennial Threshold Concepts Conference, The University of New South Wales in collaboration with the University of Sydney.

Perry, C. & Allard, A. (2003). Making the connections: Transition experience for first-year education students, *Journal of educational enquiry*, *4*(2), 74–89. https://ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/EDEQ/article/view/525

Pietkiewicz, I., & Smith, J. A. (2014). A practical guide to using interpretative phenomenological analysis in qualitative research psychology, *Psychological Journal*, *20*(1), 7–14. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263767248_A_practical_guide_to_using_Interpretative_Phenomenological_Analysis_in_qualitative_research_psychology

Piqsels (n.d.). Free image. https://www.piqsels.com/en/public-domain-photo-zxwkx

Pitman, T., Roberts, L., Bennett, D., & Richardson, S. (2017). An Australian study of graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2017.1349895

Plageman, P. (2011). Educator, planner and advocate: Higher education for adults in the new millennium. *Adult Learning*, *22*(2), 32–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/104515951102200205

Polkinghorne, D. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. In J. A. Hatch & R. Wisniewski (Eds.), *Life history and narrative: Influences of feminism and culture* (pp. 5–23). Falmer.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences.* State University of New York Press.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential phenomenological perspectives in psychology: Exploring the breadth of human experience* (pp. 41–60). Plenum. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-6989-3_3

Pollard, L. (2018). Remote student university success: An analysis of policy and practice. *NCSEHE 2017 Equity Fellowship Final Report*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/remote-student-university-success-analysis-policy-practice/

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants part 2: Do they really think differently*? On the Horizon 9*(6), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424843

Productivity Commission. (2019). *The demand driven university system: A mixed report card*. Australian Government. https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/university-report-card/university-report-card.pdf

Quinn, R. (2004). *Building the bridge as you walk on it: A guide for leading change*. Jossey-Bass.

Rabourn, K. E., BrckaLorenz, A., Shoup, R. (2018). Reimagining student engagement: How non-traditional adult learners engage in traditional postsecondary environments. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *66*(1). 22–33 https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2018.1415635

Rabourn, K. E., Shoup, R., & BrckaLorenz, A. (2015, May). *Barriers in returning to learning engagement and support of adult learners.* Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research.

Radwan, N., Senousy, M. B. & Riad, A. (2014). Current trends and challenges of developing and evaluating learning management systems. *International Journal of E-Education, E-Business, E-Management and E-Learning*, *4*(5), 361–375. https://doi.org/10.7763/ijeeee.2014.v4.351

Ragusa, A. T. (2017). Technologically-mediated communication: Student expectations and experiences in a FOMO society. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-017-0077-7

Rattray, J & Land, R. (2017). Special Issue: Threshold Concepts and Conceptual Difficulty. *Practice and Evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *12*(2), 63–80. http://www.pestlhe.org/index.php/pestlhe/issue/view/31

Rattray, J. (2016). Affective dimensions in liminality. In R. Land, J. H. F. Meyer, & M. T. Flanagan (Eds.), *Threshold concepts in practice* (pp. 67–76). Sense Publishers. https://dro.dur.ac.uk/19953/1/19953.pdf

Read, B., Archer, L., & Leathwood, C. (2003). Challenging cultures? Student conceptions of “belonging” and “isolation” at a post-1992 university. *Studies in Higher Education*, *28*(3), 261–277. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070309290

Reay, D. (2008). Class, authenticity and the transition to higher education for mature students. *The Sociological Review*, *50*(3), 398–418. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954x.00389

Reeves, S., Albert, M., Kuper, A., & Hodges, B. D. (2008). Why use theories in qualitative research? *British Medical Journal*, *337*. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.a949

Reid, K., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2005). Exploring lived experience. *The Psychologist*, *18*(1), 20–23. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Paul-Flowers-2/publication/221670347_Exploring_lived_Experience/links/0922b4f57ab3ca3a29000000/Exploring-lived-Experience.pdf

Reinharz, S., & Chase, S. (2002). Interviewing women. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research* (pp. 221–238). Sage Publications.

Remedios, R., & Richardson, J. T. E. (2013). Achievement goals in adult learners: Evidence from distance education. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *83*(4), 664–685. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12001

retention program where attrition is low. Journal of College Student Retention, 2(4), 341-353.

Rhode, J. F. (2009). Interaction equivalency in self-paced online learning environments: An exploration of learner preferences. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, *10*(1). http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/%20irrodl/article/view/603/1179

Richard, H., & Haya, A. (2009). Examining student decision to adopt web 2.0 technologies: theory and empirical tests. *Journal of computing in higher education*, *21*(3), 183–198. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-009-9023-6

Richards, L. (2009). *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Richardson, F. C., Fowers, B. J. & Guignon, C. B. (1999). *Re-envisioning psychology: Moral dimensions of theory and practice.* Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Richardson, J. C., Maeda, Y., Lv, J., & Caskurlu, S. (2017). Social presence in relation to students' satisfaction and learning in the online environment: A meta-analysis. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *71*, 402–417. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.02.001

Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. A. (2005). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (p. 959–978). Sage Publications Ltd. http://www2.fct.unesp.br/docentes/geo/necio_turra/PPGG%20-%20PESQUISA%20QUALI%20PARA%20GEOGRAFIA/Qualitative%20parte%202.pdf

Richardson, V. (1994). Conducting research on practice. *Educational Researcher*, *23*(5), 5–10. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X023005005

Ricoeur, P. (2016). *Hermeneutics and the human sciences* (J. B. Thompson, Ed. & Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1987).

Ridley, D. (2012). *The literature review: A step-by-step guide for students* (2nd ed.). Sheffield University.

Rieman, D. J. (1986). The essential structure of a caring interaction: Doing phenomenology. In P. M. Munhall & C. J. Oiler (Eds.), *Nursing research: A qualitative perspective* (pp. 85–105). Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Roberts, J. & Crittenden, L. (2009). Accessible distance education 101. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, *4*. http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/09141.pdf

Roddy, C., Amiet, D. L., Chung, J., Holt, C., Shaw, L., Mckenzie, S., Garivaldis, F., Lodge, J. M., & Mundy, M. E. (2017). Applying best practice online learning, teaching, and support to intensive online environments: An integrative review. *Frontiers in Education*, *2*(59). https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2017.00059

Rodger, S. & Turpin, M. (2011). Using threshold concepts to transform entry level curricula. In Krause, K., Buckridge, M., Grimmer, C. & Purbrick-Illek, S. (Eds.), *Research and development in higher education: Reshaping higher education, 34* (pp. 263–274). Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc. https://www.herdsa.org.au/system/files/HERDSA_2011_Rodger.PDF

Rodger, S., Turpin, M. & O'Brien, M. (2013). Experiences of academic staff in using threshold concepts within a reformed curriculum. *Studies in Higher Education, 40*(4), 545–560. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.830832

Rodgers, B. L. & Knafl, K. A. (2000). *Concept development in nursing: Foundation, techniques and applications* (2nd ed.) Saunders.

Rodrigues, H., Almeida, F., Figueiredo, V. & Lopes, S.L. (2019). Tracking e-learning through published papers: A systematic review. *Computers & Education, 136*(1), 87–98. Elsevier Ltd. https://www.academia.edu/41905259/Tracking_e_learning_through_published_papers_A_systematic_review

Rodríguez-Hidalgo, A. J., Pantaleón, Y., Dios, I., & Falla, D. (2020). Fear of COVID-19, stress, and anxiety in university undergraduate students: A predictive model for depression. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.591797

Ross-Gordon, J. M. (2011). Research on adult learners: Supporting the needs of a student population that is no longer nontraditional. *Peer Review, 13*(1), 26–29. https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/research-adult-learners-supporting-needs-student-population-no

Ross, J. (2011). *Unmasking online reflective practices in higher education* [PhD Thesis]. https://era.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1842/6321/Ross2012.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

Rowbottom, D. P. (2007). Demystifying threshold concepts. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *41*(2), 263–270. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2007.00554.x

Ryan, M-L. (2006). From parallel universes to possible worlds: Ontological pluralism in physics, narratology and narrative. *Poetics Today*, *27*(4), 663–74. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.121.9029&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Saar, E., Täht, K., & Roosalu, T. (2014). Institutional barriers for adults' participation in higher education in thirteen European countries. *Higher Education*, *68*, 691–710. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9739-8

Saldana, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Salmon, G. (2011). Learning innovation for the 21st Century. In U. D Ehlers & Di. Schneckenberg (Eds.), *Changing cultures in higher education: Moving ahead to future learning* (pp. 27–42). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-03582-1_3

Salmon, G. (2013). *The key to active online learning* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Sanders, K., Boustedt, J., Eckerdal, A., McCartney, R., Moström, J. E., Thomas, L., & Zander, C. (2012). Threshold concepts and threshold skills in computing. *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual International Conference on International Computing Education Research – ICER '12*. https://doi.org/10.1145/2361276.2361283

Sandler, M. (2000). Career decision-making self-efficacy, perceived stress, and an integrated model of student persistence: A structural model of student persistence. *Research in Higher Education*, *41*(5), 537–580.

Saroyan, A., & Trigwell, K. (2015). Higher education teachers' professional learning: Process and outcome. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, *46*, 92–101. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2015.03.008

Savin-Baden, M, & Howell-Major, C. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice.* Routledge.

Savin-Baden, M. (2000). *Problem-based learning in higher education: Untold stories.* Open University Press.

Savin-Baden, M. (2008a). From cognitive capability to social reform? Shifting perceptions of learning in immersive virtual worlds. *Research in Learning Technology*, *16*(3), 151–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687760802526731

Savin-Baden, M. (2008b). *Learning spaces: Creating opportunities for knowledge creation in academic life.* McGraw Hill.

Savin-Baden, M. (2008c). Liquid learning and troublesome spaces: Journeys from the threshold? In J. H. F. Meyer, & R. Land (Eds.), *Threshold concepts within the disciplines* (pp. 75–88). Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460911477

Savin-Baden, M. (2016). The impact of transdisciplinary threshold concepts on student engagement in problem-based learning: A conceptual synthesis. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning*, *10*(2). https://doi.org/10.7771/1541-5015.1588

Savin-Baden, M. & Falconer, L. (2016). Learning at the interstices; locating practical philosophies for understanding physical/virtual inter-spaces. *Interactive Learning Environments*, *24*(5), 991–1003. https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2015.1128212

Scheurich, J. J. (1995). A postmodernist critique of research interviewing. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, *8*(3), 239–252. https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839950080303

Schostak, J., & Schostak, J. (2008). *Radical research: Designing, developing and writing research to make a difference.* Routledge.

Schraw, G., Crippen, K. J., & Hartley, K. (2006). Promoting self-regulation in science education: Metacognition as part of a broader perspective on learning. *Research in Science Education, 36,* 111–139. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11165-005-3917-8

Schwartzman, L. (2010). Transcending disciplinary doundaries: A proposed theoretical foundation for threshold concepts. In J. H. F, Meyer, R. Land & C. Baillie (Eds.), *Threshold concepts and transformational learning* (pp.21–44). Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460912078_001

Scotland, J. (2012). Exploring the philosophical underpinnings of research: Relating ontology and epistemology to the methodology and methods of the scientific, interpretive, and critical research paradigms. *English Language Teaching, 5*(9), 9–16. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n9p9

Scott, D. & Usher, R. (2011). *Researching education: Data methods and theory in educational inquiry* (2nd ed.). Continuum.

Seaman, J. E., Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2019). *Grade increase: Tracking distance education in the United States*. Babson Survey Research Group. http://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/gradeincrease.pdf

Sfard, A. (1998). On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one. *Educational Researcher*, *27*(2), 4–13. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x027002004

Shinebourne, P. (2011). The theoretical underpinnings of IPA. *Existential Analysis, 22*(1), 16–31.

Sibbett, C., & Thompson, W. (2008). Nettlesome knowledge, liminality and the taboo in cancer and art therapy experiences: Implications for learning and teaching. In R. Land, J. H. F. Meyer, & J. Smith (Eds.), *Threshold concepts within the disciplines* (pp. 227–242). Sense. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460911477

Sieveking, N., & Perfetto, G. (2000 – 2001). A student-centred individual-level university

Signor, L., & Moore, C. (2014). Open access in higher education–strategies for engaging diverse student cohorts. *Open Praxis*, *6*(3), 305–313. https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.6.3.132

Silverman, D. (2019). *Interpreting qualitative data* (6th ed.). Sage.

Singh, J. (2013). Critical appraisal skills programme. *Journal of Pharmacology & Pharmacotherapeutics*, *4*(1), 76–77. http://www.jpharmacol.com/text.asp?2013/4/1/76/107697

Singh, V. & Thurman, A. (2019). How many ways can we define online learning? A systematic literature review of definitions of online learning (1988-2018). *American Journal of Distance Education*, *33*(4). https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2019.1663082

Smith J. A., & Osborn M. (2007). Pain as an assault on the self: An Interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Psychology and Health*, *22*(5), 517–534. https://doi.org/10.1080/14768320600941756

Smith J. A., Flowers P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method, research*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780880903340091

Smith, J. A. (1993). *After the demise of empiricism: The problem of judging social and educational inquiry.* Ablex.

Smith, J. A. (1996) Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Psychology and Health*, *11*(2), 261–271. https://doi.org/10.1080/08870449608400256

Smith, J. A. (2004) Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *1*(1), 39–54.

Smith, J. A. (2010). Interpretative phenomenological analysis a reply to Amedeo Giorgi. *Existential Analysis*, *21*(2), 186–192.

Smith, J. A. (2011a). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Health Psychology Review*, *5*(1), 9–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2010.510659

Smith, J. A. (2011b). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis: A reply to the commentaries and further development of criteria. *Health Psychology Review*, *5*(1) 55–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2010.541743

Smith, J. A. (2011c). 'We could be diving for pearls': The value of the gem in experiential qualitative psychology. Qualitative Methods in Psychology Bulletin, 12, 6–15.

Smith, J. A. (2017). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Getting at lived experience. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *12*(3), 303–304. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262622

Smith, J. A. & Osborn, M. (2007). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: A practical guide to research methods*, (pp. 53–80). Sage Publications. http://med-fom-familymed-research.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2012/03/IPA_Smith_Osborne21632.pdf

Smith, J. A., & Eatough, V. (2007). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In E. Lyons & A. Coyle (Eds.), *Analysing qualitative data in psychology* (p. 35–50). Sage Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446207536.d10

Smith, J. A., & Eatough, V. (2017). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In C. Willig (Ed.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology*. Sage Research Publications. https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n12

Smith, J. A., & Eatough, V. (2019). Looking forward: Conceptual and methodological developments in interpretative phenomenological analysis: Introduction to the special issue. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *16*(2), 163–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1540620

Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 51–80). Sage Publications, Inc.

Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2015). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith, (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (3rd ed., pp. 25–52). Sage.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Osborn, M. (1997). Interpretative phenomenological analysis and the psychology of health and illness. In L. Yardley (Ed.), *Material discourses of health and illness* (pp. 68–91). Taylor & Frances/Routledge.

Smith, J. A., Jarman, M. & Osborn, M. (1999). Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis. In M. Murray & K. Chamberlain (Eds.), *Qualitative health psychology: Theories and methods*. Sage. (pp. 218–241). http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446217870.n14

Smyth, R. (2004). Exploring the usefulness of a conceptual framework as a research tool: A researcher's reflections. *Issues in Educational Research*, *14*(2), 167–180. http://www.iier.org.au/iier14/smyth.html

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, *104*, 333–339. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039

Soffer, T., Kahan, T. & Nachmias, R. (2019). Patterns of Students' Utilization of Flexibility in Online Academic Courses and Their Relation to Course Achievement. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 20*(3). http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/3949/5099

Sousa, D. (2008). From Monet's paintings to Margaret's ducks: Divagations on phenomenological research. *Existential Analysis*, *19*(1), 143–155. http://repositorio.ispa.pt/bitstream/10400.12/1881/1/EA%202008%2019%281%29%20143-155.pdf

Sousa, D. (2014). Validation in qualitative research: General aspects and specificities of the descriptive phenomenological method. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *11*(2), 211–227. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.853855

Spiegelberg, H. (1959). *The phenomenological movement: A historical introduction*. Martinus Nijhoff.

Spiegelberg, H. (1975). *Doing phenomenology: Essays on and in phenomenology*. Martinus Nijhoff.

Spiers, J., & Riley, R. (2019). Analysing one dataset with two qualitative methods: The distress of general practitioners, a thematic and interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *16*(2), 276–290. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1543099

Spradley, J. (1979). Asking descriptive questions. In, *The ethnographic interview*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~pms/cj355/readings/spradley.pdf

Stanage, S. M. (1987). *Adult Education and phenomenological research: New directions for theory, practice, and research.* Krieger.

Star Trek – The Original Series. (1966, November 10). Season 1, Episode 10, *The Corbomite Manoeuver*.

Statistica. (2020). https://www.statista.com/

Stoessel, K., Ihme, T. A., Barbarino, M.-L., Fisseler, B., & Stürmer, S. (2015). Sociodemographic diversity and distance education: Who drops out from academic programs and why? *Research in Higher Education*, *56*(3), 228–246. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-014-9343-x

Stolz, S. (2020). Phenomenology and phenomenography in educational research: A critique. *Educational Philosophy and theory*, *52*(10), 1077–1096. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1724088

Stone, C. (2017). *Opportunity through online learning: Improving student access, participation and success in higher education*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/opportunity-online-learning-improving-student-access-participation-success-higher-education/

Stone, C., & O' Shea, S.E. (2013). Time, money, leisure and guilt – The gendered challenges of higher education for mature-age students. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, *53*(1), 95–116. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1008886.pdf

Stone, C., & O'Shea, S. (2019). Older, online and first: Recommendations for retention and success. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *35*(1), 57–69. https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.3913

Stone, C., O'Shea, S., May, J., Delahunty, J., & Partington, Z. (2016). Opportunity through online learning: Experiences of first-in-family students in online open-entry higher education. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, *56*(2), 146–169. https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3411&context=sspapers

Storey, L. (2007). Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis. In E. Lyons & A. Coyle (Eds.), *Analyzing qualitative psychology* (pp. 51–64). Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446207536.d11

Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Sullivan, P. (2014). Promiscuous phenomenology and defensive discourse analysis. In J. Spiers (Ed.), *QMiP Bulletin Issue 18 Autumn 2014*. The British Psychological Association. https://shop.bps.org.uk/qmip-bulletin-issue-18-autumn-2014

Sun, A. & Chen, X. (2016). Online education and its effective practice: A research review. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, *15*, 157–190. https://doi.org/10.28945/3502

Suri, H. (2020). Ethical considerations of conducting systematic reviews in educational research: Methodology, perspectives and application. In O. Zawacki-Richter et al. (Eds.), *Systematic reviews in educational research* (pp. 41–54). Springer https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-27602-7

Sveningsson, S., & Alvesson, M. (2003). Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle. *Human Relations*, *56*(10), 1163–1193. https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267035610001

Svensson, L. (1977). On qualitative differences in learning: III. Study skill and learning. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *47*(3), 233–243. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1977.tb02352.x

Taylor, J. A. (2008). Assessment in first year university: A model to manage transition, *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 5(1), 17–33. https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol5/iss1/3

Technology in Higher Education 17(2). https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-019-0176-8

Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency. (2017). *TEQSA Annual Report 2016–17*. https://www.teqsa.gov.au/for-providers/resources/teqsa-annual-report-2016-17

Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency. (2018). *TEQSA Annual Report 2017–18*. https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/teqsa-annual-report-2017-18

Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency. (2019). *TEQSA Annual Report 2018–19*. https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/teqsa-annual-report-2018-19

Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency. (2020). *TEQSA Annual Report 2019–20*. https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/teqsa-annual-report-2019-20

Thomas Tallis School. (2016). *TALLIS habits: Education to understand the world and change it for the better*. https://tallishabits.tumblr.com/post/143854757549/threshold-concepts-acknowledge-that-students-dont

Thomas, L., Boustedt, J., Eckerdal, A., McCartney, R., Moström, J. E., Sanders, K., & Zander, C. (2012). A broader threshold: Including skills as well as concepts in computing education. In *Threshold concepts: From personal practice to communities of practice* (pp. 154–158). Proceedings of the National Academy's Sixth Annual Conference and the Fourth Biennial Threshold Concepts Conference, 27–29 June 2012. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED558533.pdf

Thomas, L., Boustedt, J., Eckerdal, A., McCartney, R., Moström, J. E., Sanders, K., & Zander, C. (2017). In the liminal space: Software design as a threshold skill. *Practice and Evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *12*(2), 333–351.

Thomas, R. M. (2003). *Blending qualitative and quantitative: Research methods in theses and dissertations*. Sage Publications.

Thomassen, B. (2018). *Liminality and the modern: Living through the in-between*. Routledge.

Thompson, P. (2018, February 26). Threshold Concepts in Academic Writing. *Patter*. https://patthomson.net/2018/02/26/threshold-concepts-in-academic-writing/

Thorne, S. (2000). Data analysis in qualitative research. *Evidence Based Nursing*, *3*, 68–70. http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/ebn.3.3.68

Tight, M. (2014). Theory development and application in higher education research: The case of threshold concepts. *International Perspectives on Higher Education Research*, *10*, 249–267. https://doi.org/10.1108/s1479-3628(2014)0000010018

Timmermans, J. (2010). Changing our minds: The developmental potential of threshold concepts: Threshold concepts and transformational learning. In Jan H. F. Meyer, R. Land & C. Baillie (Eds.), *Educational futures 42* (pp. 1–19). Sense. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789460912078;

Timmermans, J. A. & Meyer, J. H. F. (2019). A framework for working with university teachers to create and embed 'Integrated Threshold Concept Knowledge' (ITCK) in their practice. *International Journal for Academic Development, 24*(4), 354–368. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2017.1388241

Timmermans, J. A., & Meyer, J. H. (2017). A framework for working with university teachers to create and embed 'Integrated Threshold Concept Knowledge' (ITCK) in their practice. *International Journal for Academic Development, 24*(4), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2017.1388241

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 45*(1), 89–125. https://doi.org/10.2307/1170024

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University Of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention, 8*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.2190/4YNU-4TMB-22DJ-AN4W

Tinto, V. (2017). Reflections on student persistence. *Student Success, 8*(2), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v8i2.376

Tolkien, J. R. R. (1937). *The Hobbit or there and back again*. Ballantine Books.

Tones, M., Fraser, J., Elder R., & White, K. (2009). Supporting mature-age students from a low socioeconomic background. *Higher Education, 58*, 505–529. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40269199

Towlson, K., & Rush, N. (2013). Carving the information literacy niche within graduate employability. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, *19*(3), 300–315. https://doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2013.825212

Trafford, V. N. & Leshem, S. (2008). *Stepping stones to achieving your doctorate*. Open University Press.

Trafford, V. N., & Leshem, S. (2009). Doctorateness as a threshold concept. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *46*(3), 305–316. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703290903069027

Trowler, P. (2011). *Researching your own institution: Higher education*. British Educational Research Association. https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/researching-your-own-institution-higher-education

Trowler, P. (2012). Theorising disciplines and research practices: Conceptual groundwork. In P. Trowler, M. Saunders, & V. Bamber, (Eds.), *Tribes and territories in the 21st-century: Rethinking the significance of disciplines in higher education* (pp. 91–96). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203136935

Truhlar, A. M., Williams, K. M., & Walter, M. T. (2018). Student engagement with course content and peers in synchronous online courses discussions. *Online Learning*, *22*(4). https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i4.1389

Tsai, C. W. & Chiang, Y. C. (2013). Research trends in problem-based learning (PBL) research in e-learning and online education environments: A review of publications in SSCI-indexed journals from 2004 to 2012. *British Journal of Educational Technology, Special Issue e-Learning and Leadership*, *44*(6), 185–190. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12038

Tseng, S.-C., Liang, J.-C., & Tsai, C.-C. (2014). Students' self-regulated learning, online information evaluative standards and online academic searching strategies. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *30*(1), 106–121. https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.242

Tucker, V. M., Weedman, J., Bruce, C. S., & Edwards, S. L. (2014) Learning portals: Analyzing threshold concept theory for LIS education. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, *55*(2), 150–165. https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/55423/6/JCU_55423-Tucker_et_al_2014_accepted.pdf

Tucker, W. (1965). Max Weber's "Verstehen". *The Sociological Quarterly*, *6*(2), 157–165. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4105245

Tuffour, I. (2017). A critical overview of interpretative phenomenological analysis: A Contemporary Qualitative Research Approach. *Journal of Healthcare Communications*, *2*(4). https://doi.org/10.4172/2472-1654.100093

Turner, J. H. (1988). A behavioral theory of social structure. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716288499001043

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process. Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine Transaction.

Turner, V. (1974). *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society.* Cornell University Press.

Turner, V. (1975). Liminal to liminoid, in play, flow, and ritual: An essay in comparative symbology. Rice University Studies. https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/63159/article_RIP603_part4.pdf

Turner, V. (1977). Variations on a theme of liminality. In S. F. Moore & B. G. Myerhoff (Eds.), *Secular ritual* (pp. 36–52). Van Gorcum, Assen.

Turner, V. (1982). Liminal to liminoid, in play, flow and ritual: An essay in comparitive symbology. In V. Turner, *From ritual to theatre, the human seriousness of play* (pp. 20–60). PAJ Publications. https://monoskop.org/images/7/79/Turner_Victor_From_Ritual_to_Theatre.pdf

Turner, V. (1990). Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama? In R. Schechner & W. Appel (Eds,) *By means of performance* (pp. 8–18). Cambridge University Press.

Turner, V. (1995). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Turner, V. & Turner E. (1978). *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture: Anthropological perspectives.* Columbia University Press.

Turner, V. W. (1967). Betwixt and between: The liminal period in rites de passage. In *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual* (pp. 93–111). Cornell University Press. https://web.stanford.edu/group/steinbeck/doc/Turner.pdf

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, (1998). *World declaration on higher education for the twenty-first century: Vision and action and framework for priority action for change and development in higher education.* World Conference on Higher Education in the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action, Paris, 1998. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141952

Universities Australia (2019). *Data Snapshot.* https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Data-snapshot-2019-FINAL.pdf

Universities Australia (2020). *Higher Education Facts and Figures October 2020*. https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/200917-HE-Facts-and-Figures-2020.pdf

Usher, R., Bryant, I., & Johnston, R. (1997). *Adult education and the postmodern challenge*. Routledge.

Valverde-Berrocoso, J., Garrido-Arroyo, M. del C., Burgos-Videla, C., & Morales-Cevallos, M. B. (2020). Trends in educational research about e-learning: A systematic literature review (2009–2018). *Sustainability*, *12*(12), 5153. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12125153

Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage* (M. B. Vizedom, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.

Van Gennep, A. (1975). *The Rites of Passage* (M. B. Vizedom & G. L. Caffee, Trans., 2nd Ed). University of Chicago Press.

Van Manen M. (2001) Professional practice and 'doing phenomenology'. In S. K. Toombs (Eds.). *Handbook of phenomenology and medicine* (pp. 457–474). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0536-4_24

Van Manen, M. (1977). Linking ways of knowing with ways of being practical. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *6*(3), 205–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.1977.11075533

Van Manen, M. (1982). Phenomenological pedagogy. *Curriculum Inquiry*, *12*(3), 283–299. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.1982.11075844

Van Manen, M. (1984). 'Doing' phenomenological research and writing: An introduction. *Phenomenology and Pedagogy*, *2*(1), 36–39.

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Suny Press.

Vidor, K. Fleming, V., Cukor, G., Thorpe, R., Taurog, N., & LeRoy, M. (1939). *The Wizard of Oz*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Voogt, J. & Knezek, G. (2018). Rethinking learning in a digital age: Outcomes from EDUsummIT 2017. *Technology Knowledge and Learning*, *23*, 369–375. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10758-018-9383-y

Vuori, J. (2014). Student engagement: buzzword of fuzzword? Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, *36*(5), 509–519. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080x.2014.936094

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.; A. R. Luria, M. Lopez-Morillas, M. Cole, & J. V. Wertsch, Trans.). Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1930–1934).

Walker, C. (1998). Learning to learn, phenomenography and children's learning. *Educational and Child Psychology*, *15*, 25–33.

Walker, G. (2013). A cognitive approach to threshold concepts. *Higher Education*, *65*, 247–263. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9541-4

Wang, Q., Quek, C. L., & Hu, X. (2017). Designing and improving a blended synchronous learning environment: An educational design research. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *18*(3). https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v18i3.3034

Washington, G. (2019). The learning management system matters in face-to-face higher education courses. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, *48*(2), 255–275. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239519874037

Watson, L. (2007). Building the future of learning. *European Journal of Education*, *42*(2), 255–263. https://doi:10.1111/j.1465-3435.2007.00299.x

Watts, L. (2016). Synchronous and asynchronous communication in distance learning: A review of the literature. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *17*(1), 23–32.

Webb, S., Burke, P.J., Nichols, S., Roberts, S., Stahl, G., Threadgold, S. & Wilkinson, J. (2017). Thinking with and beyond Bourdieu in widening higher education participation. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *39*(2), 138–160. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2017.1302926

Wei, H.-C., & Chou, C. (2020). Online learning performance and satisfaction: Do perceptions and readiness matter? Distance Education, 41(1), 48–69. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2020.1724768

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E. (2009) *Social learning capability: Four essays on innovation and learning in social systems*. Social Innovation, Sociedade e Trabalho booklets, 12-separate supplement, MTSS/GEP & EQUAL. https://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/09-04-17-Social-learning-capability-v2.1.pdf

Whannell, R. & Whannell, P. (2015). Identity theory as a theoretical framework to understand attrition for university students in transition. *Student Success*, *6*(2), 43–52. https://studentsuccessjournal.org/article/view/572/329

White B. A., Olsen T., Schumann D. (2016). A threshold concept framework for use across disciplines. In Land R., Meyer J.H.F., Flanagan M.T. (Eds.), *Threshold concepts in practice. Educational futures (rethinking theory and practice).* Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-512-8_5

Willans, J. A. (2019). Tales from the borderland: Enabling students' experiences of preparation for higher education. *International Studies in Widening Participation*, *6*(1), 48–64. https://novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe/index.php/iswp/article/view/114

Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2011). I feel like I'm being hit from all directions: Enduring the bombardment as a mature-age learner returning to formal learning. *Australian journal of adult learning*, *51*(1), 119–142. https://www.learntechlib.org/p/110212/.

Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2018). Why did we lose them and what could we have done? *Student Success*, *9*(1), 47–60. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v9i1.432

Willig, C. (2008). Phenomenological methods. In C. Willig (Ed.), *Introducing qualitative research in psychology* (2nd Ed., pp. 52–71). Open University Press. https://resv.hums.ac.ir/uploads/introducing_qualitative_research.pdf

Willis, B. D. (1994). *Distance education: Strategies and tools*. Educational Technology Publications.

Willis, J. W. (2007). *Foundations of qualitative research: Interpretive and critical approaches*. Sage.

Wilson, D., & Allen, D. (2011). Success rates of online versus traditional college students. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, *14*, 1–5. http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/11761.pdf

Wilson, K. L., Murphy, K. A., Pearson, A. G., Wallace, B. M., Reher, V. G. S., & Buys, N. (2016). Understanding the early transition needs of diverse commencing university students in a health faculty: Informing effective intervention practices. *Studies in Higher Education*, *41*(6), 1023–1040. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.966070

Windelband, W. (1998). History and natural science. *Theory & Psychology*, *8*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354398081001

Winnicott, D. W. (1960). Ego distortion in terms of true and false self. In *The maturational process and the facilitating environment: Studies in the theory of emotional development* (pp. 140–152). Kamac Books. https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Winnicott_EgoDistortion.pdf

Winnicott, D. W. (2005). *Playing and reality* (2nd Ed). Brunner-Routledge.

Wong, T.-L., Xie, H., Zou, D., Wang, F. L., Tang, J. K. T., Kong, A., & Kwan, R. (2019). How to facilitate self-regulated learning? A case study on open educational resources. Journal of Computers in Education, 7(1), 51–77. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40692-019-00138-4

Woolf, V. (1931). *The waves*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Wright, V. H.; Marsh, G. E.; Miller, M. T. (1999). *An historical analysis of instructional technology in education*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED437899.pdf

Wu, L. & Wu, M. (2011). The employee dissatisfaction with organizational change: An empirical study of a technology service company. *African Journal of Business Management, 5*(4), 1304–1311. https://academicjournals.org/journal/AJBM/article-full-text-pdf/9DC5E0418886

Yanuschik, O. V., Pakhomova, E. G., & Batbold, K. (2015). E-learning as a way to improve the quality of educational for Iiternational students. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences, 215*, 147–155. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/82692327.pdf

Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research. *Psychology and Health, 15*(2), 215–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/08870440008400302

Yardley, L. (2008). Demonstrating validity in qualitative psychology. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to methods* (2nd Ed., pp. 235–251). Sage.

Yeh, Y.-C., Kwok, O.-M., Chien, H.-Y., Sweany, N. W., Baek, E., & McIntosh, W. (2019). How college students' achievement goal orientations predict their expected online learning outcome: The mediation roles of self-regulated learning strategies and supportive online learning behaviors. *Online Learning*, *23*(4), 23–41. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i4.2076

York, T. T., Gibson, C., & Rankin, S. (2015). Defining and measuring academic success. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, *20*(5).

Zepke, N. (2014). Student engagement research in higher education: Questioning an academic orthodoxy. Teaching in Higher Education, 19(6), 697–708. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2014.901956

Zhai, X., Gu, J., Liu, H., Liang, J-C., & Tsai, C-C. (2017). An experiential learning perspective on students' satisfaction model in a flipped classroom context. *Educational Technology & Society, 20*(1), 198–210. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313385248_An_experiential_learning_perspective_on_students'_satisfaction_model_in_a_flipped_classroom_context

Zhang, J., Lou, X., Zhang, H., & Zhang, J. (2019). Modeling collective attention in online and flexible learning environments. *Distance Education*, *40*(2), 278–301. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2019.1600368

Zhu, M., Herring, S., & Bonk, C. J. (2019). Exploring presence in online learning through three forms of computer-mediated discourse analysis. *Distance Education, 40*(2), 205–225. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2019.1600365

Zhu, Y., Zhang, J. H., Au, W. & Yates, G. (2020). University students' online learning attitudes and continuous intention to undertake online courses: A self-regulated learning perspective. *Education Tech Research Dev* 68, 1485–1519. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-020-09753-w

Zimmerman, B. J. (2011). Motivational sources and outcomes of self-regulated learning and performance. In B. J. Zimmerman & D. H. Schunk (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation of learning and performance* (pp. 49–64). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Zimmerman, B. J., & Schunk, D. H. (Eds.). (1989). *Self-regulated learning and academic achievement: Theory, research, and practice*. Springer-Verlag.

Zittoun, T. (2014). Transitions as dynamic processes – A commentary. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction, 3*(3), 232–236. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2014.02.010

Zittoun, T. & de Saint-Laurent, C. (2015). Life-creativity: Imagining one's life. In V. P. Glaveanu, A. Gillespie & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *Rethinking creativity: Contributions from cultural psychology* (pp. 58–75). Routledge. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Constance-De-Saint-Laurent/publication/299466054_Life-creativity_Imagining_one%27s_life/links/59d4a0cea6fdcc181adc3c8b/Life-creativity-Imagining-ones-life.pdf

Zittoun, T. & Grossen, M. (2012). Cultural elements as means of constructing the continuity of the self across various spheres of experience. In M. César & B. Ligorio (Eds.), *The interplays between dialogical learning and dialogical self* (pp. 99–126). Information Age Publishing.

Zittoun, T., Valsiner, J., Vedeler, D., Salgado, J., Gonçalves, M. & Ferring, D. (2013). *Human development in the lifecourse. Melodies of living*. Cambridge University Press.

APPENDIX A:

Extended Interview Questions

Research Questions:	Interview #1	Interview #2
How does one group of adult learners describe their first weeks of study in an online environment?	What expectations did you have about this study? What factors influenced your decision to continue studying/come back to study? Why did you decide to engage with online study? Tell me about your initial experiences of online study. What have been some of the positive experiences you have encountered so far as an online learner? *(How did that make you feel?)* What types of negative or frustrating experiences have you encountered so far? *(How did that make you feel?)* How would you describe your technical skills? *(How did working with computers in an educational way make you feel?* *What are the differences between this type of study and just 'going online'?)* What previous experiences have you had with online learning?	Not applicable.
What strategies do adult learners adopt when negotiating their transition to online learning?	How would you describe being an online learner? Can you take me through some of the activities you engage in when studying online? How does online study differ from other types of study you have done? How do you feel about working with other students online?	What expectations did you have about this type of study? *(In what ways have your expectations been proven to be right or wrong?)* Tell me about a high point in your online study. *(What was it about that … that made you feel good?)* Tell me about any negative or frustrating experiences you have

	What was easy about becoming an online learner? What was difficult about becoming an online learner?	encountered? *(What made that experience particularly hard?)* How would you describe your technical skills now? *(How does that impact your online study?)* How do you feel about studying online now?
What strategies do adult learners adopt to assist in persisting in their online studies?	How has your life had to change because you have started to study online? *(What sort of things have you had to change?* *How does that make you feel?* *Who else is involved?)*	Tell me how you feel now you have completed a whole trimester studying online. *(What made you keep going?)* What advice would you give other new students about being an online student now that you have finished one trimester? In what ways have you fitted online study in with other aspects of your life? *(How did you adjust to online study?)* What are your thoughts about further online study? What do you think needs changing in your online study?
How do the experiences described by one group of adult learners relate to the Threshold Concepts Framework as described by Meyer and Land, (2006, 2011)?	What feelings do you have when you go online to study? What sort of online experience have you had to-date? What does being an online learner mean to you? *(How do you feel about starting this new part of your life?)* How did you feel when you first logged on in your online subject/s?	How do you think you have changed as a person over the past weeks? *(Do you feel more confident; less confident; part of something; alone…?)* How have your feelings about studying online changed over the trimester? *(How do you feel about online study now?* *How do you feel when you go online to study?* *How do you feel when you anticipate further online study?)* Tell me about any experiences you found difficult. *(Tell me about the worst thing that happened to you.*

		How did that experience impact on how you felt about online learning?) Tell me about any experiences you found easy. *(Tell me about the best thing that happened to you?* *How did that experience impact on how you felt about online learning?)* Tell me about the support you have received through the trimester. *(From college? From others?)*

APPENDIX B:

Participant Information and Informed Consent Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Each participant must sign two copies of this form. One is to be retained by the participant and one by the researcher.

My name is Trish Powers. My study is called *The Light at the End of the Tunnel: A Study of Adult Learners Transitioning into the Online Learning Space*.

You are invited to take part in this research study. The project has been approved by the [redacted] Human Research Ethics Committee.This researcher is a lecturer at the college in which you are enrolled, but she is not one of your lecturers. Participation in this research study is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to. A pair of movie tickets will be provided to all those who participate in this study.

The aim of this project is:

I am doing this research to explore how adult students experience, adapt and adjust to starting online higher education, to get a better understanding of what you experience, and what your needs are at this early stage of your study.

The expected benefits of this project are:

The research will contribute to the development of more effective curriculum design and sustainable academic development practices, the understanding of the needs of adult students 25+ transitioning into the online learning space and the development of suitable approaches to the support of this group in terms of retention.

Your participation in this project will involve:

If you choose to participate you will be asked to be involved in two 50–60-minute interviews about your online learning experiences. The first interview will take place during the first three weeks after you begin your online study. The second interview will take place at the end of the first trimester of study. These interviews will either be by telephone or face to face, and you are free to choose which method you would prefer. The interviews will be recorded.

The foreseeable risks of your participation have been identified as:

I consider that any risk to you by participating in this research is extremely low. However if you experience any emotional discomfort you can end the interview at any point, withdraw from the research at any time and withdraw any data that you have provided to that point without providing an explanation. Your participation is purely voluntary. If you decide to withdraw from the study it will not affect in any way your treatment by, or your relationship with [redacted]. You may also ask the researchers to return or dispose of any data generated from you at any time (unless it is not possible to disaggregate your data from the rest of the data).

Intellectual property in the data generated as part of this project, including any audio or video recordings and any photographs, will rest with [redacted]. Information provided by participants will be treated as private and confidential. It is not possible to provide a 100% guarantee of confidentiality because information generated through research activities is not legally privileged. However, [redacted] will take all reasonable steps to protect your personal information. This includes storing and managing data in accordance with the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*.

The following exceptions or special considerations apply to this project: The information generated as part of this research project may be disseminated through public statements or publications, including assignments and theses, reports, conference presentations and refereed journal articles. Data will be aggregated and summarised before being reported. Participants will be described using pseudonyms and will not be identified as individuals, occupants of particular positions, or members of specific organisations. Thank you for your interest and participation. Please ask the researchers if you have any questions or concerns about your participation. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the use of these documents, you can contact the [redacted] Ethics Officer on [redacted]

Please find below a Consent Form. If you choose to participate would you be so kind as to complete this form and forward it to me.

Principal Investigator: .....

Email: .....

Investigator conducting data collection: .....

Email: .....

Name of Participant: .....

Date of Birth (you must be over 18 to sign this form): .....

I consent to participate in the research project described above.

I DO NOT consent to participate in the research project described above.

I consent to be audio recorded.

I DO NOT consent to be audio-recorded.

Signature: .....

Date: .....

APPENDIX C:

Participant Information and Informed Consent Form to Donate Journal/Diaries (or Copies Thereof) to the Study

RESEARCH STUDY: *The Light at the End of the Tunnel: A Study of Adult Learners Transitioning into the Online Learning Space*.

You have very kindly taken part in this research. During our last contact you offered me the use of notes you have taken in a journal/diary form concerning your experiences as an adult online student between our two interviews (or copies thereof), in order to assist me in my research.

As you may remember this study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the [redacted]. In order to accept these documents, I must amend my Ethics Application to the [redacted]. The Ethics Committee require me to invite you to consent to giving me access to the aforementioned journal/diaries (or copies thereof).

In donating these documents to my research, I can foresee no risks for you. Your decision is completely voluntary, and you may of course refuse or withdraw your permission to my use of these documents at any time. It is your choice as to how many of these documents you wish to share. This will not affect your relationship or your enrolment with the college where you are studying in any way. Your privacy will be protected at all times and confidentiality is assured. No-one other than myself as the researcher will have access to your identity and you will not be identified in any part of the research. The documents will be kept in a secure location for a minimum of five years after final publication. They will then be destroyed.
If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the use of these documents, you can contact the [redacted] Ethics Officer on [redacted]

Please find below a Consent Form. If you choose to participate and permit the donation and my use of these journals/diaries in my research, either in full or part thereof, would you be so kind as to complete this form and forward it to me. I can then arrange for the forwarding of the documentation at no expense to you.

Thank you very much for your participation in the study so far.

Principal Investigator: .....

Email: .....

Investigator conducting data collection: .....

Email: .....

Name of Participant: .....

Date of Birth (you must be over 18 to sign this form): .....

I consent to the donation and use of my journals/diaries in full or part thereof.

I DO NOT consent to the donation and use of my journals/diaries in full or part thereof.

Signature: .....

Date: .....