Experiences of mature women students on a vocational foundation degree: how do they engage in heutagogy?

Sarah Jane Carr

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Abstract

A significant proportion of students in higher education are mature women returning to study after a break from formal education. They often have family and work commitments, and their learning experiences and support needs can be very different to those of students entering higher education straight from school. However, there is a lack of visibility about how such students engage with learning as part of their complex lives. This research sought to shine a light on this under-researched group of students.

This research formed a study of one cohort of mature women students on a vocational foundation degree course offered by NCT (formerly National Childbirth Trust) with University of Worcester. Using a sequential multiphase design as part of a qualitative approach to mixed-methods, data were collected using online surveys and semi-structured interviews over two years. Quantitative data was analysed using Excel and provided descriptive statistics to offer context and snapshots of the participants' attitudes and approaches to learning. Interview transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to develop understanding of how participants made sense of their lived experiences on their journeys as learners studying and then moving into practice. The qualitative data and analysis constitute the main focus of the study.

A critical engagement with the literature was carried out, exploring studies that had relevance because they focussed on participants with similar characteristics to those in the present study, or participants with similar roles, or participants on courses that were similar. Theories of adult learning were explored and heutagogy was highlighted as having relevance for learners in the 21st century digital age; it formed part of the conceptual framework for the study. This theory of adult learning combines various elements including collaboration with communities of practice, self-efficacy and self-determination, motivation, nonlinear learning, use of the internet and reflective practice. As most

participants were student mothers, and their mothering roles shaped their learning, the research used a matricentric feminist phenomenology to tell their stories and explore their experiences.

The findings paint a picture of how students built on their previous learning experiences, how they approached learning as critically reflective learners taking responsibility for their independent study, and how their life situations and their studies interrelated in ways that were different for other groups of students, particularly school leavers and mature men. The unpredictability of their lives as student mothers could make studying particularly difficult; support from like-minded peers who understood the challenges they faced in combining their roles and responsibilities was crucial. Taking steps to increase awareness of these challenges for other people involved – families and partners in the domestic sphere, and course providers and tutors in the academic sphere, for instance - could help facilitate better experiences of learning for similar students.

Key words: Self-determined learning, Heutagogy, Mature women students, Student mothers, Adult learners, Higher education, Lifeload, Matricentric feminism, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

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List of Abbreviations

ANT	Antenatal teacher (NCT role)
BFC	Breastfeeding Counsellor (NCT role)
FE	Further education
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
NCIHE	National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education
NCT	Parenting charity formerly known as National Childbirth Trust
NCTP	NCT practitioner (who has successfully undertaken NCT training and has a current licence to practise to support expectant parents by, for example, facilitating antenatal courses)
NIACE	National Institute of Continuing Adult Education
NUS	National Union of Students
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PNL	Postnatal Leader (NCT role)
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
SIPAIG	Scottish IPA Interest Group
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter sets out the background for this research and my personal rationale for undertaking it, followed by the aims and objectives of the study. It also includes definitions of some of the main concepts used, before outlining the thesis structure.

Research context

As part of the widening participation agenda seen globally over recent decades (Shah, Bennett and Southgate, 2015), there are growing numbers of mature women students, especially mothers, at HEIs (Stone and O'Shea, 2019a; HESA, 2021a). If this engagement is to be increased further, an understanding is required of the barriers and challenges faced by those who differ from more 'traditional' students. Previous studies have identified a lack of visibility about these students, in particular those with caring responsibilities as mothers (Johnson, Schwartz and Bower, 2000; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Murtagh, 2017, 2019; Callender, 2018; Kensinger and Minnick, 2018; Stone and O'Shea, 2019b). Some of the more recent research has only been published since I started this thesis in 2015, so relevant findings have been incorporated into the current study as it evolved. In the current neoliberal context, it is important to avoid marginalisation through deficit thinking (Portelli, 2013; Sharma, 2018), whereby differences from the norm are considered mainly in terms of stereotypical constructions of the barriers such students might face, without due consideration of the positive traits and experience that they often bring to HE (Dunn, 2019). This research aims to provide insights to help HE practitioners, course providers and policymakers better understand how mature student women (particularly mothers) engage with learning and the factors shaping this engagement, so that HEIs can adapt to support such students and recognise the skills, experiences and personal attributes that they have to offer (Dunn, 2019).

NCT and my personal rationale for undertaking the research

The context for this study is a third-sector organisation, known as NCT (formerly National Childbirth Trust). Founded in 1956, NCT has since grown to be the largest parenting charity in the UK, offering a range of services including antenatal classes and breastfeeding support provided by NCT practitioners (NCTPs), with the aim of supporting parents-to-be and new parents to feel confident and informed about pregnancy, childbirth and life with a new baby, as well as advocating on their behalf through involvement with many expert maternity groups in the UK (NCT, 2020).

NCT College (in partnership with University of Worcester) offers vocational training and professional development to people wanting to train as practitioners facilitating this support and education (NCT, 2018). At the time of the study, the NCT Birth and Beyond foundation degree course (see Appendix A, p.397) used a blended learning approach – much of the study was self-regulated - and comprised five compulsory modules at Level 4. These were skills- and knowledge-based, including reflective practice and listening skills, facilitating adult learning in groups, and knowledge about giving birth, breastfeeding and the postnatal period. All modules were assessed formatively and summatively, through a mixture of exams and written and practical assessments. Students combined self-regulated independent learning at home (often using online resources) with face-to face learning in groups during tutorials and study days (usually two to three contact days a month). Subject-specific module tutors facilitated study days in different regions of the country, providing online support and giving feedback on formative and summative assignments. Core tutors were responsible for students attending their tutorial groups, providing general support through monthly tutorial days, and email or telephone contact in between. The tutors were all practitioners and had studied with NCT themselves (although not necessarily for the foundation degree, as this qualification only started in 2013). A range of

modules was offered at Level 5, which took two years part-time or one year full-time. Students then had the option to top up to an honours degree by taking further modules at Level 6. Since this research took place, the education model has been reviewed and modified (NCT, 2020) although the aim is still to train motivated, skilled and knowledgeable practitioners. All NCT students at this point had so far been women and were mostly mature (aged 25+); most had dependent children. Many already had first degrees, which is not usually the case for mature students (MillionPlus, 2018).

My own association with NCT started over thirty years ago with my attendance on an antenatal course in preparation for the birth of my first baby. I undertook various voluntary roles for my local branches, including setting up and facilitating a home birth support group, as well as training to facilitate antenatal courses. I subsequently trained to become an assessor and gained a BA in Educational Studies in order to become a module tutor and a core tutor on the NCT Birth and Beyond degree at Level 4, and an academic tutor at Level 6. I took a sabbatical year and subsequently resigned from my tutor roles part-way through my PhD, however, partly to maintain a distance from the students who were participating in the research (ethical considerations are considered in more detail in Chapter 4) but mainly to focus on my studies.

During my time as a tutor working with the mature women students on the NCT course, I developed an interest in their attitudes and approaches to learning and how they combined studying with their complex lives. I was interested to know more about the implications for their learning of being mature women with a range of roles and responsibilities to manage as well as their studies, and how they might be better facilitated, supported and valued as learners. Because of my tutor role, I was ideally placed to explore and illuminate their experiences as learners.

Heutagogy (Hase and Kenyon, 2013) is a theory of learning that emphasises specific learner attributes, including self-awareness around learning; engaging in

reflective practice (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985; Schön, 1983, 1987; Jasper, 2013); self-efficacy or having a belief in oneself as a learner (Bandura, 1977b; Zimmerman, 2000); and being motivated to take responsibility for acting in one's best interests (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Learners practising attributes of heutagogy often learn as part of communities of practice with shared interests (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Although the NCT course was not specifically heutagogical in approach, course modules included reflective practice and a focus on adult learning theories and metacognition, and the students often seemed highly motivated to learn, both independently (which was a major requirement of the course) and with others in their groups. Heutagogy was therefore chosen as a suitable lens for exploring their learning.

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of mature women students (mostly mothers) on a vocational foundation degree and how they engaged in heutagogy, in order to aid development of better educational practice. The thesis objectives are:

1. To gain insights into current understandings around mature women and learning through critically reviewing literature across a range of disciplines.
2. To explore the attitudes and approaches to learning and the experiences of a cohort of NCT students over a two-year period using a qualitative-dominant sequential mixed methods approach and a conceptual framework that includes the theories of heutagogy and matricentric feminism (see Chapter 3).
3. To explore and analyse the data derived from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews in relation to existing literature.
4. To discuss the findings and contribute to a developing understanding of mature women students so they can be better supported in their learning.

Definitions

Some concepts used in the thesis are defined as follows:

Blended learning: a combination of face-to-face learning and online digital learning opportunities accessed remotely (Jisc, 2020).

Double-loop learning: a concept from organisational learning that encourages learners to reflect on and make explicit their assumptions and beliefs about the world, in order to interrogate them for validity and applicability to practice (Argyris and Schön, 1978). It is therefore very similar to reflexivity.

Lifeload: 'the sum of all the pressures a student has in their life, including university' (Kahu, 2013, p.767).

Heutagogy, also known as self-determined learning: a relatively new and therefore still evolving theory that supports students taking active responsibility for their own learning in the digital age, and includes the following elements: motivation, self-efficacy and self-regulated learning, metacognition (thinking about learning), reflective practice, double-loop and nonlinear learning, and communities of learning and practice (Hase and Kenyon, 2013).

Mature students: definitions of mature students vary globally with some including students who are aged 21+ (see, for example, UCAS, 2018) when starting their course while many others refer to those aged 25+ (Lin, 2016; Office for Students, 2021). As this research takes as its focus students who are 'non-traditional' which usually specifies 25+ (see, for example, Forbus, Newbold and Mehta, 2011; see Chapter 2 for further discussion), the latter definition is used where possible.

Non-linear learning: learning which is designed so students can make choices about how best to meet their learning goals, by actively exploring a range of different paths, often supported by access to the internet and social media and

connection with others (Blaschke, 2014; Blaschke and Hase, 2019; Blaschke, 2021). It involves the notion of learning as 'wandering' backwards and forwards, taking risks and following instincts (Glassner and Back, 2020, p.179).

Participants: this refers to all the students who took part in the research, comprising the questionnaire respondents at two timepoints (S-1 and S-2) and the interviewees, again at two timepoints (Int1 and Int2).

Patriarchy: a male-dominated society, which is structured politically, legally, religiously and economically so men have power over women, and where men are perceived as the default human (Cameron, 2018).

Scaffolding: an idea influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, noting differences between what learners cannot do, what they can do with help, and what they can do on their own without help, and providing suitable support to help them develop understanding and skills. Examples are 'procedural scaffolding' (aiding students to identify and use available tools) and 'metacognitive scaffolding' (aiding students to consider how they think and learn) (Jumaat and Tasir, 2014).

Thesis structure

To help orient the reader through the thesis, there follows a brief overview of its structure (see Figure 1, p.24). The aims and objectives and the context of the research have been described in this introduction chapter.

Chapter 2 explores overlapping bodies of literature having aspects relevant to the thesis topic. These are arranged according to the focus of the studies: first, the characteristics of participants, including age and sex; then the roles and responsibilities of participants in addition to their studies, such as being a mother; and finally, characteristics of courses participants were studying on, such as vocational foundation degrees. A range of challenges is identified that are often faced by students similar to ones under investigation in the present study.

There follows an exploration of what the literature says about mature women as learners in relation to other groups of students. The theory of heutagogy (Hase and Kenyon, 2013) is considered as a lens to explore participants' attitudes and approaches to learning. Two studies that investigated mature women students and heutagogy are critiqued, and a gap in the research is identified.

In Chapter 3, I present the study's conceptual framework which builds on my own experiences as a student and a tutor on the NCT course, my exploration of the literature, and the theoretical framework which combines heutagogy and matricentric feminism.

In Chapter 4, I explain the approaches used to address the study's aims and objectives and position myself in relation to the research, particularly as a partial insider researcher. A conceptual framework (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Bracken, 2010) including heutagogy was chosen to structure the research and sharpen its focus and aid understanding (Jabareen, 2009). A matricentric feminist phenomenology (O'Reilly, 2021) is utilised which aims to highlight links between mature women's experiences of learning and their roles and identities as mothers in a patriarchal society. After discussing ethical considerations, in particular around being an insider researcher on some levels, the study design is presented. This takes the form of a multiphase sequential mixed methods study approach (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Schumacher *et al*, 2020) which prioritises the qualitative rather than the quantitative strand, unlike many mixed methods approaches (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected at four different points over a two-year period. The first phase was an online questionnaire shared with the whole cohort of 130 students starting the NCT Birth and Beyond foundation degree at Level 4 in September 2017. The second phase comprised semi-structured interviews with six students who had responded to the first questionnaire. A second online questionnaire formed the third phase, towards the end of the second year. The fourth and final phase was a second round of semi-structured interviews with the same six participants after

the end of the second year. Quantitative data were analysed using Microsoft Excel, producing graphs and tables to reveal shapes and patterns. Qualitative data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) which has an idiographic focus and involves the researcher making sense of the interviewees' themselves making sense of their experiences. This approach put them at the centre of the research process, which is congruent with a feminist approach. Issues around trustworthiness and reflexivity are also considered in this chapter.

The findings are then presented in three distinct chapters which explore different aspects of participants' experiences as learners in three horizons (Gadamer, 1975/2013) which emerged from the analysis. After a brief description of the demographic characteristics of the participants, Chapter 5 presents an overview of the IPA super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes forming the structure of these three findings chapters. This chapter then explores the participants' attitudes to learning (including the themes 'Highly motivated learners', 'Learning as a mature student is different' and 'Active, responsible learners') and then their approaches to learning (including the themes 'Learning independently using online and social media strategies', 'Learning independently using offline strategies' and 'Revisiting and reflecting on learning'). Chapter 6 focuses on participants' incorporating studying with their other roles and responsibilities, as part of their extensive lifeloads (Kahu, 2013). The main themes are 'Integrating study into complex lives', 'Impact of studying on mothering, 'Impact of studying on participants', and 'Impact of studying on relationships'. Finally, Chapter 7 investigates the wider contexts for participants' engagement with learning under the themes 'Landscapes of learning – travelling together as women and mothers', 'Landscapes of learning - travelling together' and 'Continuing the learning journey' (as they qualified and moved into practice).

Chapter 8 presents a discussion of the main findings in relation to the research questions and existing literature. I consider how participants engaged in different

aspects of heutagogy over the two-year period and how this engagement for student mothers was fundamentally shaped by their caring and other roles and responsibilities. Finally, there is an exploration of the notion of invisibility around participants' experiences highlighted by other studies (Johnson, Schwartz and Bower, 2000; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Murtagh, 2017, 2019; Kensinger and Minnick, 2018; Stone and O'Shea, 2019b), and how participants seemed to perceive differing levels of awareness and understanding of their lifeloads for different stakeholders (including their partners, families, tutors and course designers and providers).

Chapter 9 demonstrates how the research aims and objectives have been addressed, and identifies the contributions of the study - including increased knowledge and understanding of mature women student mothers, notably in relation to heutagogy - and its limitations. The varying levels of visibility for different stakeholders identified in Chapter 8 form the basis for recommendations for practice and further study, before I share some final thoughts on my learning as a PhD student.

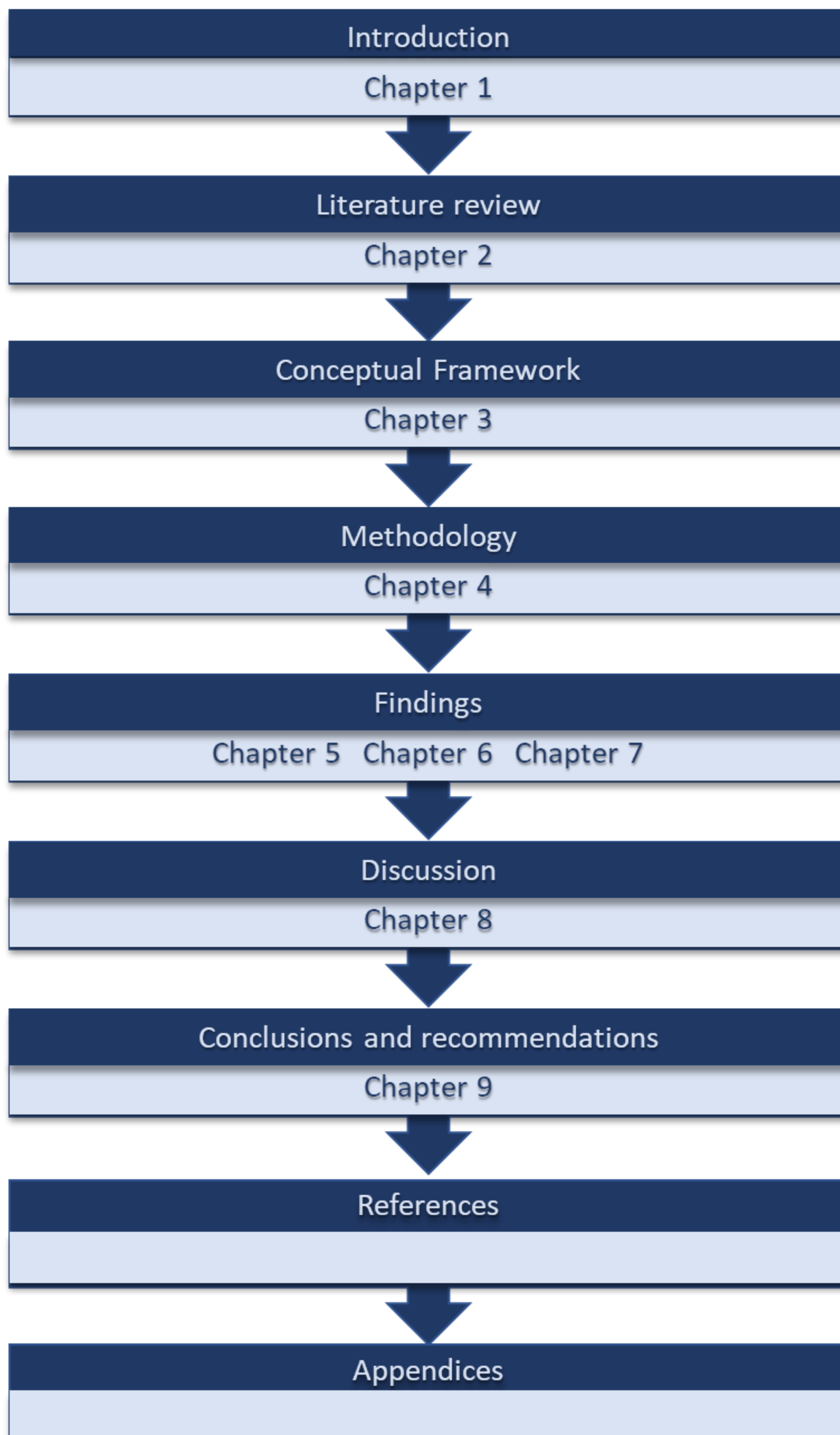


Figure 1: Thesis structure

Chapter 2: Literature review

Introduction

This chapter's purpose is to critically engage with relevant aspects of the literature (Hart, 2005) to identify what is known about mature women students. First, I introduce the research questions and objectives for this literature review. Then, I describe how the range of literature was identified and briefly discuss the concept of non-traditional students, before reviewing each three overlapping groups of literature in turn. There follows a consideration of mature students as learners, and of similarities and differences between men and women in relation to some current theories of learning. I then identify an evolving theory of learning, heutagogy, and examine what it has to offer to the consideration of the cohort of students that is the focus of this thesis. Two areas of research into women students and heutagogy are critiqued and the gap in research is identified where the present study aims to present new understandings. As Aveyard (2014) points out, a literature review is a research method and therefore follows a systematic process to answer defined research questions. The questions for this literature review are as follows:

- What emerges from the literature to illuminate mature women learners' experiences of studying for a vocational foundation degree?
- What is heutagogy and how does it fit as part of the conceptual framework for this investigation of mature women students as learners?

Identifying relevant literature

My engagement with relevant literature has evolved since the initial scoping stage to identify the position of the research, when I carried out purposive searching of databases including Academic Search Complete, British Education Index, Proquest Central and ERIC (Education Resource Information Center). A

range of different search terms was used (such as 'older', 'adult', 'returner', 'women', 'female', 'non-traditional', 'heutagogy') to access academic papers and books related to the topic of mature women students since 1990 (further back for seminal works). University theses were also searched using the British Library EThOS resource. These searches were replicated as the study developed, and new terms were added to identify further sources including 'part-time', 'foundation degree', 'vocational degree'. Emerging literature of interest was identified by following authors on Twitter, setting up alerts on ResearchGate, Google Scholar and Academia.edu. In the latter stages, I discovered ConnectedPapers.com which helped to find further related literature through automated citation chaining or snowballing (Ridley, 2012). I included studies from a range of countries, even though HE systems vary widely, as they contained possibly pertinent findings. Abstracts were read and those that seemed irrelevant were discarded; papers that looked suitable were then read through and critiqued.

Although using a methodical approach to review literature aids robustness (Booth, Sutton and Papaioannou, 2016), undertaking a part-time PhD over six years resulted in a large accumulation of papers and books as I proceeded, almost without noticing, and I also found delight in the serendipitous find or the invaluable recommendation from supervisors and peers. Additionally, I was able to revisit literature first encountered during my tutor training and view it from a different standpoint as an experienced tutor but also a novice researcher. This review therefore combines organic and meandering as well as systematic approaches to the existing body of literature.

Participants in the current study had complex identities. They were mature women (aged 25+), mostly mothers with young children and in stable relationships. Some were studying full-time, but others were part-timers, often because they were also working outside the home or had limited childcare options. Many already had first degrees, and a few had higher degrees (details are presented in Chapter 5, p.129). There are several bodies of literature which have

participants with a range of different but often overlapping aspects and dimensions which are relevant to the current study. These bodies of existing literature about being students can be grouped into three aspects as shown in Table 1, below.

Aspects of participants	Dimensions of aspect	Specific examples	Example studies
A. Characteristics of participants	Age	*Mature students*	Richardson (1994, 2000); Crossan *et al* (2003); Kasworm (2005, 2010); Cox and Ebbers (2010)
	Sex/gender	*Men/women*	Stone and O'Shea (2013); Rubin *et al* (2018); Douglas *et al* (2020)
	Socio-economic group	*Low socio-economic status*	Reay, Ball and David (2002); Stone (2008); Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010); Callender (2018)
	Ethnicity	*Different ethnicities*	Bowl (2001); Reay, David and Ball (2005)
	Previous educational experience (self/family)	*First in family at university*	Stone and O'Shea (2019b)
B. Participants' roles and responsibilities outside studenthood	Caring responsibilities	*Student parents of all ages or 21+ or 25+*	Marandet and Wainwright (2010); Brooks (2012, 2015)
		Student mothers of all ages or 21+ or 25+	Edwards (1993); Pascall and Cox (1993); Lyonette *et al* (2015); Moreau and Kerner (2015); Murtagh (2017, 2019); Webber (2017a, 2017b)
		Lone parents or mothers	Longhurst, Hodgetts and Stolte (2012); Beeler (2016)
	Work responsibilities	*Working full-time or part-time as well as studying (and parenting)*	Ashton and Elliott (2007a, 2007b)

Aspects of participants	Dimensions of aspect	Specific examples	Example studies
C. Characteristics of the course they were on	Level of course	*Postgraduate* *Foundation course* *Access Course*	Lynch (2008) Smith (2017, 2019); Elliott (2019) Reay, David and Ball (2002)
	Course type	*Vocational (such as teaching or nursing)*	George and Maguire (1998); Wright (2011, 2013); Fleming (2019)
	Single or mixed sex	*All or mostly women*	Alzeer (2017, 2018, 2019)
	Mode of study	*Part-time* *Distance* *Blended*	Frith and Wilson (2014); Collins (2018) Gravani (2019) Ashton and Elliott (2007a, 2007b)

Table 1: Overview of overlapping dimensions of existing research relevant to the current study.

The different focuses of the extant literature present challenges in pinpointing studies relevant to the current study. I have tried to identify those having something to say about students like participants in the present research, even though they were not always a close match. The more relevant literature is explored later in this chapter, according to the different aspects of participants being studied (A, B and C). In addition, the literature on mature students specifically as learners (D) is considered, and then more specifically, the theory of heutagogy (E).

One purpose of this literature review is to illuminate some obscurities and uncover silences existing around mature women students, as the idea of invisible women recurs in the literature (see, for example, Brooman, Darwen and Pimor, 2015; Lyonette *et al*, 2015; Seale, 2016; Elliott, 2019; Cook-Sather, 2020). This notion has also become part of a renewed wider movement to expose the lack of consideration of one half of humanity (see, for example, Criado-Perez, 2019), which has its basis in a patriarchal world because, as de Beauvoir (1949, p. 143)

explained, 'representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.' Locating relevant literature was sometimes difficult because research into women students was often not highlighted as such; the sexed and gendered nature of participants was perhaps not seen as important (or less important than it was to my study). This may be a facet of Moreau's (2016) observation that Western culture has traditionally excluded women from HE by focussing on the disembodied student mind which, she argues, has resulted in the default white masculine body being assumed rather than made explicit, echoing the invisibilities highlighted in this review. The aim of shining a light on the under-researched experiences of mature women students to improve practice led logically to the utilisation of an explicit feminist perspective (Vendramin, 2012; Ashton and McKenna, 2020), which is explored further in Chapter 3. Next, I consider the sometimes-controversial issue of 'non-traditional' students, which is how mature women students are often described.

Non-traditional or post-traditional students or something else?

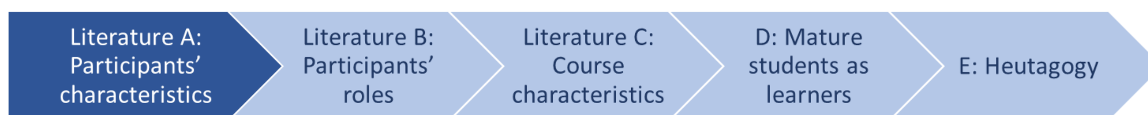
Controversies around the term 'non-traditional' should be noted, not least because it has connotations of othering, implying such students are not welcome or valuable in HEIs (Yancey Gulley, 2016). Another danger is that dividing students into 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' carries implications of two groups of homogeneous students which does not take account of the different demographical situations of the wide range of students in both categories (Waller, 2006; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Yancey Gulley, 2020). As Kasworm (2005, p.16) argued, adult students need to be acknowledged by HEIs as 'complex individuals with multifaceted and multi-layered identities'. Such acknowledgement may be an important factor in tackling concerns over low degree completion rates for 'non-traditional' students (Taniguchi and Kaufman,

2005). Research that helps develop HEI's understanding of adult learners is therefore important.

Women can fall into the category of 'non-traditional' students because, as Brooks (2012) points out, universities have traditionally been perceived as male-oriented spaces, with 'ideal' learners constructed as male, white, middle class and free from burdensome domestic responsibilities (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). The typical student has traditionally also been a full-time recent school-leaver, and universities have often focussed on seeking to attract young students with potential (Kasworm, 2010, p.144), while showing less interest in mature students. Policymakers globally have started to attempt to reverse this situation as part of the widening access agenda (Amorim, 2018), following, for example, the Dearing Report in the UK (NCIHE, 1997), the Bologna process in Europe (European Commission, n.d.) and the Bradley Review of HE in Australia (Bradley *et al*, 2008). Patterns have therefore been gradually changing over recent years. The emphasis on 'traditional' students (young, full-time, with studying as the main focus of their lives) is being replaced by one encompassing larger numbers of 'new-traditional' (Belcastro and Purslow, 2006) or 'post-traditional' (Aquino and BuShell, 2020) students who are often aged 25+ and have other adult roles and responsibilities (such as caring and work) as well as studying. Their more complex lives present a set of different challenges around how they study from that encountered by 'traditional' students (Ross-Gordon, 2011). In particular, they face the challenge of trying to fit into an educational system not designed for this group of students (van Rhijn, Smit Quosai and Lero, 2011) and which often therefore puts the onus on them to adapt as individuals, instead of tackling structural inequalities.

The next three sections explore findings from literatures with specific perspectives, as identified in Table 1 (p.28): A) different characteristics of research participants (such as sex), B) specific roles of participants (such as mothering) and C) characteristics of the course participants were studying on (for example,

vocational). Two further sections investigate D) what is known about mature students as learners, and E) the relevance of the theory of heutagogy. The following diagram acts as a signpost through the complicated terrain of this chapter.



A: Literature according to characteristics of participants

Age and sex/gender

Age is a main defining characteristic of students who do not fit the traditional notion of HE students (Tilley, 2014). Mature students represent between a quarter and a third of students in the UK, the USA, and Australia (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019; Universities Australia, 2020; HESA, 2021a), where much of the relevant research reviewed was situated. In recent decades, the proportion of students who are adults has expanded rapidly in the UK since Brazziel (1989) identified them as the fastest growing group of HE students. Data recorded by HESA (2021a) for the academic year 2019/20 show just over three-fifths of all first year UK undergraduates were aged 20 and under (62%, n=449,695). A further 13% were aged between 21 and 24 (n=96,070), while just under a third were aged 25 and over (30%, n=217,735).

Although 57% of first year undergraduates were women in that same year (HESA, 2021a: 2019-2020, n=411,075), it can be difficult to assess trends around numbers of students in HE who are adults and women. However, between the academic years 2017/18 and 2019/20, the number of both men and women students aged 25+ starting any undergraduate degree rose slightly by 4.5% (Figure 2, p.32). At the time of writing, applications from UK students aged 21+ for full-time courses for 2021/22 have risen by 24% since the previous year, and there has also been a

large rise (39%) in applications for the women-dominated field of nursing from students aged 35+ (Office for Students, 2021).

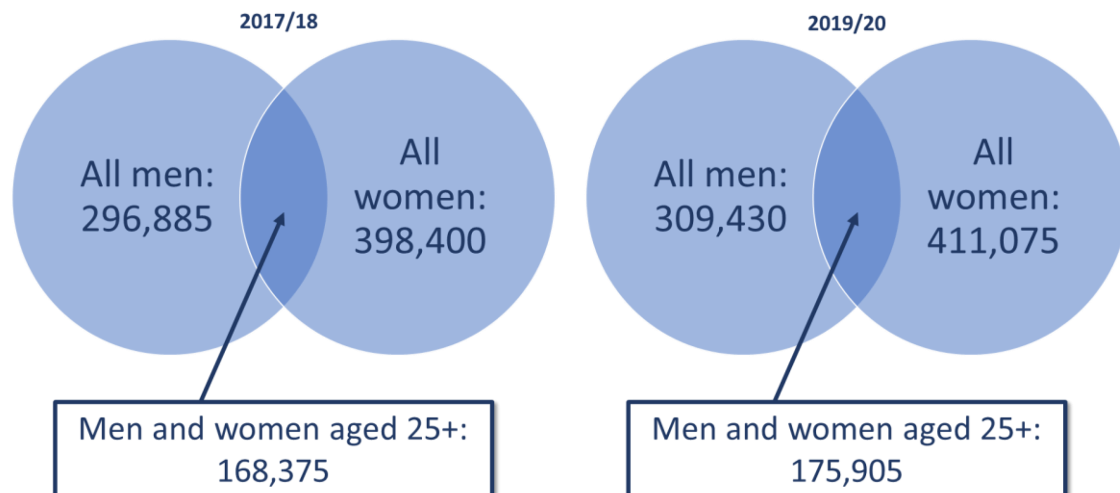


Figure 2: Numbers of first year undergraduates in UK HE by year (adapted from HESA, 2021a)

The data suggest numbers of mature students who are women have been increasing in the UK and are likely to continue to do so. There are predictions of a noticeable expansion of mature students if there is an economic downturn (Kelchen, 2019, cited by Bauer-Wolf, 2019) - which is increasingly likely following the Covid-19 pandemic – as studying for qualifications is often seen as more worthwhile when jobs are scarce (UCAS, 2018).

Various studies have focussed on participants from groups with low socio-economic status or disadvantaged backgrounds (see, for example, Reay, 2002; Reay, Ball and David, 2002; Stone, 2008; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Callender, 2018) and different ethnic groups (see, for example, Bowl, 2001; Reay, David and Ball, 2005) or who were lone mothers (see, for example, Longhurst, Hodgetts and Stolte, 2012; Beeler, 2016). In contrast, the cohort in the current study broadly mirrored the traditional NCT practitioner profile, being predominantly middle class, white British women in coupled relationships. The number of studies about mature women students with special educational needs and disability is notably negligible.

It can be seen, therefore, that mature learners are part of a changing landscape of learning globally, where assumptions about HE students are no longer helpful. Such students may face both dispositional challenges related to individual circumstances and personal characteristics, as well as institutional barriers which do not take account of their situations, such as inflexible timetabling and assessment policies (Burton, Golding Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011). It is conjectured that HEIs and policymakers often forget about them (MillionPlus, 2018), and often ignore the particular gendered constraints encountered by many mature women students (Stone and O'Shea, 2013).

Research shows older students can differ from school-leaver students by having greater understanding of how they learn, and in their motivation (Justice and Dornan, 2001). For example, Osborne, Marks and Turner (2004) explored mature students' motivations for returning to HE and categorised them accordingly. They designated *delayed traditional* students as being in their twenties and having similar commitments and interests to 'traditional' school leaver students. *Late starters* were described as those who have faced a life-changing event such as divorce and want a 'new start'. The category *single parents* comprised mainly women with families trying to escape social exclusion. *Careerists* and *escapees* were currently in employment and trying to make progress or find a route out of low-skilled, low-paid jobs. Finally, the last small group was *personal growers*: people of any age mainly driven by a love of learning (Osborne, Marks and Turner, 2004, p.296). Different groups therefore have different learning motivations. Participants in the present research do not fit neatly into these categories, however: most had children but also partners; many enjoyed learning for its own sake but were aiming to gain a qualification for a change of career, although they often had degrees and professional jobs already. Some research has found students who are mothers are often motivated by being a role model for their children (Wainwright and Marandet, 2010; Webber, 2017a).

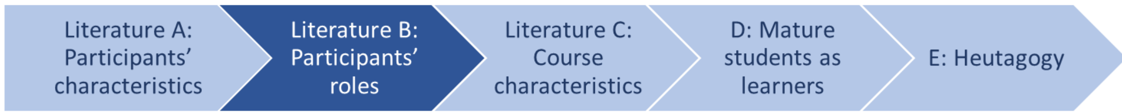
Mature students have a wide range of educational histories. Many returning to HE after a break have often underachieved academically and can therefore lack confidence in their abilities (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Students' lack of confidence and lack of preparedness for studying in HE can be major dispositional challenges (Burton, Golding Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011) and may increase the likelihood of imposter syndrome (Chapman, 2017). Their student identities may be more diffuse than younger students' (Crossan *et al,* 2003), especially if there is a long absence since their last participation in education.

However, mature students often bring positive aspects to HE in terms of life experiences and pragmatism (Medved and Heisler, 2002; Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2012), as well as resilience and dedication (Murtagh, 2019). Higher levels of intrinsic motivation (learning for its own rewards) are often associated with 'non-traditional' students (Bye, Pushkar and Conway, 2007; Chapman, 2012) and mature students are likely to have higher levels of self-efficacy beliefs and commitment to achieving their educational goals (Higgins, 1985; Krager, Wrenn and Hirt, 1990, Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2002). It seemed important therefore to include questions to explore intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the questionnaires for this study.

Overall, as Cox and Ebbers (2010, p.241) point out:

> Adult students bring with them different and multiple experiences, roles and responsibilities than those of traditional age students … experience different transitions … and have a different focus.

Recognising these differences as part of course design and delivery supports a more equitable learning environment and increased academic success (Stone and O'Shea, 2019a). There is a growing body of literature on mature students specifically as learners, which is explored in more detail later in section D. First, I consider research findings about participants in relation to their roles and responsibilities outside their studying.



B: Literature according to participants' roles and responsibilities

Student mothers

There is currently relatively little research focussing on experiences of students who are mothers in HE, as other researchers have pointed out (see, for example, Lyonette *et al*, 2015). Some studies concentrate on lone mothers (Beeler, 2016; Longhurst, Hodgetts and Stolte, 2012) rather than mothers with partners (like most participants in the present study), while some studies investigate student mothers of all ages (although the majority of student mothers are mature).

There is some research into students who are parents but being a student mother is different to being a student father, as Laming, Morris and Martin-Lynch (2019) point out. Student mothers often have different experiences from student fathers because mothering is a gendered role in a patriarchal society (Murtagh, 2019), although of course motherhood varies across different intersections of society (Lynch, 2008). It is unclear how many student parents there are in the UK as HEIs are not required to collect data, although this has been recommended by student organisations (NUS, 2009; NUS Scotland, 2016).

As mentioned previously, a common theme is the invisibility of these students' experiences and the challenges they face in the UK (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Murtagh, 2017, 2019) and elsewhere (Johnson, Schwartz and Bower, 2000; Kensinger and Minnick, 2018; Stone and O'Shea, 2019b). This links to a wider lack of engagement with the experiences and needs of the whole range of 'non-traditional' students noted above. A greater understanding of students who are mothers is needed, therefore, to be able to support them better, both in terms of accessing HE but also persisting and

succeeding throughout their HE journeys. As with other aspects of this cohort, it is important to remember they are not homogeneous; nonetheless, there were identifiable facets that affected the learning experiences of student mothers including juggling different roles, time pressures and guilt, confidence, financial issues, familial and social support, and structural issues. These key aspects of being student mothers identified in the literature are briefly presented below.

Juggling multiple roles

One major differentiating feature between student mothers and many other students is their need to manage a wider range of roles as part of their complex lives such as mother, student, partner, friend and employee (Reay, Ball and David, 2002; Ashton and Elliott, 2007a; Stone and O'Shea, 2013). These roles in the public and private spheres are often varied and difficult to reconcile with each other (Cox and Ebbers, 2010). Resultant time constraints and associated higher stress levels were often noted (see, for example, Edwards, 1993; Home, 1997; Home, 1998; Vaccaro and Lovell, 2010; Moreau and Kerner, 2015). Although student mothers who were also doing paid work had an extra role to manage, which added complexity and extra labour to their lives, it is possible they had already developed coping strategies, so might find it easier in some ways to adapt to studying than mothers who had not worked since having children (Griffiths, 2002).

Having caring responsibilities as a mother is one notable area of difference between student mothers and other students (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2008; Stone and O'Shea, 2019a, 2019b). Carrying out domestic responsibilities has been identified as a heavy burden for all student mothers, and this does not seem to have changed noticeably since the earliest studies I investigated from the 1990s, particularly coping with the emotional labour that still tends to fall on mothers (Leonard, 1994; Stone and O'Shea, 2013; Fatherhood Institute, 2016; Webber, 2017a). Lynch (2008) argues patriarchal society has developed 'intensive mothering' as the 'myth' by which mothers are judged. In this model, a mother

must prioritise her children above herself, because as Edwards (1993, p.73) puts it, 'women plan, organize and create orderly patterns around other individuals' wants and needs.' Studying can put student mothers in conflict with this aim, particularly if they construe studying as doing something for themselves (Edwards, 1993). Some mothers compensate by reducing their personal or leisure time outside their studies or even their sleep (Moss, 2004; Stone and O'Shea, 2013). Student mothers can find it difficult balancing their roles, therefore, and particularly combining their identities as students and mothers (Brooks, 2012). A common finding is that student mothers often prioritise their mothering role over being a student (O'Shea, 2015; Webber, 2015, 2017b). Their student identities can be more fragile than for other students, often leading to imposter syndrome (Studdard, 2011; Wilans and Seary, 2011; Chapman, 2017), a feeling of self-doubt and lack of 'belongingness' which can inhibit academic success (Yorke, 2016).

The traditional conceptions of women as carers in the home and students as men without caring responsibilities can affect how women are perceived by others, and also how they perceive themselves (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2008). In her study of US graduate student mothers, Lynch (2008) found participants often minimised conflicts between roles by downplaying each role in the opposing spheres. This mirrors the strategies used by 'separators' identified by Webber (2017b, building on Edwards' work, 1993). Other mature women students were designated as 'connectors' or 'mixers', where they tried to completely or partially overlap their roles. Questions were therefore included in the questionnaires and interviews to probe how participants combined studying with their other roles.

Time pressures and associated guilt

Having multiple roles in the public and private spheres was often noted as leading to a lack of time for participants to carry out their studying and other roles as well as they might wish (Griffiths, 2002; Murtagh, 2019). This could lead to guilt (Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999; White, 2008; Brooks, 2015; Webber, 2017b),

especially for those who felt they were transgressing societal expectations by being students instead of caring exclusively for their children (White, 2008; Brooks, 2015; Kensinger and Minnick, 2018).

Confidence

Another emotional aspect identified was that lack of confidence could be an issue for mature women students, both around academic ability (according to a recent review of the literature on mature women students in the US carried out by Lin, 2016) and also the effect of age on learning ability (Ashton and Elliott, 2007a, 2007b). Older mature students (aged 40+) can be particularly affected (Pearce, 2017). Self-confidence has been identified as an important factor in undergraduate achievement and performance (Yorke, 2016; Newton, 2016, cited in Elliott, 2019). Quimby and O'Brien (2006) noted 'non-traditional' mature women students in the US with higher self-efficacy beliefs experienced less distress than those with lower levels. The questionnaires for the current study therefore included specific questions about confidence about different aspects of learning.

Financial issues

While many students struggle financially, student parents can find finances particularly challenging. For example, student parents in the UK often face financial difficulty (NUS, 2012), not least because tuition fees and childcare costs are some of the highest in OECD countries (OECD, 2020). Finances were also found to be an issue for student parents in studies from other countries even if they were also working (Ashton and Elliott, 2007a; White, 2008; Stone and O'Shea, 2013; Kensinger and Minnick, 2018). Student mothers' costs can be especially high, because the combined costs of dependants and extra childcare and often lost income represent a high level of financial as well as emotional investment (Griffiths, 2002) that can increase the pressure to succeed. In addition, the value of undertaking and continuing engagement with HE can

involve ongoing intense negotiations with partners and families that can be difficult to resolve (Moss, 2004). Lack of disposable income can also limit the finding of easy solutions to problems that many student mothers face arising from lack of time.

Familial and social support

Successfully making the most of limited time available for studying can be dependent on students' ability to access sufficient economic, cultural, social and economic capital (Webber, 2017a). However, support and encouragement on offer to student mothers from their friends and families can vary widely (Ashton and Elliott, 2007a; Ward, 2009). A combination of practical and emotional support can be valued by students (Lynch, 2008; Elliott, 2019). In a survey of US undergraduate students to examine relationships between family members and female adult students, Plageman and Sabina (2010) found students' own mothers in particular were often a crucial source of support. Students whose social support is low or less than anticipated may need to rely on their own inner resources and motivation (Justine Mercer, 2007); this may be particularly challenging for those students lacking in confidence. Social and emotional support has been identified as an important contributor to student success (Webber, 2017a; Kensinger and Minnick, 2018); this aspect was therefore explored in the questionnaires and interviews.

Structural issues

Lack of affordable, reliable childcare can be a major barrier to HE access and retention (Griffiths, 2002; Lynch, 2008; Kensinger and Minnick, 2018). Moss (2004) points out the patriarchal nature of HEIs, which can lead to the marginalisation of students who are parents in matters related to course organisation, timetabling (not taking account of school holidays, for example) and university rules (such as strict deadlines). Lynch (2008) found participants often felt intellectually supported by tutors, but not emotionally, partly because

there was no recognition of their private lives. In contrast, Ward (2009) found in her qualitative study of an earlier NCT diploma programme that tutors had a good understanding of students in their small tutor groups. A more personalised approach can help students be seen and understood better; acknowledging and accommodating students' caring responsibilities can affect their studies in positive ways. Tutors may not be aware of an individual student mother's situation until she has an emergency such as a child falling ill, causing difficulties with attendance or assignment submission (Murtagh, 2019). There can be a lack of clear protocols on how to deal with such cases and tutors can therefore be left to act according to their own views and experiences, which might include a reluctance to treat student mothers differently to other students and thereby risk claims of unfairness (see, for example, O'Neill, 2017; Murtagh, 2019).

Although there might be concerns about potential costs of changes, Alsop, Gonzalez-Amal and Kilkey (2008, p. 633) point out that what is needed is mostly 'creative and compassionate thinking' about the particular needs of student carers. Brooks (2012) in her comparative study of student-parents in HEIs in the UK and Denmark found striking differences in how support was offered, linking this to the differences between neo-liberal and social democratic regimes. However, a key point seemed to be Danish HEIs were often more aware of and responsive to a diverse student body than UK HEIs. This hints that change including a renewed focus on awareness and compassion in the UK is possible. Potential changes in these areas are addressed in the Recommendations section in Chapter 9 (p.337).

The literature shows how student mothers can face a particular set of challenges. To develop understanding of how the cohort I was studying experienced these, the questionnaires included various questions about combining roles, finding time and space for study, their engagement with their families and their relationships with their partners, and any changes they had made in order to study. The interviews enabled a deeper exploration of the lived experience of

being student mothers and how this interacted with their learning. Next, I consider literature differentiated by aspects of courses participants were studying on.

C: Literature according to characteristics of the course

Most research into mature women balancing mothering and studying has focussed on learners studying full-time for campus-based academic degrees. This section investigates research into mature women who are studying in less traditional ways.

Part-time mature students

Numbers of part-time students at HEIs in the UK have reduced over recent years (Butcher, 2020) which led to Callender and Thomson (2018) designating them the 'lost' part-timers; they are doubly lost because there are learners who are not able to access education as they would have previously, often because of funding issues, and those who are able to gain access are not as well understood as other students. There is a lack of research into part-time mature women students with children specifically, against a wider knowledge gap of part-time mature students in HE regarding their experiences and specific challenges and barriers (Butcher, 2020). The refrain of invisibility therefore plays out in this area too. Part-time students are very often mature women (HESA, 2019) and therefore a large proportion are providing care to others, whether children or other family members, or both. Part-time students often face specific barriers such as cost and lack of flexibility in course provision (Collins, 2018), which mirrors the impediments identified in research into student mothers generally.

Butcher (2020) identified a range of feelings experienced by part-time students, particularly those who had had a long break since previous formal education, including anxiety about academic performance, but also excitement about the chance to challenge themselves and make up for missed opportunities. Part-time students can have a fragile student identity when studying alongside full-timers (Frith and Wilson, 2014), not always seeing themselves as 'proper' students. They may feel short-changed by finding part-time education a 'half-empty experience, rather than a half-full version of the real thing' (Davies, 1999, p. 144). This may be a result of provision for part-time and mature students being less resourced, less valued and less well-understood than other provision (NIACE, 2005). As Frith and Wilson (2014) note, government policies to widen participation have often focussed on improving access for a wider range of students but have not given the same attention to supporting students in terms of their retention and success once they have started their courses. However, as Wright (2013) points out, some mature women students can relish the chance to balance different roles as part-time students and mothers, rather than focussing on one activity full-time.

After the large drop in recent years, there are indications that numbers of part-time students in the UK are likely to increase again, against a backdrop of increases in overall UK student enrolment (HESA, 2021b). There have been calls for courses offering greater flexibility in the form of blended learning (Office for Students, 2021) and for barriers posed by funding to be tackled (Shaw, 2014), which could support increased participation and retention.

Vocational foundation degree students: mature women and student mothers

While most undergraduates study for first or honours degrees, some students take other routes. In the UK, one alternative is a foundation degree, the academic equivalent of two-thirds of an honours degree at Level 5 in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (QAA, 2020). Following the identification of a skills gap in the UK labour market, foundation degrees were introduced in 2000

with the aim of providing learners with skills and knowledge relevant to employment (Leitch, 2006), and also to widen participation and encourage lifelong learning (QAA, 2020). Unlike traditional honours degrees, there are no set entry requirements but there is a focus on work experience (UCAS, 2021).

Some studies have included vocational students among their participants; for example, Brooks (2012) included some in her study of UK student parents but did not present analysis of them as a separate group. However, there is only a small body of research specifically investigating mature women students on foundation degrees, often carried out by insider researchers (Shafi and Rose, 2014; Smith, 2017, 2019; Welsh, 2020) which suggests it is perhaps not a topic that outsiders have considered worthy of study, possibly due to low numbers of students. The number of women (of any age) enrolling on foundation degrees is relatively small and dropped slightly from 10,025 to 9,900 between 2017/18 and 2019/20; although full-timers increased slightly (up 3% from 7684 to 7,950), the number of part-timers dropped by 17%, from 2,340 to 1,945 (HESA, 2021b). This is part of a a general decline in all part-time undergraduates, no doubt partly explained by changes in funding provision (Shaw, 2014), although this fall has shown recent signs of reversing (Smith, 2017; Office for Students, 2021).

Foundation degree students can experience a range of positive and negative emotions about their studying. Smith's (2017, 2019) qualitative investigation of mothers studying to become teaching assistants in the UK noted that, as with student mothers on all types of degrees, they often experienced deep and lasting guilt about not allocating enough time and attention to their families and their paid work, although he found they mostly reported positive emotions otherwise. There can be a perception of foundation degrees not being 'real' degrees which might limit the amount of cultural, social and economic capital accrued by students (Dunne, Goddard and Woolhouse, 2008). Nevertheless, Herrera, Brown and Portlock (2015) noted their research participants (who were all women aged 22+ although their parental status was not stated) found that while learning on a

foundation degree could be challenging it was also rewarding for many, and they often valued learning as part of a community of practice.

Mature women on distance and blended learning courses

Distance or remote learning has its roots in the correspondence course originally made possible by developments in printing, postal services and literacy, and has historically appealed to women in particular, because they could combine learning with their other roles and responsibilities (Herman and Kirkup, 2017). There has been an acceleration in distance learning as part of the digital era of the 21st century (Stone and O'Shea, 2019a), and e-learning is seen as increasingly appropriate 'in a global world for global learners' (Ashton and Elliott, 2007b, p.171). Self-efficacy and motivation issues are particularly relevant for these students, compared to those on campus-based courses (Wang *et al*, 2008; Severino *et al*, 2011; Cascio, Botta and Anzaldi, 2013); these issues were therefore explored in the questionnaires for this present study, because the NCT course had elements of distance learning and self-directed independent study.

Australia has led the way in exploring women's experiences of studying on distance courses (see, for example, Ashton and Elliott, 2007a, 2007b; O'Shea, Stone and Delahunty, 2015; Stone and O'Shea, 2013, 2019a, 2019b), at least partly due to the geography which can be a barrier to completely campus-based courses. Scholars are divided on the benefits and challenges of distance learning. Some have described a 'distance education deficit' (Simpson, 2013) which requires intensive student support. Herman and Kirkup (2017) argue the limits on social interaction as well as the geographical distance involved in such courses can enable women students to orient themselves away from learning environments that discriminate in favour of men. Others have pointed out the benefits of flexibility in fitting studying into complex lives and the contribution distance education has made in widening participation for women and other marginalised groups (Aneja, 2017).

Blended courses like the one in the present study combine face-to-face and online elements and are likely to be more common following the Covid-19 pandemic (Killen and Langer-Crame, 2020). They can combine the benefits of distance and campus learning such as flexibility, reduced travel and social benefits (Aneja, 2017). There is a dearth of research into mature learners on blended programmes (Youde, 2020), although a study by Ausburn (2004) found US adult students in blended learning environments particularly appreciated being part of a learning community, among other aspects. In contrast, Frith and Wilson (2014) found mature part-time students can feel excluded from being part of a learning community; they argue finding like-minded individuals to share experiences with helps to develop the confidence that underpins academic success.

One challenge for students on courses with online learning elements, particularly courses with extensive independent study requirements like the NCT course (NCT, 2018), concerns digital access and skills. Internet access is at an all-time high in Great Britain, for example, with only 4% of households being without access compared to 43% in 2006 (ONS, 2020a), although this does not imply all students can access computers at home when they need to, as these may be shared between family members. Recent research shows digital skills levels vary widely, however. The Department for Education in the UK developed a framework of Essential Digital Skills (DfE, 2018) which defines a set of foundation skills (including turning on and using devices securely) and five categories of essential digital skills needed for engaging in life and work, including problem solving, communicating, handling information and content, and making transactions, all underpinned by being safe, legal and confident online. A recent report drawing on this framework found an estimated 9 million UK adults (16%) do not have these foundation skills, while a further 2.7 million adults (5%) can navigate the internet but do not have a full range of digital skills (Lloyds Bank, 2020). If current trends continue, it is forecast low digital engagement will remain likely for a quarter of UK adults in 2030. A large majority (82%) of adults who

were online reported being digitally self-taught and many did not utilise their skills regularly: this suggests there is likely to be wide variation in competency throughout the population. Importantly, over a quarter (27%) of full-time students had concerns about their digital skills; people with physical or sensory impairments often had lower levels of digital skills (Lloyds Bank, 2020).

(Dis)abled students may face particular challenges around digital exclusion as well, and even those with 'digital capital' may not find the technologies commonly used in HE sufficiently inclusive (Seale, 2013). As Gilliam (2021, para. 11) points out, dealing with digital exclusion necessitates setting aside the assumption that 'students are technological whizzes with whizzing machines'; this is even more important for mature students who possibly missed out on learning digital skills formally at school and may not have developed them at work, particularly in light of the Lloyds Bank (2020) finding that over three-quarters of the UK workforce (77%) did not receive digital skills support from their employers.

Mature women students on a single sex course

Women in the UK have historically achieved academic success by locating themselves apart from men, either in women-only colleges or by studying women-dominated subjects such as nursing or midwifery, as Tamboukou (1999) pointed out. There is very little recent research into mature women students as learners on a single-sex course, however, no doubt linked to the majority of HEIs worldwide now being co-educational, following an increasing acceptance of women students in male-dominated HEIs since the 19th Century (Goldin and Katz, 2011). One exception is Deutsch and Schmertz's (2011) feminist study using focus groups with mature women in historically all-women US HEIs. Participants in their study reported educational lives influenced by gender roles, and highlighted similar issues to those found in other studies, such as challenges in juggling multiple roles and financial difficulties. In addition, participants valued

the social support from being part of a group of women who shared a common understanding of challenges they faced.

Nations in the Middle East have been some of the last to sanction the move away from single-sex HEIs and research into how women students have responded to this change has highlighted the importance of women's spaces. For example, Alzeer (2017, 2018, 2019) explored how Emirati HE women students constructed and engaged with learning spaces in ways that were context and culture specific, often 'cocooning' themselves in small, hidden spaces in a university that was originally a women-only institute, but then admitted a small proportion of men (the sexes were still kept segregated, however). The women students seemed to use these small areas of public space as their own private spaces for seclusion, safety and sometimes sleep which they often lacked in their homes (Alzeer, 2017; 2018).

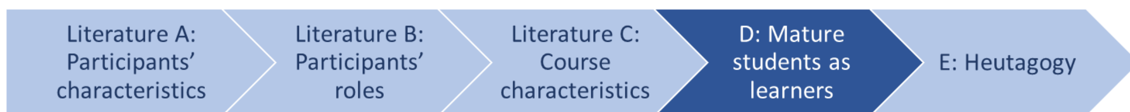
Mixed sex universities in the UK have traditionally been seen as male-dominated spaces that pose potential dangers for women (Mackinnon, Elgqvist-Saltzman and Prentice, 1998). However, Quinn (2003) carried out qualitative research with diverse women students in the UK who could also formulate the university as a nurturing space protected from external threats. For some, this space was a refuge from abusive husbands and partners. Domestic abuse was not a focus of this current study, and did not emerge in the data, but would no doubt be a worthwhile if ethically demanding area for further investigation, especially because it is often a hidden phenomenon (Women's Aid, 2020).

It can be seen therefore that the literature has little to say about experiences of mature women students studying only with other women. Even courses with mostly women students are not well-understood, as there is also a scarcity of research into 'non-traditional' students on courses usually undertaken by women such as nursing (Kiernan, Proud and Jackson, 2015).

Finding space for learning

As well as facing challenges around finding time to study in addition to carrying out all their other roles, students can face difficulties finding space to study. Tamboukou (1999) explored the personal and social spaces of women studying to become teachers in the UK; their quest for a private space of their own mirrored the Emirati women in Alzeer's research (2017, 2018, 2019). Courses with a large element of independent study like the NCT course under consideration might presume students can easily find space to learn. As von Prummer (2000, p.70) points out, a requirement for independent study in the home privileges students with higher levels of resources who can claim space for themselves. The home is still perceived as the domain of women (Acker, 2012) where the primary role is nurturing the family, not studying and self-development (see also Moss, 2004). Student mothers can struggle to justify (to their families and often to themselves) taking space for their studies, because the home is often undervalued as a site of learning (Gouthro, 2005). Students may find blurring the boundaries between study and home challenging, a process which has been mirrored for many women who found themselves suddenly working from home without childcare because of the Covid-19 pandemic (see, for example, Crosslin and Bailey, 2021). This situation has precipitated calls for the 'right to disconnect' when working from home, because of the risk of negative health impacts, especially mental distress (Jones and Bano, 2021). This highlights the importance of supporting mature women students to manage their studies effectively.

Having examined the literature about mature women's situated experiences as students, the next section explores what the literature says about mature students with reference to their engagement with learning.



D: Mature students as learners

Adult learners

The growth in literature about adults as distinct from children as learners has accelerated since the concept of andragogy (Knowles, 1968; Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2012) became more current (andragogy is returned to later in this chapter). As they develop in skills and experience, older students are sometimes thought to adopt different approaches to their learning and to achieve more academic success than school leaver students (see, for example, Leppel, 2002; Kreber, 2003), although other studies report no significant differences, and some claim conversely that 'traditional' students seem to learn more deeply and effectively than older students (Clark and Ramsay, 1990; McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001; Nsor-Ambala, 2020). Independent learning in particular is an important part of HE but is still poorly understood, according to a recent UK study (Hockings *et al*, 2018). As reported earlier, mature or adult learners over the age of 25 make up a significant proportion of students in HE globally. In the UK, the number of students aged 21+ (not 25+ as is common in other definitions of mature students) applying to universities has recently started to rise again, after a drop in recent years which was partly due to lack of part-time provision and changes in student funding (Office for Students, 2021).

Although the body of research into adults learning continues to grow, as evidenced by the large number of journals in the field, 'mature women as learners' is not a commonly researched topic. Therefore, mature women students' particular approaches and attitudes to learning, and the implications for course design and delivery, remain less well-understood. As Voyer and Voyer (2014) have pointed out, much of what is known overlaps with stereotypical views of girls and

women compared to boys and men. The following section explores what the limited extant literature in the field has found.

Differences between mature women and mature men learners?

Some research has evaluated variations between men and women learners of 'traditional' student age. For example, D'Lima, Winsler and Kitsantas (2014) investigated first year US college students and found ethnic and gender differences, including women students' reporting lower academic self-efficacy beliefs than men across all ethnic groups at the beginning of the course, and Caucasian (sic) women indicating higher levels of intrinsic motivation and higher performance than men.

There has been less focus on sex/gender differences for mature students, however. More than two decades ago, Hayes and Flannery (1995) carried out a systematic review of adult women and learning. They noted a lack of research specifically on women aged 25+ learning in HE settings. In fact, they found just twenty-eight relevant papers of varying quality; only one was conceptualised within a feminist framework. Three key themes were identified (the second two are of interest in the present study): women as silent, particularly in the presence of often louder, more confident men (this did not apply here as all students on the NCT course were women); women's self-doubts or lack of confidence in their abilities and their belongingness; and women as connected learners. This last theme encompasses women's common preferences to learn 'in ways that allow them to connect new concepts to personal experience; to integrate cognitive and affective learning; and to engage in communal as opposed to solitary knowledge-building' (Hayes and Flannery, 1995, p.7).

The latter theme can also be linked to the idea of 'connected knowing' which was introduced by the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky *et al*, 1986/1997), a hugely influential publication about women learning. Although some of their ideas have been strongly contested as they focus on differences

arising from sex, rather than the effect of patriarchal social structures (Ryan, 2001), they identified two interesting approaches to evaluating and constructing knowledge: *separate knowing* where a learner evaluates knowledge in an objective, sceptical way, in contrast to *connected knowing* where a learner embraces new ideas and looks to make personal links (Galotti *et al*, 1999). Marrs and Benton (2009) suggest that women may try to understand a new situation from the perspective of others first, before critically analysing it, whereas men may analyse first before considering other people's points of view. It is possible that the tendency many women have to prioritise others' perceptions is related to the phenomenon of 'double consciousness' which is seeing oneself through the lens of other people's perceptions (Burghardt Du Bois, 1897), which can be a characteristic of people in situations of social inequality, whether African Americans in a racist society, or women in a patriarchal one. The habit of framing themselves in relation to others in life generally might shape how some women learn. There is a danger in emphasising women's connectedness, however, because it leads to a simplistic perception that women learn best in groups, as Hayes (2001) points out, and can feed stereotypes about women having lower levels of competitiveness and self-direction than men.

The findings of Hayes and Flannery's review (1995) were often contradictory, however. Some studies found no gender-related differences (male adult students also often make links to their own experiences, for example), while others did not consider the effect of the context for women learning in an often competitive and unfriendly HE environment. Overall, the review did not find enough evidence to either confirm or refute widespread assumptions about how women learn.

Studies carried out in the intervening years show a similar range of inconsistent results. Some studies have found differences in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation between men and women (see, for example, Zaccone and Pedrini, 2019). Several have explored men and women students in relation to deep, surface, and strategic (or achieving) approaches to learning (Marton and Säljö, 1984/1997; Biggs, 1987;

Entwistle, McCune and Walker, 2011). Deep approaches to learning are typically depicted as being active, independent, critical and curious, often going beyond the curriculum in order to learn for its own sake. Surface learning approaches are described as more passive and often incorporate superficial processes such as rote learning to pass assignments. Strategic or achieving learning approaches are a mixture of deep and surface approaches to make best use of resources available to achieve high grades (Rutherford, Limorenko and Shore, 2016). For example, in their quantitative study of white/Caucasian (sic) and Mexican-American US community college students, Marrs and Benton (2009) explored Belenky *et al*'s (1986/1997) concepts of separate and connected ways of knowing and links to deep, surface and achieving approaches. Analysis of responses to a questionnaire identified tendencies towards separate and connected knowing; women respondents in both ethnic groups were more likely to demonstrate the latter and less likely to demonstrate the former than men. Differences were relatively small, however.

Other studies have found very little difference between men's and women's learning, although some have found differences in performance and attainment (see, for example, Lovat and Darmawan, 2019; Rubin *et al*, 2018). Vermunt (2005) noted women undergraduate students at a university in the Netherlands appreciated learning co-operatively with other students more than men did, but otherwise no consistent relationship between sex and learning pattern was detected. Richardson and King (1991) first reported finding no inherent differences in approaches to studying between men and women three decades ago, and various studies since have supported this finding (eg, Zeegers, 2001; Byrne, Flood and Willis, 2002; Kreber, 2003). However, in certain contexts, differences may be observed between men and women students. For example, Richardson carried out various studies in distance education which found women more likely to use a surface approach to learning than men (Richardson, 2005; Richardson, 2006). As distance learning often appeals to mature women students with additional responsibilities (Ashton and Elliott, 2007a; Herman and Kirkup,

2017), it is possible lack of time for studying might limit deep approaches to learning and force a more strategic approach. The social aspects of mature women learning are explored in more detail in the later section on heutagogy and also form a strong focus of this present study, so they shaped the questions asked in the surveys and interviews.

Very few studies have explored interactions between age and gender in relation to deep and surface learning. One exception is Rubin *et al*'s (2018) recent study of Australian undergraduates which used questionnaires to measure self-reported learning approaches and degree satisfaction. They observed no significant overall effect of gender and deep learning approaches but did find higher age predicted deep learning more strongly for women than for men students, and this was linked with degree satisfaction. They hypothesised that older women are less career-focussed and so are likely to be more intrinsically motivated than men or younger women, although their findings did not provide confirmation. This (somewhat contentious) assumption about attitudes towards careers is less likely to be true for mature women students studying for a vocational qualification. Rubin *et al's* sample (2018) comprised 552 women and 428 men, but combined results from students at different stages of their degree, and therefore did not allow for changes over the degree course which might be expected (for example, Richardson, 2000, who noted a range of studies demonstrating use of deep learning approaches often declines in the first year in HE).

Rubin *et al* (2018) also asked about caring responsibilities (11.5% reported having these 'often' or 'constantly'; 84.8% reported 'sometimes' or 'rarely') but did not provide analysis using this variable. In contrast, the majority of participants in the current study were mothers with dependent and often young children, and as the research explored earlier shows, caring responsibilities can mediate students' engagement with HE in different ways (see, for example, Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2008). Finally, Rubin *et al* (2018) highlighted self-reporting as a limitation of their study but did not acknowledge that men and women may

exhibit different behaviours when responding to questionnaires, which might have affected their findings.

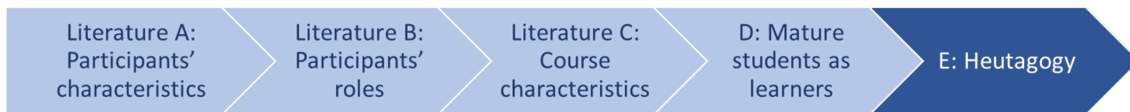
Data from this latter study were further analysed by Douglas *et al* (2020). They concluded older women who have decided to attend HE are more motivated than men or younger women to employ deep learning approaches, which correlates with their higher relative achievement. They suggest therefore that, contrary to some other studies (see, for example, Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2002; Quimby and O'Brien, 2006; Gongadze, Styrnol and Hume, 2021), mature women students do not need specific support. However, this perspective does not allow for two arguments: firstly, mature women with support may be able to achieve even more highly if they are provided with support for their educational needs; and secondly, mature women students may work harder than other students because they feel under huge pressure to succeed because of sacrifices they and their families have often made (see, for example, Griffiths, 2002). Targeted support and course design which takes into account their situations might help them balance their lives better, making their university experience more positive.

The lack of significant differences between men and women as learners aligns with recent neuroscience research which suggests there is very little inherent biological difference between men and women's brains (Fine, 2017; Rippon, 2019). This highlights the importance of avoiding common stereotypes, although as Rippon (2019) points out, brain plasticity means living in a gendered society changes the brain to become more gendered. A question about the effect of gendered social roles on the experience of being a mature woman student was included in the second interview schedule.

Although the idea of deep, surface and strategic learning approaches is well-established - and deep learning in particular is often valued and encouraged by educators – some have questioned whether they are useful concepts when exploring adult learning. Haggis (2003) points out that the theory and practice have not been subject to usual levels of critique. She identifies concerns about the

validity of the ‘approaches to learning’ model and about the values often assigned by educators to the approaches. Deep learning approaches are often conceived as characteristics of ‘good’ students (even though other proponents such as Marshall and Case, 2005, have argued strongly this should be avoided). For example, Douglas *et al* (2020) claim deep learning is superior to surface learning, because of higher levels of commitment around understanding meaning and linking new ideas to existing knowledge, and because it is linked with better academic achievement. Questions arise about whether the ‘approaches to learning’ model privileges men’s typical learning orientations over women’s in a patriarchal society. Time and ‘headspace’ for deep learning is a luxury many mature women students cannot afford, so they are often seen to adopt instrumental approaches to learning (Cappleman-Morgan, 2005, cited in Murtagh, 2017; Atherton, 2013b) or at least a ‘strategic pragmatism’ (Duncan, 1990, p. 58, cited in Griffiths, 2002). To understand more about how the cohort in my study fitted learning into their lives and the strategies they used, I included questions about this topic in the surveys, and explored it in more detail in the interviews.

There are other criticisms of the ‘approaches to learning’ model of learning, however, such as that it is an oversimplification of learning lacking a strong empirical basis (Tormey, 2014; Batteson, Tormey and Ritchie, 2014) and that it has not kept pace with the huge changes in university learning approaches using digital technologies (Lindblom-Ylänne, Parpala and Postareff, 2019). In the next section, I explore a range of different theories of adult learning and identify why heutagogy, an evolving theory of learning, might be more useful in considering mature women as learners in the 21st Century digital age, which has afforded a new range of different challenges and opportunities.



E: Heutagogy: an evolving theory of learning

In recent decades there have been various theories which try to explain how adults learn in the three domains of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Although these theories overlap, they can be broadly grouped into the categories considered briefly in Table 2 (p.57). They broadly trace a trajectory from teacher-centred to learned-centred approaches.

Category of learning theory	Learning theories	Some key ideas	Some key authors/texts
Instrumental *Focus is on individual experience*	Behavioural	A stimulus in the environment leads to a change in behaviour	Thorndike (1911) Skinner (1954)
	Cognitive	Concerned with perception and processing of information	Piaget (1952) Bruner (1966)
	Experiential	Educators are responsible for creating experiences to facilitate learning	Kolb (1984)
Humanistic *More learner-centred, promoting individual development*	Andragogy	Adults learn in different ways to children, drawing on their experience	Knowles (1968)
	Self-directed learning	Emphasises autonomy and individual freedom in learning	Dewey (1938) Knowles (1975) Freire (1976/2006)
Transformative *Learning results in change of perspective*	Transformative learning theory	Critical reflection challenges learner's beliefs and assumptions	Mezirow (1978, 2000) Brookfield (2000)
Social *Learner's experience is shaped by her context and community*	Situated cognition/ communities of practice	Learning and thinking are social activities, structured and influenced by the setting in which learning takes place	Bandura (1977a) Vygotsky (1978) Wilson (1993) Wenger (1998) Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor (2015)
Motivational *Includes two elements: motivation and reflection*	Self-determination theory	Recognises importance of intrinsic motivation and the need to fulfil three basic needs of Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness (feeling of belonging)	Maslow (1954) Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000)
Reflective models *Reflection in and on action lead to change*	Reflection-change theory	Using reflection and feedback to help develop autonomous learning	Schön (1983, 1987) Kolb and Lewis (1986)

Table 2: An overview of adult learning theories (Adapted from Taylor and Hamdy, 2013, e1562-e1563)

Each theory has its strengths, but none provides a complete conception of how adults learn. Perhaps the theory most widely used in HE currently is andragogy, whose best-known advocate is Malcolm Knowles, which was developed in North America from European roots (Knowles, 1984). This learning framework assumes adults learn differently to children because they have the following specific characteristics (Knowles, 1984, cited in Pappas, 2014, para. 3):

- **Self-Concept**
  As a person matures, his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.

- **Adult Learner Experience**
  As a person matures, he/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.

- **Readiness to Learn**
  As a person matures, his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles.

- **Orientation to Learning**
  As a person matures, his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application. As a result, his/her orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centredness to one of problem centredness.

- **Motivation to Learn**
  As a person matures, the motivation to learn is internal.

As andragogy has evolved, debates have raged over whether it is a theory of adult learning or adult education, or principles of good educational practice, or perhaps a portrayal of how adults should learn (Hartree, 1984). Knowles himself (1980, p.112) eventually positioned andragogy not as a theory of adult learning, but instead a 'model of assumptions about learning or a conceptual framework that serves as a basis for an emergent theory'. Educationalists have also debated the generalisability of andragogy and its foundational assumptions. For example, self-directedness is arguably prized specifically as a white middle class North

American trait, as Tennant pointed out (2006), and some adults prefer to be passive in their learning (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2015). Brookfield (1986) contended that self-direction is better conceptualised as a goal of adult learning, rather than a necessary condition, while Grow (1991) suggested self-directed learning is a continuum that students may exhibit at different levels in different situations. Nevertheless, andragogical principles, and in particular its learner-centred approach, continue to have relevance to adult learners in the 21st Century (Charungkaittikul and Henschke, 2017; Gravani, 2019).

As contexts for adult learning change, such as the evolution of the interactive digital age and the growth in online education (Allen and Seaman, 2016; Bowen, 2014; Goldman and Scardamalia, 2013: Glassner and Back, 2020; Moore, 2020), and a move to ubiquitous 'anytime, anywhere' learning (Agonács and Matos, 2019; Ceylan, 2020), learning theories are being constantly developed and refined, and sometimes new ones emerge. Heutagogy, also known as self-determined learning (which is different to self-directed learning), is one such theory (Hase and Kenyon, 2013; Blaschke and Hase, 2016). Although other '-gogies' have been proposed, including ubuntugogy, an African theory of education based on humanity to others (Bangura, 2005), peeragogy or paragogy (learning from others), and cybergogy (online engagement), heutagogy seems to be one which draws together various aspects of the theories outlined above and brings them into the digital age. It builds on and extends andragogy because it:

- requires double-loop learning rather than single-loop learning;
- emphasises capability development, not only competency development;
- is learner-determined (designing the curriculum and assessment) rather than learner-directed (organising the learning);
- is a learner-managed approach in contrast with the instructor-learner managed one usually seen;
- has a non-linear design and learning approach instead of a linear one;
- focuses on the process of getting students to understand how they learn as opposed to learning the content (Agonács and Matos, 2019, p.224).

By emphasising self-regulated learning, reflection and motivation, and taking into account the growing accessibility of information online, heutagogy puts learning into the control of the learner instead of the tutor (Blaschke, 2012), which is consistent with Barnett's (2010, 2013) indication of the need to develop a self-determined focus in HE that puts students in the centre. It also highlights lifelong learning as a continuous process required for success in modern workplace environments (Abraham and Komattil, 2017; Moore, 2020; Blaschke, 2021).

Heutagogy is underpinned by two main conceptions around what adult learning is. The first is based on humanistic psychology or humanism, with Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers as its main proponents in rejecting behaviourist and psychodynamic psychology (McLeod, 2015). Key assumptions are that human beings are basically good, have free will and are motivated to develop or self-actualise. In relation to education, this approach highlights the importance of relationship in teaching and focuses on facilitating learning rather than transferring knowledge directly (Rogers and Lyon, 2013). Freire's (1976/2006) emancipatory theory of education also built on this approach, highlighting the importance of respect in learning, and being concerned with pedagogy that makes an informed difference to the world and supports the development of social capital, particularly for those who have traditionally had no voice, which chimes with a feminist approach.

The second idea underlying heutagogy is constructivism, which posits that learners actively create their own understanding and meaning of events, based on their experiences and beliefs, rather than being passive recipients of knowledge. Important constructivist theories include Dewey's transactional constructivism (Vanderstraeten, 2002), Kolb's cycle of experiential learning (1984); and also Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978; McLeod, 2019) and Bruner's (1966) idea of scaffolding, which both relate to designing and structuring

learning to aid students in developing proficiency through offering targeted support.

Heutagogy highlights specific learner attributes (Blaschke and Hase, 2016) including metacognition, reflective practice, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977b; Zimmerman, 2000); and self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Heutagogical learners often learn by interacting regularly with communities of practice or groups of people with shared interests (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). They can find aspects of learning transformational, changing their outlook on the world and their interactions with it (Mezirow, 1991). They are likely to develop into lifelong learners, having commitment and motivation to continue learning throughout life and will be more likely therefore to thrive in a 'global-knowledge economy' (Blaschke, 2012, p.57).

Two recent reviews of the literature on the application and implementation of heutagogy as a theory (Agonács and Matos, 2019; Moore, 2020) have demonstrated how the body of research has been growing since 2010, particularly around the areas of 'learner-centredness and learner-determinedness'; studies often indicated adult students felt positively towards the approach (Agonács and Matos, 2019). There are still gaps in the literature, however, particularly in relation to capability development and non-linear learning, and a lack of quantitative studies that might help to explain and predict heutagogical phenomena. No specific mention is made of studies investigating heutagogy for specific cohorts like participants in the current study. All the studies of heutagogy in Agonács and Matos' (2019) review adopted a pragmatist paradigm, which is the approach taken in this study.

Challenges of implementing heutagogy

Possible challenges around adopting a heutagogical approach mirror those common when implementing any creative and challenging approach; Barnett (2007) identified two risks that are relevant to this study. The first is

‘epistemological risk’, where students may follow their own interests at the expense of what they need to know and develop a ‘warped perspective or a skewed understanding of a field’ (Barnett, 2007, p. 143), which is a particular issue for vocational courses, where a certain level of skills and knowledge acquisition is expected. Unlike more traditional teacher-led systems, where learning is designed and assessed by teachers, a completely heutagogical approach supports learners to identify and develop suitable assessments themselves (Hase and Kenyon, 2013; Blaschke, 2019). Such negotiated assessments, as Moore (2020) points out, could pose challenges around curriculum approval and course accreditation. The second risk is a ‘practical risk’, where students may be insufficiently prepared to engage with the learning approach (Barnett, 2007). This was evident in Stoszkowski and McCarthy’s (2019a, 2019b) case study of heutagogical learning principles applied to final year undergraduate degree modules at two UK HE institutions. They argue such an approach might not be suitable for all students, particularly those lacking motivation and experience in self-determined learning, and propose the need to teach students to learn heutagogically. Others have noted that students often need to be encouraged and guided to become more active and independent learners (Msila and Setlhako, 2012) and to use digital technology (Cochrane and Narayan, 2014; Glassner and Back, 2020), which chimes with Blaschke and Hase’s (2021) claim that learning how to learn is a key component of a heutagogical approach.

Implementing a new approach such as heutagogy can also result in resistance from various stakeholders. Educators may find moving from a teacher-centric to a learner-centric approach requires a reappraisal of their roles and an expansion of their skillsets, particularly those involving information technology (Ashton and Newman, 2006). Developing learning environments which are more tailored to individual learners is likely to take time and effort, although Hase and Kenyon (2013) claim that benefits to students are worth the investment. Employers may prefer traditional courses with more familiar curricula and assessments. Students may resist taking on more responsibility for their own learning, particularly if

they are used to being passive learners in a highly directed environment, at least in the early stages of the course. Concerns about student satisfaction can negatively impact innovation in teaching and learning; as Halsall, Powell and Snowden (2016, p.8) point out, 'fear of poor NSS [National Student Survey] returns is often the driver behind curriculum delivery'.

Despite these concerns, the theory of heutagogy seems relevant in a fast-changing world where education increasingly incorporates knowledge sharing through online modalities, requiring more critical, more autonomous learners (Agonács and Matos, 2019). It therefore seems a suitable lens to use when considering mature women students as learners, which is the focus of the next section.

Women as heutagogical learners

Research grounded in the relatively new concept of heutagogy has tended to focus on distance online learning and often vocational courses (see, for example, Ashton and Elliott, 2007a, 2007b; Canning and Callan, 2010; McLoughlin and Lee, 2010; Hase, 2011; Msila and Setlhako, 2012; Hase and Kenyon, 2013; Abraham and Komattil, 2017; Lock *et al*, 2021). This also holds true when investigating the specific topic of women and heutagogy, although the number of studies is extremely small. For example, Bhoyrub *et al* (2010) argued heutagogy would be a suitable approach for training nurses (who are more likely to be women, although this was not specified) because of the focus on developing a level of competence and also the capability to adapt and deal with unknown situations in future practice (participants in the present study also need to balance competency with capability as future practitioners).

Four studies are of particular relevance and are summarised in Table 3 (p.64).

Study details	Methodological approach	Authors
Investigation of students and teaching staff on a fourth-year elective in Caring Studies at a Canadian University	**Qualitative** Exact details unclear: 'A critical exchange of thoughts between members of the learning community was elicited to foster metareflection and thus reflexivity.'	Maykut, Wild and May (2019)
Investigation of qualified oncology nurses and their engagement with heutagogy in a Canadian hospital	**Qualitative** Semi-structured interviews with nurses (n=13)	Cordon (2015)
Investigation of a teacher education programme using heutagogy at an Australian university	**Mixed methods** 2-part survey of students (n=67) to collect demographic data and information about participants' perceptions of flexible and blended approaches to learning and knowledge and use of ICT 2 focus groups (n=35) to enable students to elaborate on their questionnaire responses Surveys of teaching staff (n=8) and other stakeholders	Ashton and Newman (2006) Ashton and Elliott (2007a, 2007b)
Investigation of an Early Years foundation degree using heutagogy at 3 UK universities	**Qualitative** Phenomenological interviews with students (n=25) at 3 different timepoints over the 14-week first term of the course	Canning (2010) Canning and Callan (2010)

Table 3: Studies relating to women and heutagogy

Maykut, Wild and May (2019) reported that adopting a heutagogy-influenced course design in part of the latter stage of a Canadian nursing programme encouraged greater autonomy and self-efficacy beliefs (although participants were on the fourth year of their course, so arguably they would have been

developing in these aspects anyway). For her doctoral thesis, Cordon (2015) interviewed 13 female oncology nurses (who were already qualified rather than studying) to investigate their engagement in heutagogy as part of lifelong learning and continuous professional development. She found lack of time was an important constraint, but a heutagogical approach seemed to enable them to solve problems they had not encountered before, therefore indicating it did develop their 'capability' as predicted by Blaschke and Hase (2016).

I now investigate in more detail literature from two programmes of study which have some similar characteristics to my own research. The first explored the introduction of a new heutagogical programme into an early childhood teacher education programme for the cohort of the year 2005 (98% women and 40% aged 25+) in the University of Western Sydney, Australia, and produced various papers, three of which are particularly relevant to the current research (Ashton and Newman, 2006; Ashton and Elliott, 2007a, 2007b).

Questionnaires completed by 61% (n=67) of 110 enrolled students and focus groups with a sub-sample (n=35) indicated that many participants had caring responsibilities, and almost all also worked in paid employment. All had already gained the Diploma of Children's Services (or equivalent) which gave them two years' academic credit toward their bachelor's degree. Despite these commonalities, their backgrounds varied hugely in cultural, religious, socio-political and socioeconomic aspects. Key themes were identified (Ashton and Elliott, 2007a) which included:

- The place of family/culture in students' lives;
- Financial demands and employment;
- Issues of distance and travel;
- Students' preparedness for university study;
- Concerns regarding infrastructure and resources at the university.

Mixed levels of familial support were noted, as well as issues around digital access and skills. Their findings were similar to other research about women students explored earlier; these aspects are explored in the current study through targeted questions in the questionnaires and the interviews.

In another paper, Ashton and Newman (2006, p.836) described the modification of the university programme to use 'flexible and blended heutagogy' to better meet the cohort's needs. The third paper (Ashton and Elliott, 2007b), which is the one most often cited, presented participants' evaluations of the new programme. Findings from the students included high levels of commitment to the course, despite their multifaceted lives; a preference for some face-to-face contact, despite often having to travel long distances; concerns about meeting academic standards (their previous diploma experience notwithstanding); and a lower level of internet experience than expected. Teaching staff (n=8) and other relevant stakeholders were also surveyed and findings included: a wide range of ability and experience of using IT indicating a need for support; the challenge of change, especially with regards to handing more control over to students; and an anxiety about their abilities to provide flexible and blended learning.

Overall, perceptions of the new programme were mixed. The flexibility of e-learning was valued as well as the social learning that happened more easily face-to-face, but despite being highly motivated, some participants had difficulty reaching the required academic standards. While these findings are of interest, the focus of the study is a course designed as explicitly heutagogical in approach, which was different to the NCT course which made no claims to be heutagogical but had elements overlapping with heutagogy (from my own observations as a tutor on the course). The sample was larger and much more varied demographically than my sample; students in the Greater Western Sydney area (the university's location) were often the first in their family attending tertiary education, and there were high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. The majority were not mature students, and although many reported having some

caring responsibilities for family members, many did not seem to be mothers. The focus group data added some additional depth to data from the questionnaires but did not provide rich personal insights into women engaging in heutagogical learning that in-depth individual interviews might have. Finally, the research was carried out over 15 years ago, so is possibly losing its applicability to current students.

The second programme of study relevant to my study was qualitative research carried out with mature full-time students on a blended learning foundation degree in Early Years in three UK HEIs (Canning, 2010; Canning and Callan, 2010). Phenomenological interviews were undertaken with 25 students (of a cohort of 50) at three different timepoints over the first term of the course to explore participants' subjective experiences of their learning journeys. Rather than the course design being completely overhauled as in the previous Australian study, students were supported to develop new ways of learning and take responsibility for directing their own learning through various strategies including:

- online forums for module-specific discussion;
- online forums for social networking;
- setting visits where tutors discussed students' progress in linking knowledge to practice;
- face-to-face group activities of work-based reflection where students were able to share their professional development, with examples of linking what they had learnt to the changes they were making in their practice (Canning, 2010).

Developing reflective skills and becoming independent critical thinkers were important aspects of the course. Tutors reportedly moved from a familiar didactic approach at the beginning towards a more facilitative approach as the course progressed (Figure 3, p.68).

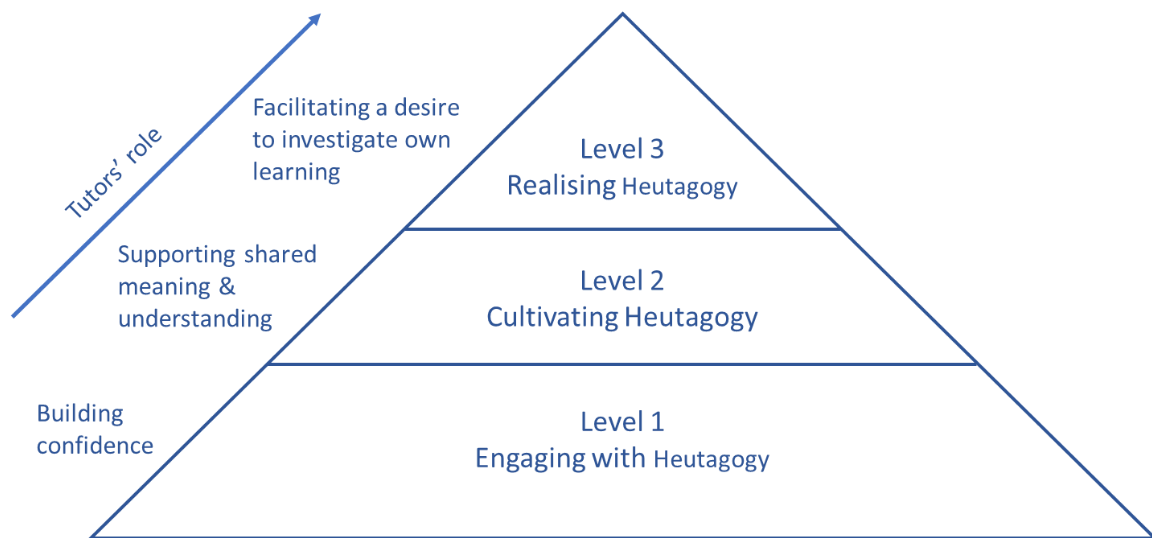


Figure 3: From pedagogy to heutagogy (Canning, 2010, p.63)

Canning (2010) Playing with heutagogy: exploring strategies to empower mature learners in higher education. Journal of Further and Higher Education, 34 (1), pp. 59-71, copyright © 2010 UCU, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, ttp://www.tandfonline.com on behalf of 2010 UCU.

Participants shared anxieties about academic capability and levels of support, as well as reporting a willingness to listen and learn. As they progressed through the course, they reported increased understanding of themselves as learners through the use of portfolio-based reflection.

The course is claimed to have taken on a heutagogical philosophy, so that it was underpinned by a focus on building capacity (Canning, 2010) with a stated intention to promote knowledge sharing instead of knowledge hoarding (Wenger, 2002), which sounded positive. Some quotes are included as evidence from the three stages of interviews, but it is unclear from these how many participants did actually move through to being fully self-determined learners over a relatively short fourteen weeks. Were they perhaps more versed in what was expected of them as more independent learners, and therefore knew what they should say about their own learning? A mixed methods approach might have provided a better understanding of the likely range of experiences. Although they were mature students (and presumably mostly or all women as is common on an Early Years degree) there was no consideration of how participants' lives outside university interacted with their studying.

In their roles as course tutors on the programme, Canning and Callan (2010) considered the reflection participants had engaged in as part of the original research. Their aims included asking questions about balancing the needs of all stakeholders (students, academic staff, HEIs and future workforce requirements) and how their answers might translate to other students as part of widening participation. In considering such questions, they reported how they encouraged tutors and students to engage in more critical and reflective thinking to explore students' attitudes and values as part of an increasing focus on heutagogy. Again, this support for a more self-aware and conscious criticality sounded positive but very little supporting evidence was cited.

A consideration of the methodological approaches of these latter two studies contributed to a realisation that sequential mixed methods with a qualitative focus (Hesse-Biber, 2010) was the preferred direction for the current study, in order to carry out a comprehensive investigation of the experiences of mature women students as learners on the NCT foundation degree.

Chapter summary

This chapter has explored the literature to identify issues and gaps related to the focus of my study; namely, mature women students (mostly with dependent children) studying on a vocational foundation degree. Findings from these studies were synthesised to draw together a picture of what is currently known about learning experiences of participants similar to the ones in this study, and the specific circumstances and resulting challenges they can face.

First, two research questions for this review were identified, as well as the approach used to answer them. Then the controversy about how to identify students who do not fit into the notion of 'traditional' was discussed. Next, I explored the research undertaken with various groups of students with characteristics overlapping to some extent with participants in the present study. A range of challenges is often faced by these groups of students, in particular

because of who they are, the stage of life they are in and the range of roles and responsibilities they have to manage, as well as the particular course they are studying on. A key issue is the challenge of trying to 'construct student selves within social and institutional structures that do not always support these self-reconstructions' (Deutsch and Schmertz, 2011), because their complex lives are often not taken into account. They often have a more extensive lifeload (Kahu, 2013) than other more typical students. Despite this, mature women students can also bring many strengths and skills including motivation, strategic approaches to learning and life experiences to draw on. There can be a mismatch between what such students have to offer and what is conventionally valued by universities, however, because, as O'Shea (2016, p.48) argues: 'students do not necessarily arrive at university bereft of the necessary capitals to enact success but rather the capitals they describe are not necessarily those traditionally celebrated.'

Managing an extensive lifeload is not the only site of difference between mature women students and other students explored in the literature, however. Various studies have investigated disparities between adult learners and younger learners, and between women and men as learners, particularly using the common model of 'approaches to learning'. While it is unlikely there are significant innate differences between male and female learners, enacting gender roles within a patriarchal society can affect mature women students, particularly mothers, and their engagement with learning. Somewhat surprisingly, very few studies have explicitly used a feminist lens to explore mature women students, so this was the route taken in this current study (see Chapter 3, p.78).

Different models of learning were presented which were identified as lacking relevance in the 21st century digital age. The theory of heutagogy was presented as an alternative having currency for exploring the learning of mature women learners. Studies into this evolving theory have highlighted some of its benefits

and challenges as an approach to learning, but very few have investigated heutagogy in relation to mature women students with complex lives.

The shape of the literature taking mature women as an explicit focus, especially those with dependent children, is summarised in Table 4 (below).

Literature A: Participants' characteristics	Literature B: Participants' roles	Literature C: Course characteristics	D: Mature students as learners	E: Heutagogy
Some studies consider students who are mature and women	Some studies consider students who are mothers, but not all are mature	Few studies on women on blended delivery foundation degrees	Many studies consider adult learners; fewer explore women learners	Small but growing number of studies on adult learners and heutagogy
Few studies consider all relevant aspects of A, B and C			Very few studies consider mature women learners in relation to other relevant aspects	Hardly any studies consider intersection between mature women and heutagogy

Table 4: Summary of the current shape of relevant literature

There is therefore a research gap which my study aims to move closer to filling by focusing on the lived experiences of mature women students in depth, as these are inextricably interwoven with their attitudes and approaches to learning (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2008). This chapter has shown there is still much more to be made visible to feed into designing and providing courses that meet the needs of this particular group of students more effectively. Because of the lack of studies in this area, the present study aims to develop greater understanding of how mature women students engage in heutagogy. Four research questions were developed that emerged from critical engagement with the literature:

1. How do mature women returners to study on a vocational foundational degree engage in self-determined learning, also known as heutagogy?
2. What facilitates and what impedes this engagement?
3. How do participants' attitudes and approaches to learning develop and what are the potential implications for their future practice after they qualify?
4. What effect do participants' lives and relationships have on how they study and become self-determined learners?

The next chapter sets out the conceptual framework for the current study.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

Introduction

This chapter presents the framework that underpins the study. Explicit employment of a framework as a conceptual lens (Jabareen, 2009) gives direction to the different elements of this research, tying them together and increasing credibility, and also increases the likelihood of being able to apply results to practice (Evans, Coon and Ume, 2011), which is congruent with my research aims. A conceptual framework is a scaffold of connected core concepts which lays out 'key factors, constructs, or variables, and presumes relationships among them' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.16). It helps to explain the issue under investigation by identifying patterns in the data (Creswell, 2007; Bracken, 2010). Definitions of theoretical and conceptual frameworks vary, so I am using the idea of a conceptual framework as the argument or rationale for the study (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017; Marshall and Rossman, 2021), and one which draws on three sources (Crawford, 2020): (1) personal and professional experience, (2) literature and (3) theory integrated into a theoretical framework (see Figure 4, below).

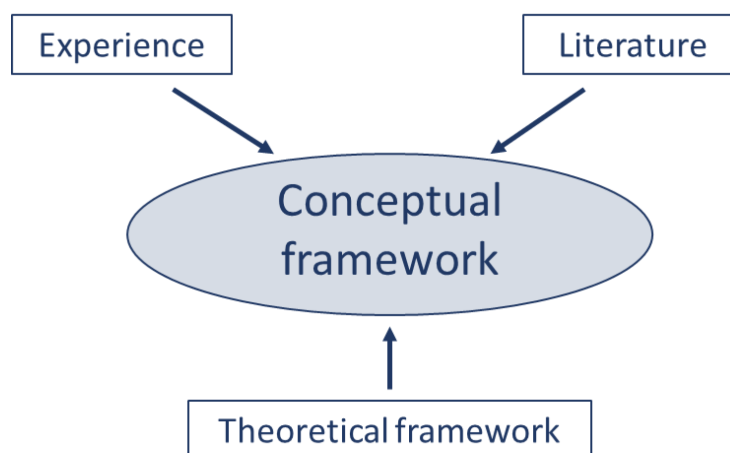


Figure 4: Sources for conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study

The impetus for undertaking this research has its roots in my own experiences as a student (undertaking my first degree straight after school, then returning to study as a mature student and mother) and as a tutor on the NCT Birth and Beyond Foundation Degree course. This set of experiences suggested to me that mature women students, especially mothers, may approach learning in particular ways. The review of the literature in the previous chapter offered a synthesis of current understandings of students similar to the participants in this study, and highlighted gaps in awareness. Heutagogy (Hase and Kenyon, 2013; Blaschke and Hase, 2016), which combines elements of motivation, self-efficacy and self-regulated learning, metacognition, reflective practice, double-loop and nonlinear learning, and communities of learning and practice, was identified as a potentially relevant theory when exploring mature women students as learners, particularly women who were mainly middle class with its attendant cultural capital (Bourdieu, in Gunn, 2005), and had previous HE experience; it was therefore chosen as part of my theoretical framework. In addition, I chose to use a lens of feminism, and specifically matricentric feminism (Bueskens, 2020; O'Reilly, 2021) which focuses on mothers, because it became clear as the research progressed that mothering and motherhood were fundamental aspects of the participants' experiences of learning. The different elements of the conceptual framework are depicted in the diagram below (Figure 5, p.75) and are discussed further in the next section.

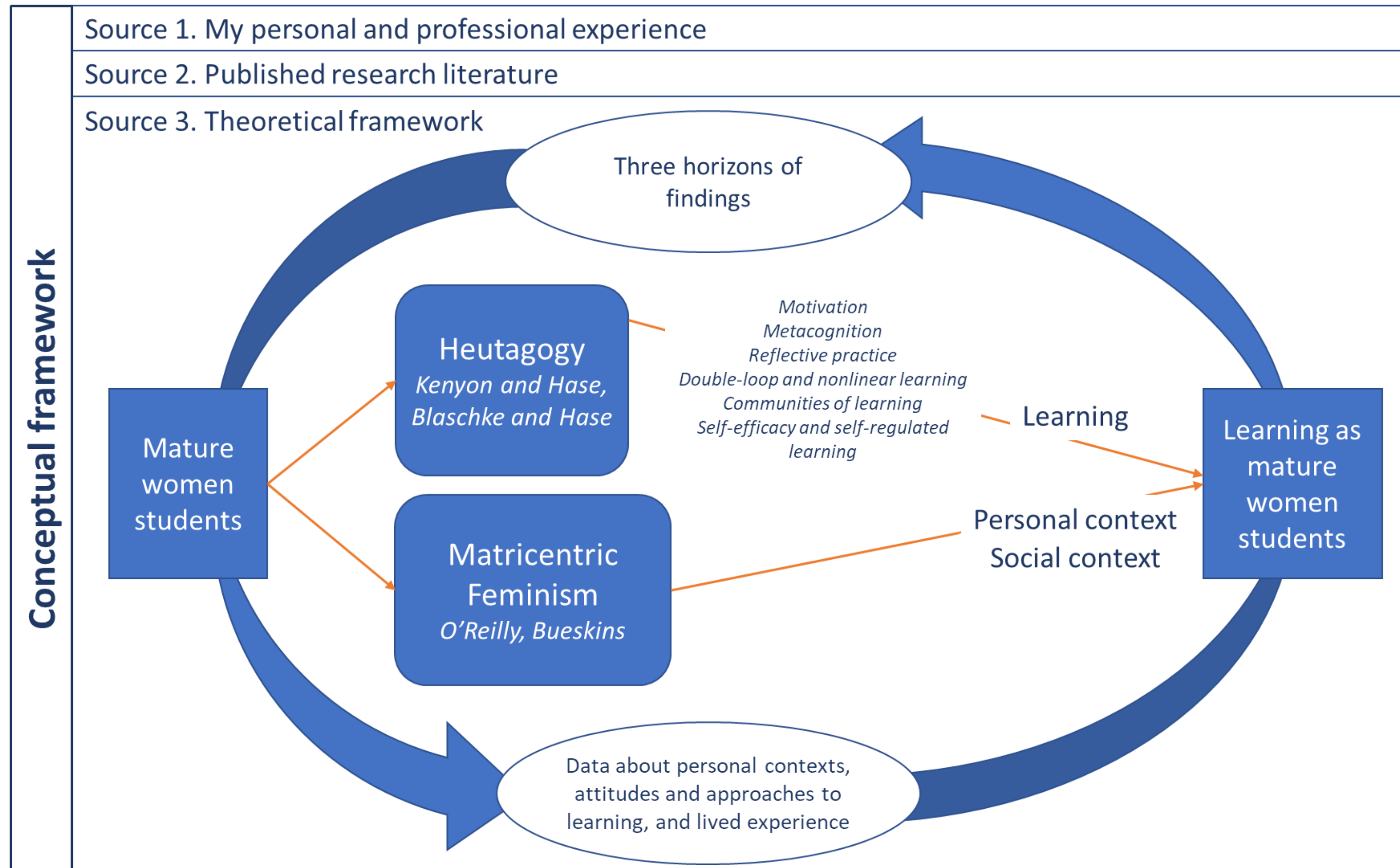


Figure 5: The conceptual framework for this study

Heutagogy

Heutagogy has already been explored in the previous chapter (p.56), so in this section I intend to identify the benefits but also potential shortcomings of using it as a lens for the research. Other theories of adult learning could have been adopted, such as self-directed learning where learners take the initiative for identifying their learning needs and formulating ways to meet them (see, for example, Tao *et al*, 2015). However, heutagogy fits better for this study as it is particularly relevant for courses with distance elements, partly because of 'the ways in which heutagogy further extends the andragogic approach and also due to the affordances it offers when applied to emerging technologies' (Blaschke, 2012, p.57).

Heutagogy is particularly suitable for exploring vocational education (Stoten, 2020), as it focuses on the development of an individual's competency and also her capacity to apply it to novel situations in practice, and to carry on evaluating that competency, filling in gaps as appropriate (Ashton and Newman, 2006; Blaschke, 2012). Bhoyrub *et al* (2010) highlight the applicability of heutagogy to nurse education because it helps practitioners deal with unpredictable practice-based environments; birth educators too have to deal with changing circumstances. Birth policy changes nationally and locally; new evidence is continuously produced on best practice for baby care; each new group of parents has specific circumstances and needs to be catered for. For example, NCT practitioners had to adapt quickly to the major unforeseen change in practice brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic-induced move to facilitating groups of new parents online, instead of face-to-face.

Theories underpinning heutagogy fit with NCT's organisational values and approaches to education, as well as to my pragmatic worldview. Humanism as proposed by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers (McLeod, 2015) is a keystone of NCT practice, particularly that related to breastfeeding counselling (Morgan and

Wierenga, 2018). Like heutagogy which is ‘concerned with learner-centred learning that sees the learner as the major agent in their own learning, which occurs as a result of personal experiences’ (Hase and Kenyon, 2001, p.112), NCT’s educational approach is based in constructivism which centres learners’ creation of their own understanding and meaning based on their experiences and beliefs, rather than being passive recipients of knowledge. There is a strong emphasis on facilitating learning instead of a knowledge transfer model.

Issues around using heutagogy as part of the theoretical framework should be noted, however. It is still seen as an emergent approach to learning with a lack of empirical evidence about how it is applied in practice (Agonács and Matos, 2019; Moore, 2020). There remains a lack of consensus on exactly what the key elements of heutagogy are, how they can be differentiated from pedagogy and andragogy. Moore (2020) recommends that this consensus is needed in order to develop and validate a heutagogy instrument, which could be used to provide empirical support (Moore, 2020, p.396). The lack of such a validated instrument limits the use of quantitative data and analysis and is part of the reason for adopting a qualitatively focussed mixed methods approach in the current study, which focuses on participants’ lived experiences. Further quantitatively focussed study is recommended once a suitable instrument is available.

Heutagogy supports learners taking responsibility for identifying gaps in their knowledge, skills and understanding but the implementation of a fully heutagogical approach might be problematic within the constraints of current HE quality procedures and processes, particularly for vocational courses where there is a requirement to meet standards for practice, and where familiar traditional assessments are more likely to be accepted for accreditation (Moore, 2020). This is returned to in the Recommendations section in Chapter 9 (p.337).

The NCT course did not have a specified heutagogical approach but, as well as sharing similar theoretical underpinnings, course modules included reflective

practice and an exploration of learning theories. Additionally, students were encouraged to study by themselves, and with others as part of a community of learning and practice. Heutagogy therefore seemed suitable for inclusion in this study's theoretical framework, despite its shortcomings, especially since there is little research on mature women students or mature student mothers and heutagogy; what there is has tended to focus on distance learning and particularly online learning (Ashton and Elliott, 2007a, 2007b; McLoughlin and Lee, 2010; Hase and Kenyon, 2013).

Feminist phenomenology

The current research explores the phenomenon of the experiences of women returning to study while inhabiting and performing their social roles as women and usually mothers. My engagement with the literature highlighted how mature women students' experiences are intrinsically linked to their social position in terms of their age and their gender, and also their roles as caregivers and mothers. Daly (2002) described caregiving as one of the original feminist concepts and it has become an important aspect of feminist analysis over the last decades (Alsop, Gonzalez-Amal and Kilkey, 2008). While a very few studies have taken a feminist epistemological stance (see, for example, Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2008; Deutsch and Schmerz, 2011), many have not explicitly explored the implications of socially constructed gender roles and the power structures shaping the lives of mature women students. Ideas of invisibility and obscurity emerged from the literature review, which have been identified as important feminist issues, particularly in the field of education (De Lauretis, 1990; Tamboukou, 2000; Vendramin, 2012). I therefore decided to employ a feminist phenomenology for my study to give voice to a group of women that has been marginalised (Levin, 2007).

In addition, participants in this research were all studying to become birth educators; birth and parenthood are topics very much related to sex and gender

roles. My overarching aim is to contribute to better provision and support for mature women students, and I am a woman researcher. This study therefore fits with the requirements of feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2014), because it centres the experiences of women learners and highlights how being part of a patriarchal society affects them, with the ultimate aim of improving practice to help them reach their full potential. A key element of feminist research explicates the power relations between researcher and participant (Letherby, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2014); this is explored later in the section on ethical considerations (p.90.). Phenomenology is an ideal approach when a research problem requires a deep understanding of a human experience shared by a particular group of people (Creswell, 2014). I therefore decided to invoke a phenomenology that was specifically feminist as the philosophical basis (Baird and Mitchell, 2014) for my study. In the next section, I explore different forms of feminism to identify which one fits best with the present study.

Which feminism?

The first challenge in identifying exactly what type of feminist I am, and which feminism aligns with the proposed research, is the plurality of different views and approaches coming under the umbrella of feminism (David, 2016). The famous quote from author Rebecca West (1913, no page), 'I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is; I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat' no doubt still holds true today for many. Hesse-Biber (2014, p.3) states research is considered feminist when it is 'grounded in the set of theoretical traditions that privilege women's issues, voices, and lived experiences'. Feminist research values the individual participant's views on their experiences and the context for these (Kralik, van Loon, and Watson, 2008, quoted in Mollard, 2015). Some authors have suggested specific guidelines (Cook and Fonow, 1986) or ideals (Bloom and Sawin, 2009) for utilising a feminist methodology, while others have argued for a

less rigid approach, depending instead on a stance underpinned by ethicality, a responsibility to research participants and the ensuring of a safe space for them to have their voices heard (Rizvi, 2019). This latter approach appealed to me more, perhaps because it mirrors the person-centred approach that is part of the NCT ethos (Newburn, 2014). It is easy to agree with Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002, p.16) who argue that feminist methodology can encompass a range of philosophical positions and a variety of methods, so the main feature which differentiates feminist methodology is 'the extent to which it is shaped by feminist theory, politics and ethics and grounded in women's experience'.

Of course, women should not be treated as a homogenous class with universal experiences but rather as multiple and various (McLaughlin, 2003). One criticism made of feminism - particularly the form known as second wave or feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983; Rose, 1983) - is the privileging of voices and experiences of white, middle class, heterosexual Western women while ignoring the multiple levels of oppression faced by women outside this specific group (Mann and Huffman, 2005). However, it has been argued feminist standpoint theory does not in fact claim all women share identical experiences – because the intersections of race, religion and class are also sites of difference - but they do share the experience of being assigned a kind of otherness by men, no matter what their culture (Rayaprol, 2016). Crenshaw (1989) coined the term 'intersectionality' in her work on black women and employment in America which has been embraced by third wave and post-structuralist feminists as well as critical race theorists, although it can be argued it was understood as a concept previously (for example, by Nawal El Saadawi, according to Naber and Saliba, 2021). Davis (2005, p68) described how the term intersectionality was beginning to become a buzzword over a decade ago:

> Learning the ropes of feminist scholarship means attending to multiple identities and experiences of subordination. Feminist

> journals are likely to reject articles that have not given sufficient attention to 'race', class, and heteronormativity, along with gender. At this particular juncture in gender studies, any scholar who neglects difference runs the risk of having her work viewed as theoretically misguided, politically irrelevant, or simply fantastical.

Despite these reasons for addressing intersectional considerations, it can be argued it is not clear exactly what intersectionality *is* in terms of its relation to research: a tool for exploring the experiences of individuals, a theory of identity, a way of illuminating the way society is structured or something else entirely (Davis, 2005). While intersectionality raises consciousness around the multiplicity of lived experiences of women, and gives voice to previously marginalised and ignored subjects, it continues to retain a 'methodological murkiness' (Nash, 2008, p.6). Critical race theorists, however, claim intersectionality is not a research tool, but an approach to ontology and epistemology that helps to unmask ideological positions and oppression (Gillborn, 2007; hooks, 2000). I wonder if an understanding that different women in different situations face different oppressions is perhaps a threshold concept (Meyer and Land, 2005), a shift in perspective that, once fully understood, is unlikely to be forgotten.

While this is an ongoing debate, from my position as a white heterosexual middle class woman, I have kept returning to the necessity of maintaining an open, reflexive attitude that did not make assumptions about the research participants, as well as a commitment to learning about the contexts of their lives, to hear all their voices, and to try to make explicit my own perspectives and biases regarding race and class. This is not an easy task: as Eddo-Lodge (2018) points out, those who benefit from white privilege, for example, rarely notice the favourable effects it has had on them. Similarly, I had not fully anticipated how my socio-economic class might be understood and how this might affect the interviewees. NCT is

often perceived (probably unfairly) as an organisation run primarily for and by middle class women and while change is happening to increase diversity (NCT, 2021), many tutors are still seen as 'quite middle class, quite articulate, quite forthright' as one interviewee, Cora, related in her first interview. Participants were not asked specifically about their socioeconomic status as it is particularly difficult to define for women, especially mothers of young children who have taken a career break, as three key measures commonly used are income, occupation and education (Cerutti, 2018). Alternative measures of being middle class include culture and aspiration (Reeves, Guyot and Krause, 2018) and the interviewees seemed to fit in these respects with the typical NCT profile of white and middle class; however, I did not know for sure.

Matricentric feminism

Although it is important not to be limited by specific categories of feminist, as Tong (1995) points out in her seminal work on this topic, engaging with the literature on such concepts and theories in feminism, as well as current debates around sex, gender and the very definition of what a woman is helped me to identify (somewhat to my surprise) that the type of feminist I have most affinity with is a gender-critical radical feminist (Jeffreys, 2014; Mackay, 2014; Bindel, 2021). Gender-critical feminism distinguishes between biological sex, which is constant, from notions of gender which change over time and can limit the way people are free to engage in society. According to Mackay (2015, p. 119), radical feminism is based on four key tenets: 'the acknowledgement and analysis of patriarchy, the prioritisation of women-only political organising, a focus on male violence against women as a keystone of women's oppression, and fourthly, the extension of the analysis of male violence against women to include the industries of pornography and prostitution'. While this was congruent with my own personal approach, I found as I progressed through my studies that a specifically matricentric feminism (O'Reilly, 2021) was more useful for the

research, as nearly all participants were mothers, which seemed to be a key aspect of their experiences. Matricentric feminism contends mothers and mothering are worthy of serious, sustained enquiry; that mothering is important, valuable work which is learnt not instinctive; and aims to explore the diversity of maternal experience across intersections of race, socioeconomic status, age, geography and so on (Bueskins and Brock, 2020; O'Reilly, 2021). Motherhood has become a less visible aspect of academic feminism in the 21st century (Jeremiah, 2006; O'Reilly, 2021), partly because of a growing focus on abstract theory (Merrill, 2005), but also because of a move away from maternalism, where women in affluent democratic countries are no longer expected to stay at home to care for children but to prioritise paid work which is seen as a route to women's equality (Orloff, 2006). As Stephens (2012, p.2) claims, 'the maternal and the values associated with maternal forms of care have been largely rejected in the public sphere and marginalized or conflicted in the private domain.' My research aims to honour participants' stories, making their experiences more visible in order to improve practice for future student mothers.

It is important to note that taking an explicit feminist position for research can be seen as less acceptable as proper scholarship than other approaches. For example, in her study of the epistemic status of feminist studies in Portuguese academia, Pereira (2017) demonstrates that feminist scholarship is only partially accepted as appropriate or relevant in certain limited situations, tending to be recognised but almost immediately dismissed in favour of more mainstream approaches to developing academic knowledge. One notable exception to this is Ann Oakley and her studies on motherhood in the 1970s and her influential contributions to the development of feminist research, including such topics as interviewing women (Oakley, 1979; Oakley, 1981; Oakley, 2015). Adopting a feminist lens therefore requires an even more robust defence than usual of all the decisions I have made and the actions I have taken as a researcher.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have put forward a conceptual framework for the study, summarised on page 75. This incorporates a theoretical framework combining the lenses of heutagogy and matricentric feminism, which supports a thorough exploration of interactions between the expectations and performances of being a student and being a mother in a patriarchal society and in an academia which has historically privileged white middle-class men (Wagner, 2019). This study explores the phenomenon of mature women students, particularly mothers, with an explicit focus on their learning, using the lenses of heutagogy and matricentric feminism.

The next chapter sets out the approaches chosen to investigate the learning experiences of mature women students on the NCT Birth and Beyond foundation degree to answer the research questions identified in Chapter 2 (p. 69), as well as my own philosophy and positioning in relation to the research.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter sets out the approaches chosen to address the research questions of this study and outlines the methodology. Providing a comprehensive and transparent account of choices made in designing the study and a justification for the decisions made throughout (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007) helps to enhance reliability (King and Horrocks, 2010). I locate the methodology and methods within my philosophical perspective and discuss ethical matters, particularly in relation to being an insider researcher. Next, I include a rationale for employing mixed methods before setting out the research design and the approaches to data collection and analysis. I include a consideration of trustworthiness, and my reflexivity as an ethical researcher. Finally, the strategy for combining and presenting findings from the quantitative and qualitative data is explained. I am writing in the first person using the 'reflective I' (Elliott, Kadi-Hanifi and Solvason, 2018, p.57), as this chapter draws on my critical reflection on relevant literature and my own experiences.

Research philosophy and methodology

The concepts underpinning a sound methodology are fundamental to effective research design, although there is much debate on how these concepts should be delineated (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2014). The four elements of research advocated by Crotty (1998) were helpful in formulating my approach towards this research (Figure 6, p.86) and they are addressed below.

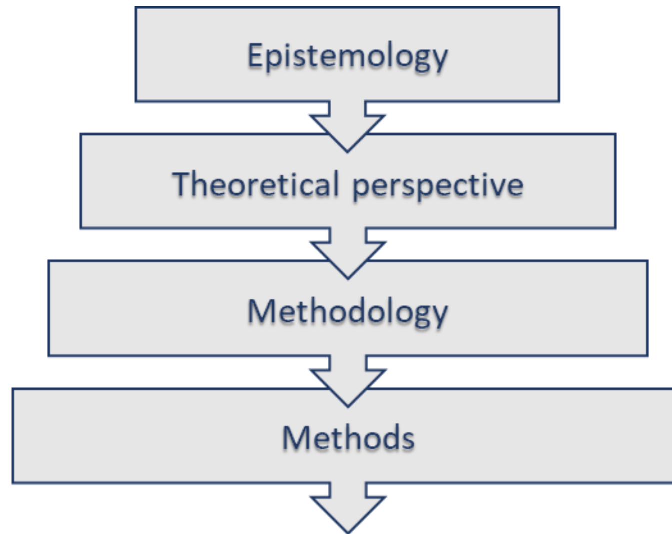


Figure 6: Relationship between research elements (Crotty, 1998, p4)

Epistemology

A researcher's methodology is, according to Crotty (1998, p3), 'the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods' (the latter being the tools and techniques used to actually gather and analyse data). He emphasises the importance of establishing a philosophical stance or theoretical perspective, which is in turn based on a theory of knowledge. Unlike many philosophers, Crotty combines ontology ('what is reality') with epistemology ('how we know reality'): he argues the two concepts are intertwined and the world only becomes meaningful when 'meaning-making beings make sense of it' (Crotty, 1998, p.10). This approach to ontology and epistemology could be argued to be consistent with a constructionist or interpretive epistemology, which both posit the truth is not out there to be discovered, but only happens at the intersection of a phenomenon and human minds seeking to make sense of that phenomenon. Schwandt (1998, p221) defines both constructionism and interpretivism as members of the same family, aiming to understand the world of lived experience from the perspective of those who experience it.

Reflecting on my own education, I recognise various changes in my views around epistemology and ontology, rather like Kuhn's 'paradigm shifts' (Kuhn, 1962) that called into question the conventional wisdom of rationalism's superiority in science, and highlighted the importance of including an element of humanism. Although there is some debate on what a paradigm actually is, and Kuhn himself used the term in several different ways (over twenty according to Masterman, 1970, cited in Morgan, 2007), I use it here in the sense of an accepted model or pattern for a researcher's fundamental beliefs about creating knowledge (Kuhn, 1962). During my school years, I realise I was comfortable with a positivist approach: it seemed obvious there was a need for objectivity to acquire scientific knowledge that was certain and clear. As an undergraduate, I embraced Karl Popper's principle of falsification (Thornton, 2021): the idea scientists should aim to develop theories in such a way they could be proved wrong, and that truth could only ever be accepted as provisional seemed powerful, subversive stuff. In later years, I moved even further from the scientific method and logical positivism and shifted my focus to exploring a multitude of views on what truth and reality are in relation to the real world, although as Pring argues (2015), there is still value in making tentative generalisations and positing causal explanations in educational research, so I did not want to jettison this approach entirely.

This research aims to understand the different ways students engage with learning within the context of their actual lives, co-constructing meaning around their experiences as learners, so it seems my epistemology has elements of the social constructionism described by Crotty (1998, p.42) as:

> … the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.

Charmaz's view about the importance of highlighting the one's subjectivity as a researcher and the need to 'stress social contexts, interaction, sharing viewpoints, and interpretive understandings' (Charmaz, 2014, p.14) also resonated with me and led me to explore the ideas of phenomenology and hermeneutics, as developed by Husserl (1982) and Heidegger (1927/1962). Both emphasise the consideration of human experiences within the context of the time, place and environment and, in particular, Gadamer's (1975/2013) notion of developing shared understanding through a 'fusion of horizons', where a horizon is everything that can be thought about by a person in a particular context (Vessey, 2009). As the current study explores the experiences of mature women students as learners, it can be described as phenomenological.

My theoretical perspective or worldview: pragmatism

My main motivation for conducting this research concerns how to find better ways of supporting students in their learning. It is logically grounded in a paradigm or worldview of pragmatism with a focus on usefulness (Creswell, 2014; Rorty, 1991) and enacting change in the world by deepening understanding of a situation and providing new ways of moving forward in practice (Pring, 2015). The philosophy of pragmatism tends to avoid engagement with ontology or metaphysics, instead building on the premise that our knowledge of an external physical reality is less important than the experiences people have and the consequences for human life, not least because our representation of the truth about that external reality can only ever be partial (Dewey, 1925; Ormerod, 2006; DeForge and Shaw, 2011). According to Mertens (2015, p37), in a pragmatic approach 'there is no problem with asserting both that there is a single 'real world' and that all individuals have their own unique interpretations of that world'. This appealed to me because it retains some elements of a post-positivist approach – such as that knowledge is shaped by evidence and rational considerations – but acknowledges the social, political, historical, and other

contexts all research occurs in (Creswell, 2014), and the value of understanding human behaviour (Bryman, 2016). Indeed, within a pragmatic worldview, current truths are seen as provisional, open to revision as more knowledge becomes known and understood (Robson, 2011; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Furthermore, pragmatism generates knowledge to help us to engage with an ever-changing world (Dewey, 1910, cited in Hammond, 2013), which seems particularly pertinent following the Covid-19 pandemic.

One criticism of pragmatism is that adopting a pragmatic approach without criticality could potentially be used to justify any and all methodological decisions (DeForge and Shaw, 2012). Research based on pragmatism must have rigour, therefore, and is judged in the end by the extent to which it effectively answers research questions (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Other criticisms particularly of the pragmatism I am drawn to, which is built on Dewey's notions (see Maddux and Donnett, 2015), include a lack of engagement with sociological explanations and an over-focus on individual agency, rather than taking into account the political aspects of society (Ormerod, 2006). Taking a feminist approach is one way of countering this criticism, because it allows an exploration of the individual and her experiences within the context of the wider structures of society and culture (Eden, 2017). Additionally, incorporating a feminist approach can offer a moral perspective, which may be weak or missing altogether in some pragmatic approaches (Gilmore, no date; DeForge and Shaw, 2012).

Very little recent research has been undertaken where feminism is combined with an overtly stated paradigm of pragmatism (post-structuralism or post-Marxism are much more usual partners for contemporary feminist research), although notable previously forgotten perspectives from the 20th Century are starting to be recovered (Whipps and Lake, 2017), and Mollard (2015) has argued for using a feminist paradigm to guide future research into postpartum depression. As Mottier (2004) argues, there are good reasons to work with a

feminist pragmatism. For example, both pragmatism and feminist theory focus on making positive changes rather than merely the development of abstract theory; both approaches are based on research participants' grounded experience; and both evaluate theory in relation to marginalised groups. Both Mottier (2004) and Rumens and Keleman (2010) suggest the early model of pragmatism associated with John Dewey has more potential for converging with feminist thought than the later neo-pragmatism developed by Richard Rorty (1991). I found this preference for Dewey interesting, given my experiences as a tutor on a module on reflective practice, where Dewey is seen as having made a unique contribution to modern understanding of the reflective process and its link to learning (Smith, 1999). It is of course important to maintain a critical perspective even (or perhaps especially) when dealing with familiar authors: reflexivity, as always, is vital.

The next section explores relevant ethical issues.

Ethical considerations

It can be reasoned that, just as research is methodologically underpinned by a worldview, a researcher's ethical practice is based on her way of being and interacting with the world. As Flinders (1992, p113, quoted in Stutchbury and Fox, 2009) argues, the basis of ethical decisions should be 'a caring attitude towards others' and actions (even those with positive outcomes) should be carried out in ways promoting honesty and justice, or *deontological ethics* (Alexander and Moore, 2021). Frameworks and the application of ethical codes such as those produced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the university guidelines (University of Worcester, 2018) provide a systematic way of ensuring ethical aspects of research are considered and managed. Ethics in social research is often focussed around four main areas: potential harm to participants, voluntary informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception (Diener and Crandall, 1978, cited in Bryman, 2016). These were all addressed as part of the

successful application for ethical approval from the university Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (the application form and ethical approval for this study are in Appendix B, p. 400, along with the data management plan).

All prospective participants were given written information about the research, indicating their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time. This was only the start of the process, however (particularly because of my status as a tutor in NCT College which is explored further in the section on insider research below). Tangen proposes there are three domains of research ethics which make up the 'complex ethical landscape' of educational research (Tangen 2014, p. 683). He argues educational researchers need to maintain awareness not only of ethical aspects internal to their research, such as those mentioned above, but also the wider implications for practice and policymaking. Ethical dilemmas can often arise when trying to balance protecting participants and developing new knowledge based on data of good quality (Tangen, 2014). The tension between Tangen's three areas is shown in Figure 7, below.

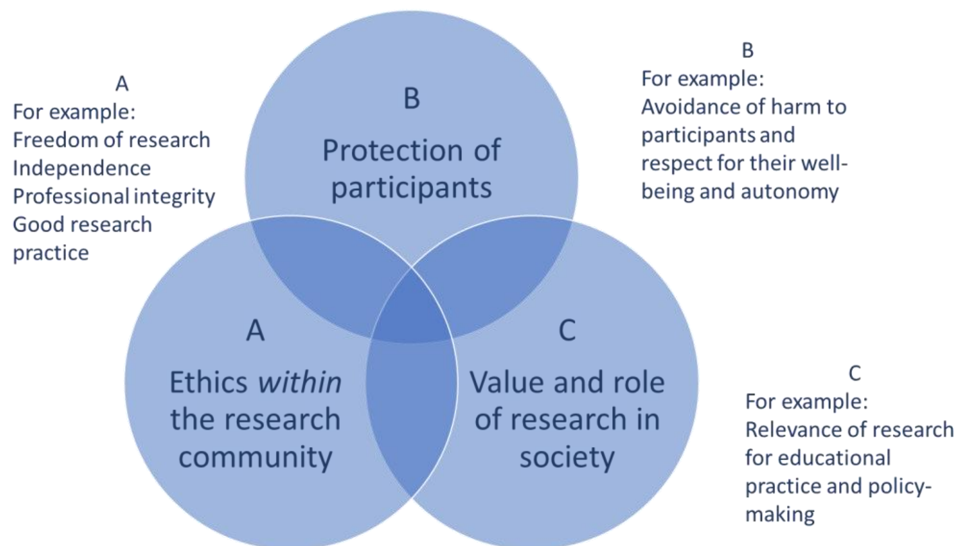


Figure 7: Three domains of research ethics (adapted from Tangen, 2014, p.680)

Through my reading, I discovered I felt most comfortable with the idea of ethics as a way of *being* as a researcher, rather than merely a set of rules to be applied; tending more to virtue ethics rather than an approach based just on principles, especially as ethical issues tend to arise in unforeseen and often complicated situations (Morris and Morris, 2016). Being a virtuous researcher takes practice and commitment to cultivate the required characteristics of 'courage, resoluteness, respectfulness, sincerity, humility and reflexivity' (Macfarlane, 2009, cited in Rawdin, 2018, p.7). I was able to draw on previous experience working as an antenatal practitioner with parents and subsequently with students, and I reflected on and discussed specific situations with relevant people to help develop my approach throughout the research process. An early example of this tension in my research process became apparent when making decisions around the timing of data collection: I needed to consider not only when it made sense to send out questionnaires and arrange interviews in terms of my research design, but also what was happening for participants in terms of the course structure and the timing of assignments and assessments. I therefore discussed my plans with my supervisors and engaged with NCT tutor colleagues to avoid assignment deadlines and times of increased stress as much as possible.

In sum, ethical conduct should be at the heart of a researcher's practice, informing all stages of research from design to data collection to analysis and dissemination (Creswell, 2014). It should be constantly revisited as part of a researcher's reflexive approach to avoid complacency. Then, reassuringly, it is possible that, as Blackburn (2001, p.135) suggests:

> If we are careful, and mature, and imaginative, and lucky, the moral mirror in which we gaze at ourselves may not show us saints. But it need not show us monsters, either.

Earlier, I stated the importance of being explicit about my position as a feminist researcher; here I explore other relevant aspects of my position with regards to ethics.

Being an insider researcher

Insider or endogenous research is usually defined as being carried out by someone who has knowledge and experience of the community and its members (Merton, 1972; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2013). This may bring advantages, including ease of access (which was the case in the present study); a shared frame of reference and a stronger rapport with participants; but also the possibility of pre-conceptions on the part of both researcher and participants (Jenny Mercer, 2007). Subject areas such as anthropology have tended to value outsider research as more objective: for example, Burgess (1984: p23, cited in Hellawell, 2006) claimed 'being a stranger, an outsider in a social setting, gives the researcher scope to stand back and abstract material from the research experience'. The distinction between researcher and researched was arguably fairly clear-cut in the first half of the twentieth century when predominantly white anthropologists travelled to faraway places to study indigenous peoples (see, for example, Mead, 1928/2001), but these differences have become less obvious as studies have increasingly been undertaken of social groups intersecting with those of researchers (Justine Mercer, 2007). Rather than a dichotomy, therefore, it can be argued there is a continuum between insiderness and outsiderness (Justine Mercer, 2007) that may change over time and place, so researchers may be insiders and outsiders at the same time (Floyd and Arthur, 2012), particularly when taking intersectional considerations into account.

Education research is increasingly undertaken by insiders (Justine Mercer, 2007; Sikes and Potts, 2008; Humphrey, 2012; Rawdin, 2018) which has raised awareness of possible issues not necessarily covered by the ethical approval process. Floyd and Arthur (2012, p.2) discuss the need to engage with the 'below surface, murky

issues' that occur throughout the research process 'linked to ongoing personal and professional relationships with participants, insider knowledge, conflicting professional and researcher roles, and anonymity'.

To minimise these conflicts, particularly with regards to power relations between the researcher and participants (Merriam *et al*, 2001; Justine Mercer, 2007), I decided to take a sabbatical year from my role as a tutor on the foundation degree course during the collection and analysis of data, meaning I had no teaching or assessing responsibilities for participants (I returned for one year at Level 6 then subsequently resigned to focus on my studies). I also highlighted the commonalities I held with interview participants: that I was a woman student myself, dealing with similar issues such as combining studies with family responsibilities and sharing interests such as working with people around birth and the transition to parenthood. These measures went some way to level power between me as researcher and the participants, allowing me to build on a shared ideology based on empathy to build positive research relations (Shariff, 2014). I tried to maintain a reflexive awareness of shifting dynamics of power relations throughout the research process (Pillow, 2003; McQueeney and Lavelle, 2017). Being open about some of my own experiences in NCT and as a student mother helped to develop rapport quickly with participants (Oakley, 2015). I took care, however, not to exploit this rapport and thereby trick participants into making disclosures they might later feel uncomfortable about (Dunscombe and Jessop, 2002; Thwaites, 2017), even though Oakley (2015) states this is unlikely in her discussion around why participants can be happy to give their time and share their responses freely and unconditionally. This seemed the case for the interviewees in the current study, who seemed to appreciate the experience of talking to me and aiding me in furthering my research aims.

During the initial part of this research, I was an antenatal teacher and also employed by NCT College tutoring at Level 4 and at Level 6, and a beneficiary of

funding for my fees from both NCT and University of Worcester. I therefore needed to balance my obligations to - and my existing relationships with - both these bodies with my aim of carrying out effective and honest research. Fortunately, NCT is an avowed evidence-based organisation, so they welcomed my research focus, and neither organisation made any demands about how I conducted or disseminated my research beyond normal ethical codes of practice (BERA, 2018; University of Worcester, 2018). My longstanding relationship with NCT and my thoughts and feelings about them as a charity and as an employer were important issues to keep under consideration as part of my reflexive approach.

Overall, the benefits of being an insider on some levels seemed to outweigh the disadvantages, particularly as I tended to share a common language and understanding of what the course entailed with participants. Familiarity with the context meant I could focus straight away on what each interviewee was telling me about her own experiences. Their interactions with me were likely to have been affected by their perceptions of my socioeconomic status, as well as my status as an NCT tutor. They did not meet me in my home, but other indicators such as my accent (typical of a relatively affluent English suburb) would probably have led them to consider me middle class. For some, this might have been reassuring or just unnoteworthy; for others it might have been unsettling, although they gave no signs of this during the interviews, seeming relaxed and open. It is possible other characteristics I shared with them (such as my NCT history and being a student mother) were more important and engendered trust.

Being explicit about my own position as a mature student with an NCT background right from the start allowed me then to immerse myself in the world of the student participants, and step in and out of my researcher role to develop co-created knowledge and interpretation (Price, 2013; Berger, 2015), working

towards a better shared understanding through Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons' (1975/2013).

I now explain the decision to use a qualitatively focussed mixed methods approach (Hesse-Biber, 2010) in this study.

Mixed methods research

Traditionally, research has been carried out according to two distinct perspectives (Feilzer, 2010). Quantitative research is considered part of the positivist/post-positivist tradition, prizing objectivity and using numerical data to indicate the occurrence of phenomena and to test hypotheses. Qualitative research relates to the interpretive/constructivist tradition, aiming to develop understanding of phenomena through the analysis of non-numerical data. Throughout the 'paradigm wars' in the last century, it was argued that qualitative and quantitative methods should not be combined because of inherent epistemological and ontological differences (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). However, this purist view has been contested by many in recent years (Östlund *et al*, 2011). Teddlie and Tashakkori claim (2013, p.19) that 'this incompatibility thesis has now largely been discredited', not least because of a growing realisation that differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches have been overstated (Maxwell, 2010), and the boundaries between them have become blurred (see Morgan, 2018, for a discussion of this). It is increasingly argued that quantitative and qualitative approaches can be 'meaningfully integrated' (Bryman, 2006, p.114) in mixed methods research to benefit from the advantages of both. Mixed methods research has continued to grow in popularity (Liu, 2022) since Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p.1) argued over a decade ago that mixed methods research was a 'paradigm whose time has come' because research is more effective if the researcher draws on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative options, and chooses freely from each according to which provide the best answers to research questions. Indeed, as Sandelowski (2014) points out, all

empirical research design entails making decisions about mixes of a possible range of methods, not just research which is identified as mixed methods.

Researchers in Evaluation Research and Nursing have been at the forefront of the 'paradigm peace movement' (Bryman, 2006, p.114), while those in Education Research have tended to lag behind (Creswell, 2010; Papadimitriou, Ivankova and Hurtado, 2013). However, as Seyfried and Reith (2019) point out, mixed methods is arguably an ideal approach for HE research for three reasons. Firstly, they say, because researchers are often carrying out endogenous or insider research (as in this case) so usually have a good understanding of the field but may be subject to bias, which mixed methods can help counter by incorporating a range of perspectives. Secondly, concepts and theories which underpin research processes in HE have often been adapted from other research fields, so more than one research method can help these concepts and theories to fit more effectively. Finally, HE as the research object utilises fuzzy technologies in teaching and learning and has fuzzy causal links between input and results. A mixture of research approaches can be helpful in dealing with these complexities.

A mathematician (Dyson, 2015) has described how some people are high-flying birds who survey the landscape, bringing together ideas from different places, while others are frogs who live in the mud and notice the details of the objects close to them. Using mixed methods could be framed as a combination of the birds' broad vision of the quantitative overview with the frogs' deep, intricate qualitative detail to provide better understanding than from either point of view on its own. This links to the idea of the hermeneutic circle (Malpas, 2018), where understanding of the whole requires reference to the parts, and understanding of the parts requires consideration of the whole in an ongoing spiral of micro and macro perspectives.

According to Hesse-Biber (2010), mixed methods research practice has often favoured a more positivist orientation, using qualitative data merely to illustrate

quantitative data analysis, or to help develop better research instruments. In the current research, I have adopted her suggestion of taking a more qualitative approach to mixed methods, because this fits with my feminist goals of privileging the lives and stories of mature women students who are often invisible or unheard (Ryan, 2001) and in order to provide suggestions for improved practice. Engagement with the literature highlighted how the lived experience of mature women students is a key part of their learning, and hardly any studies have explored heutagogy in relation to the complexity of mature women students' lives, so the qualitative frogs' view is prioritised in this study. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) - where the researcher aims to make sense of participants themselves making sense of a phenomenon as part of a double hermeneutic - was chosen to analyse the qualitative data because its idiographic focus highlights participants' individual stories, which fits with a feminist phenomenology.

Mixing methods facilitates an integration of different perspectives of the same phenomenon (Alise and Teddlie, 2010), in this case, mature women as learners. The quantitative data collected and analysed using Excel indicated the range of attitudes and approaches to learning, providing snapshots at two different timepoints through surveys carried out at the beginning of the course and towards the end of the second academic year. The qualitative data included rich, thick description and accompanying analysis.

Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data helped to increase the quality of the research in different ways (Hesse-Biber, 2010; Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017). Firstly, the initial survey of the cohort of NCT students allowed me to select a fairly homogeneous subsample to interview, which is a requirement for good quality IPA research (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Secondly, asking similar questions in both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study enabled me to increase trustworthiness. Thirdly,

triangulating results to explore convergence in findings allowed me to draw out similarities but also differences in the two perspectives. Convergence can help to develop the depth and trustworthiness of research (Bryman, 2007a), which strengthens my recommendations for improving practice both within and outwith NCT.

Using a mixed methods approach sits naturally with a pragmatic research perspective (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Feilzer, 2010; Florczak, 2014) aiming as it does to yield 'real answers to real questions' (in this research, how to improve educational practice) and respecting 'the mixed, messy real world' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.26). The abductive reasoning adopted in a pragmatist perspective can help to address the weaknesses inherent in taking either the deductive approach of quantitative research, or the inductive approach utilised in qualitative research when trying to develop understanding of complex phenomena (Mitchell, 2018).

Mixed methods as part of the pragmatic paradigm developed from that advocated by Dewey can arguably work well with a feminist approach, particularly when considering axiology. As Hesse-Biber (2012, p. 878, cited by Morgan, 2014) explains:

> *Axiology means being cognizant of our values, attitudes, and biases and acknowledging how these might play out in research praxis in terms of (a) what questions are asked or not asked in our research, (b) what type of data are or are not collected, and (c) the type of methods, measurement, analysis, and interpretation that shape our understanding of the research process.*

As Morgan (2013) points out, the characteristics outlined here are the same as those that underpin pragmatism. In this study, I made the decision to develop a

stronger focus on the qualitative data and analysis than the quantitative aspects, because that fitted with my feminist aims of developing a better understanding of the lived experiences of mature women students as learners.

My research approach and my ethical stance (explored below) were informed by my axiology, in particular regarding values around education and educational research, which broadly aligns with Biesta's argument that education has three 'domains of purpose' (2015, p.18). The 'qualification function' concerns the acquisition of skills, knowledge and dispositions in order to be able to function as part of society. The 'socialisation function' involves sharing a range of practices relating to culture, tradition, religion and so on. The final 'subjectification function' relates to individual development as an autonomous, independent being. Good education should attend to these three (sometimes overlapping) domains and by extension, educational research should aim to evaluate and improve how children and adults are supported to learn and develop as self-actualising members of society (Maslow, 1954; Akçay and Akyol, 2014). The aim of this research is to contribute to improving practice in supporting mature women students such as the ones on the NCT course under consideration.

Study design

The current research forms a study of one cohort of students on a vocational degree course and incorporates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore and interpret the phenomenon of mature women students' experiences and engagement with heutagogy. There is a wide range of study designs in mixed methods research literature - Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) identified over 35 in their handbook of mixed methods research – so it can be challenging to select the optimal design. Commonly utilised designs include convergent parallel, exploratory sequential and explanatory sequential, and multiphase designs. (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017). In a convergent parallel study, the quantitative and qualitative strands are carried out

separately and their results are integrated in the final interpretation of the whole study. In an exploratory sequential study, a first phase in which qualitative data is collected and analysed is followed by the collection and analysis of quantitative data to test or generalise the initial results. In an explanatory sequential design, the first phase of quantitative data collection and analysis is followed by a second phase of qualitative data which is used to explain the earlier results. Finally, a multiphase design combines more than two phases combined over a period of time.

My experience as a tutor suggested that the attitudes and approaches to learning of students on the NCT course varied over time, and initially I considered testing this hypothesis. I therefore designed a multiphase sequential mixed-methods study (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017; Schumacher *et al*, 2020). However, the depth and richness of the data from the interviewees emerged as more useful in answering my research questions than anticipated, so the qualitative component became the major focus of the study. This study could therefore be described as using a qualitative approach to mixed methods (Hesse-Biber, 2015). The design fits with Leech and Onwuegbuzie's (2009) typology as a Fully Mixed Sequential Dominant Status Design (F4) where the qualitative component is dominant, and the quantitative and qualitative components are interactively mixed across stages. The different elements of this approach are explored in detail below.

In brief, the study involved the collection of quantitative data firstly by means of an online questionnaire shared with all 130 newly enrolled students as the academic year commenced. The survey also collected qualitative data in the form of open-ended questions which asked participants to explain some of their answers. Analysis of the data helped to identify results which were explored in depth by collecting qualitative data in semi-structured interviews undertaken with six of the questionnaire respondents. A second set of questionnaires and

interviews was carried out during the second academic year providing a longitudinal element which indicated changes and developments, but mostly deepened the understanding of participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2003).

A sequential mixed methods approach

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from participants and analysed at different points over a two-year period in a multiphase design (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Schumacher *et al*, 2020) of two stages as shown in Figure 8 (p.103).

A sequential approach of quant→QUAL→quant→QUAL (that is, with a stronger focus on the qualitative strand) was adopted (Morse, 1991; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Analysis was carried out of data from each phase before the next one was carried out, as part of a fully mixed sequential design (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Further analysis was undertaken once all phases were complete, to provide integrated findings. Analysis is discussed in detail later (see p.113).

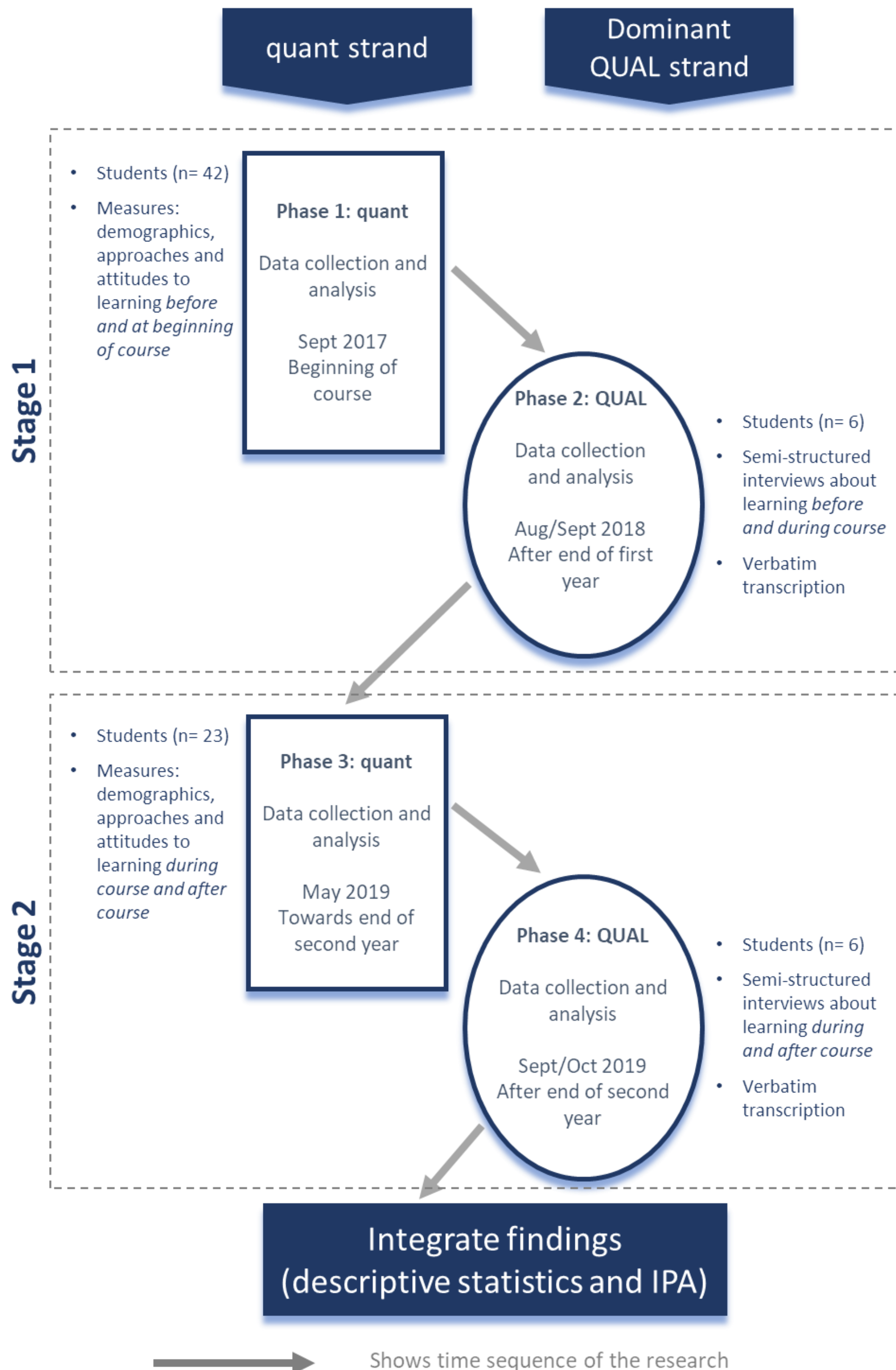


Figure 8: Multiphase sequential mixed methods design of the study

Collecting quantitative data fulfilled four functions. Firstly, I was able to gather demographic data which helped to give a context for the research and help to identify differences and similarities with other settings to establish if my findings might be more widely applicable (Arthur *et al*, 2012). Secondly, the questionnaire responses allowed me to identify possible candidates (Mayoh, Bond and Todres, 2012) to invite for interview, which is similar to a qualitatively focussed mixed methods study using IPA exploring women's experiences of traumatic childbirth (Byrne *et al*, 2017). The data also helped to locate the six interviewees in terms of demographic similarity and difference to the whole sample. In addition, different questions probed different aspects of heutagogy. Some questions with Likert scale answers gave an indication of the extent of respondents' engagement with these aspects at two different timepoints, so trends and changes could be identified as the course progressed. Finally, the quantitative data collected during the preliminary phases shaped the questions asked in the semi-structured interviews as part of the following phases (Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie, 2015).

There are potential practical disadvantages with using mixed methods, not least that as an evolving paradigm, there is a lack of conceptual and linguistic agreement between leading proponents (Niglas, 2009). Although using a combination of methods to collect different data can strengthen the study (Gray, 2014), this requires the researcher to develop a range of skills (Denscombe, 2014). A sequential study also takes more time and there is even more danger of collecting too much data to analyse than with a straightforward mixed methods approach. As a part-time PhD student, I had the luxury of being able to run the research over two years, but I needed to keep a strong focus on the research questions, or risk being overwhelmed by irrelevant data. Another challenge concerns integrating the data and analysis in a way that makes the study more than the sum of the individual quantitative and qualitative strands (Bryman, 2007b). In the findings chapters I have used the qualitative themes from the semi-structured interviews to scaffold the descriptive quantitative findings,

combining the more diffuse birds' view of the latter with the focussed frogs' view of the former. These different perspectives on participants' experiences were then combined to illuminate the phenomenon of mature women students as learners on a vocational foundation degree and their engagement with heutagogy.

The questionnaires were analysed using Excel to provide descriptive statistics. I used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) to make sense of the interview data. Other approaches such as thematic analysis were considered (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019), but because IPA is an 'idiographic approach, concerned with understanding particular phenomena in particular contexts' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.49), it offered a suitable way of exploring the phenomenon of mature women students learning and engaging in heutagogy in depth, which worked towards my objective of increasing understanding by illuminating participants' stories. IPA uses a double hermeneutic, where the researcher is trying to make sense of participants' own sense-making around their experiences in the world (van Manen and Adams, 2010). Theoretically, IPA draws upon several main areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology (based on the ideas of Husserl and more specifically Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer and Schleiermacher) and symbolic interactionism (Smith, 1996) which both emphasize how participants perceive and attribute meaning to events; hermeneutics (from the Ancient Greek for 'to interpret or make clear'); and idiography, that is, a focus on individuals making meaning of their own specific experiences (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Experience is an important focus of educational research (Noon, 2018), which further supports IPA as a suitable choice for the current study. In addition, IPA is claimed to be an approach which 'comprehensively, respectfully and explicitly incorporates the perspective of both researcher and participant' (Wagstaff *et al*, 2014, p.10). It therefore meshed with my pragmatic worldview and my ethical and feminist perspectives, by giving voice (Larkin, Watts and Clifton,

2006) to the women's experiences. The next section describes the data collection and then the analysis in more detail.

Methods: data collection

Sample

I had originally proposed investigating the learning experiences of students across all levels of the NCT Birth and Beyond degree course, but I subsequently identified the need to keep the scope of the research realistic and avoid a focus that was too broad and shallow (Baxter and Jack, 2008). I decided therefore to limit the research focus to the cohort of 130 Level 4 students who started their course with NCT College in September 2017, (the point at which the majority of them would be starting their learning journeys with NCT College, although a few might have done an access course previously) and finished in the summer of 2019.

Being a tutor with NCT afforded me invaluable access to the students: I was able to give a short presentation about my proposed research at an induction event as the cohort were embarking on the Level 4 course. I invited all those present to participate via a link and password to the online survey (hosted by Bristol Online Surveys, now called Online Surveys). Tutors were also asked to remind students about the research during their first tutorial.

Phase 1: Quantitative

Pilot survey

The questionnaire had been piloted previously with a group of students from previous years. Of the twenty-five approached, ten completed the whole questionnaire and gave useful feedback which helped to highlight possible issues around putting the research into practice (Robson, 2011) and helped to refine the research instrument (Arthur *et al*, 2012). As well as giving me invaluable practice

in using the online survey tool, the pilot highlighted several areas where changes needed to be made, including the content of the questionnaire, its format, the distribution process and the important ethical issue of obtaining informed consent (Elliott, Kadi-Hanifi and Solvason, 2018). The detailed changes made following this pilot are highlighted in a table in Appendix D (p.423).

Survey 1

Forty-four students returned online surveys by the deadline of the beginning of October 2017; two participants' responses were deleted, however, as they did not fit the criteria as second year students, leaving a final sample of forty-two. Four-fifths of the sample were aged between 26 and 45 (n=33, 79%); 17% (n=7) were 46+ (more detail is shown in Table 6, Chapter 5, p.131). The remaining two participants were under 25. Four-fifths had one or more children under the age of eleven living at home (n=34, 81%) and 14% (n=6) had older children at home; just two participants had no children living at home. Over two-thirds of the group (n=29, 69%) already had a degree (a few had a postgraduate degree; n=7, 17%). Just under a fifth (n=8, 19%) had stopped their previous education at Level 3 (equivalent to A levels). Exactly half (n=21) had their tutorials and study days in London; the other half (n=21) were based in the rest of the UK. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were asked to read a Participant Information Sheet (included in Appendix C, p.415415) and give consent before being able to access the rest of the questions. They were offered the opportunity to withdraw their data if they changed their minds in the following two months, but none did.

The research instrument: questionnaire

The questionnaire for the first phase included twenty-six overarching questions combining Likert-scale items (Nemoto and Beglar, 2014) based on a scale from 'almost never true' to 'almost always true'; items to which as many answers as applied could be chosen; and questions with text boxes asking respondents to

give more details about the answers they had given. Rating scales are very popular in research, as they provide a means of combining flexible responses that can be analysed quantitatively (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011), although it is important not assume the interval between each element on the scale is equal or that answers are standard: one respondent's 'strongly agree' might equate to another's 'somewhat agree' (Jamieson, 2004). Including open text boxes allowed participants to explain their responses in more detail, which helped to give a context for their responses and provided additional useful data.

As well as collecting demographic data, questions explored attitudes and approaches to learning linked to different elements of heutagogy, including meta-cognition, self-efficacy, self-determination, motivation, collaboration with communities of practice, use of the internet/digital media and reflective practice (Blaschke and Hase, 2016). For example, one question asked: 'Thinking back to your previous experiences of learning, what strategies did you use then that you plan to use on this course? Remember that there are no right or wrong answers' and offered a list of options including 'reading journal articles', 'observing others' and 'practising skills regularly'. Then they were asked to choose one of their answers to expand on in an open text box. The temporal focus was their previous experiences of learning and how these related to their current attitudes and approaches as they embarked on the course. The complete questionnaires for both survey points are in Appendix D (p.427 and p.448).

Phase 2: Qualitative

In order to explore topics arising from analysis of the questionnaire and to explore lived experiences around learning, and the meaning individuals assigned to these experiences, a small sample of students was identified and invited to take part in semi-structured interviews.

Subsample for interviews

Delineating the subsample required an approach aligned with my worldview of pragmatism. The sample size for the interviews needed to be large enough to provide enough rich data, but not so large it became unwieldy for a single researcher, which might risk a broad and shallow analysis (Silverman, 2014). In fact, because data from each participant is analysed in great depth when using IPA, it was appropriate to use a smaller sample size is than is usual for other approaches (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). As I planned to invite participants to take part in two interviews during their course, I allowed for the possibility of them dropping out of the course and interviewed six students in the first phase. Possible interviewees were identified from the questionnaire responses and approached using their student email addresses (which they had shared on the questionnaires). The criteria for this purposive selection of the sample (Arthur *et al*, 2012) were set so there was some variety in their ages, previous learning experiences, their current working status and the number and age of children living at home with them, and there was a geographical spread (see Table 5, below).

Pseudonym	Geographical area	Young child/ren at home	Previous level of education	Working currently	Age
Arwen	Scotland	Yes	6	P/T	31-40
Becky	Scotland	Yes	6	No	31-40
Cora	England	Yes	7	No	31-40
Darby	England	No*	7	No	41-50
Esme	London	Yes	7	P/T	31-40
Freya	London	Yes	6	P/T	31-40

*older children at home

Table 5: Interview participants (at time of first phase)

This variety provided a homogenous sample in terms of the experience of being students on the NCT foundation degree course, but allowed for exploring different perspectives, as is usual for IPA studies (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Participants were asked to read and sign a consent form (see Appendix C, p.417) and were given pseudonyms during analysis to protect their identities.

Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews 1 Pilot

The first interview was planned as a pilot to hone my interviewing skills, to practise using the recording equipment in the field, and to refine the process to meet the research objectives more effectively. This experience was invaluable in helping me understand more fully Kvale's (2007) framing of interview as a particular form of conversational practice through which an interviewee's experiences and perspectives are captured. The pilot interview confirmed the guide was useful in providing useful insights. On discovering the first interviewee had dyslexia and dyspraxia which offered particular experiences around learning, I decided (after discussion with her) to include her interview in the results to give voice to her story.

Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews 1

Semi-structured interviews are often seen as the default approach to qualitative research (King and Horrocks, 2010; Atkins and Wallace, 2012) so options were considered carefully before making my decision. Feminist researchers have long favoured interviews as they allow for a sensitive approach to participants (see, for example, Maynard, 1994; Oakley, 2015). I found semi-structured interviews worked well with IPA because they utilised a framework of prompts around participants' experiences as mature female students but allowed for flexibility to explore unanticipated and interesting areas (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Noon, 2018). The specific steps used to analyse the data are described in more detail later (p.115).

Each interview commenced with the use of a life history approach (Dominicé, 2000; Goodson, 2008; Adriansen, 2012), to help participants consider the contexts of themselves as learners, as well as the differences and similarities between their previous learning experiences and the current course. Participants were invited to co-create a life history grid about their learning experiences since the age of 5 on a large piece of paper. Although the data collected was not used in this thesis, because it did not ultimately help answer the research questions, it did seem to aid participants to relax and talk about themselves as learners easily. I then proceeded to ask questions according to the guide developed by drawing on the data from the first questionnaire, as well as my own understanding of the experiences of women as learners, through being a student myself and being a tutor supporting students, as well as through engagement with relevant literature. Topic areas included their motivations for undertaking the course, their experiences on the course, and their perceptions of themselves as learners. The schedules for both the first and second interviews are included in Appendix D (p.447 and p.468).

The flexibility afforded by using semi-structured interviews enabled interviewees to have more control over the topics they wished to discuss than using a more structured question schedule (Noon, 2018). This focus on their voices was congruent with my feminist approach (Hesse-Biber, 2014) and emerged alongside my growing realization of the reality of DeVault and Gross's claim (2012, p. 215) that relationships between researcher and participants are 'never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power' but are 'always embedded in and shaped by cultural constructions of similarity, difference and significance'. I shared a diagram of my own life history grid to build trust and demonstrate the information I was interested in (see Appendix C, p.421); this was apparently successful, as all interviewees enthusiastically shared aspects of their lives and seemed comfortable sharing their attitudes and approaches to learning on the

NCT course. Interviews took between 60-90 minutes and recordings were later transcribed verbatim.

In line with my ethical approach, which aimed to centre participants' needs as much as possible in my quest to answer my research questions, the interviews were planned flexibly to minimise disruption to their studies and their complex lives generally. I communicated with each participant using email and texts, negotiating a mutually convenient time and place to meet that would enable each to feel as relaxed as possible, bearing in mind safety for both of us, and also taking account of noise levels to be able to hear the recordings later. Some venues were not ideal in terms of privacy and noise but were the only practical solution where participants were unable or unwilling to be interviewed at home. I paid attention to where we were both seated to minimise power differentials (Atkins and Wallace, 2012), although the relationship between interviewer and interviewee can never be truly equal, not least because the researcher decides the trajectory of the research (King and Horrocks, 2010). I asked if each participant was comfortable taking part in the interview (and continuing to take part if questions seemed difficult for them), and I thanked them for their participation.

Phase 3: Quantitative

A questionnaire was developed and sent out to the whole cohort in Autumn 2018 (see Appendix D, p.427). This included some similar questions to the first one, to identify any differences in attitudes and approaches to learning. Additional questions considered impacts of studying on the course on themselves and their families, and their plans around continuing to learn, as these had been identified as topics of interest in the first interviews. The temporal focus was looking back over the course and then looking into the future as they contemplated moving into practice. Twenty-three students responded (seventeen answered both surveys, so some were new respondents).

Phase 4: Qualitative

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the same subset of students as the first round to explore issues highlighted in the second survey, including experiences on the course and as newly qualified practitioners (in some cases), and plans for learning in the future (see question schedule in Appendix D, p.468). As in the first phase, these interviews were fully transcribed and analysed using IPA.

Methods: Analysis

Analysis of the questionnaire responses

The collection and analysis of questionnaire data included two objectives:

1. To quantify the sample's attitudes and approaches to learning at the beginning of the course so they could be compared with attitudes and approaches towards the end of the course.

2. To shape the focus and orientation of the interview questions.

To achieve these objectives, questionnaire results including the Likert scales, the scorings and the text box data were inputted into Microsoft Excel. Collecting all the data in one place allowed me to study and analyse them together. Graphs and charts were created from the numerical data, and I examined the shapes and patterns. Where interesting shapes emerged, I investigated the text box data to identify if anything specific could be linked with particular scores. An example of this was the data from the questions 'When do you think you will spend time studying?' and 'Please tell me about your roles and responsibilities over the last five years at home/at work'. I compared different sets of data to identify potential links, such as between age and use of online learning strategies. I found some areas with statistically significant correlations, such as age and current academic

achievement (which was to be expected). While these correlations were not necessarily causative, they did provide reassurance the data collection was consistent. A quantitative study would have focussed on these correlations and changes between the second survey point, while a mixed methods study not using IPA might have developed hypotheses for testing or included structured interviews. However, as I wanted to explore the phenomenon of mature women students learning and engaging with heutagogy, and the lived experience was of particular interest, the design of this present study meant the quantitative strand was subsidiary to the qualitative strand. It was key in identifying where to shine the spotlight of the interviews. For example, questionnaire respondents indicated achieving high grades was important to them and this was explored with the interviewees, who highlighted how they were affected by the expectations of themselves and other people, particularly their fathers in some cases.

Using a detailed analytical statistical approach (such as chi-squared analysis and rank correlation coefficients) to analyse quantitative data and test hypotheses is often appropriate. However, I had decided to utilise a qualitatively driven mixed methods design (Hesse-Biber, 2010) with a stronger focus on exploring and interpreting the qualitative data, which would be analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). A similar approach of using descriptive statistics to support the stronger focus on qualitative findings has been taken by other researchers, such as Doran *et al* (2016) in their mixed methods study of why General Practitioners leave practice early in England. As Proches (2015) argues, combining verbal description with descriptive statistics offers a valuable middle ground between hypothesis-testing using inferential statistics and a purely qualitative approach. In the current study, descriptive statistics (graphs and charts) generated through Excel provided context for the interviewees as part of the wider cohort and this quantitative description strengthened the explanatory power of the qualitative investigation (Spillman, 2014). An inferential statistical approach would have risked having a constraining effect on subsequent data

collection by creating specific results and hypotheses to be explored in the interviews, rather than the valuing the open inductive approach of IPA used in the dominant qualitative research strand. The numerical data also provided orientation for the next phase by highlighting several areas for exploration through open questions in the semi-structured interviews. Finally, as mentioned previously, the numerical data helped to check for bias in my interpretation, particularly in my role as an insider researcher.

Analysis of the interview transcripts using IPA

Interviews were recorded with participants' permission. Although the presence of a digital recorder can have a discomforting effect on some participants (Al-Yateem, 2012), I required a complete record of the whole interview (or as complete as possible) to analyse the text closely. This was explained to participants, and acknowledged as an unfortunate necessity, although none in fact seemed concerned by the presence of the recorder, which I found somewhat surprising at the time. Some referred to wanting to help me in my research, or to enjoying the chance to talk about themselves; perhaps being recorded was seen as an acceptable cost.

The transcription of the interviews was shaped by my pragmatic worldview and my ethical approach. I followed my supervisors' recommendation to pay for a transcription service to save time, and then reviewed the transcriptions closely while listening to the voice recordings, amending as required. Initially, I had decided to include every language filler and hesitation such as 'you know' and 'erm', but I decided to follow Holland's (2012) example and tidied up the transcribed words of the interviewees to make quotes easier to read and understand. This strategy also helped protect interviewees' anonymity by making idiosyncratic speech patterns less identifiable.

Recording the interviews in digital files allowed me to replay them and immerse myself in the data, reminding me of other aspects of communication (such as particular emphasis or tone of voice) beyond the words that ended up on the page after the recordings were transcribed. Each transcript was analysed in accordance with the guidance provided by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and an IPA workshop I attended (Montague and Holland, 2019). I listened to the recording and then read through the first transcript to get an overall feel for the data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The detail of these steps is presented in Figure 9 (p.117).

1st step: Immersion in data
• Read and re-read first transcript while listening to recording • Write preliminary observations and reflections (try to bracket where necessary)
2nd step: Exploratory notes
• Make notes on transcript about content, context, language use and initial interpretative comments
3rd step: Finding emergent themes
• Transform notes into concise themes • Identify connections between themes and group together • Identify extracts from transcripts that exemplify themes
4th step: Moving on to next transcript
• Try to bracket off previous case • Follow steps 1-4
5th step: Cross-case and cross-stage patterns
• Identify emergent themes across cases and stages • Identify major (superordinate) themes and subthemes
6th step: Writing up
• Produce table of themes • Write up each theme in turn, using extracts from transcripts to illustrate themes • Link identified themes to existing literature

Figure 9: Synthesis of the stages of IPA (adapted from Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014, pp.11-13

Each transcript in the phase was analysed before moving on to the next one, and then they were all compared so master themes across cases and then stages were identified (see Appendix E, p.471, for an example extract of the spreadsheet used to keep track of emergent themes at this point). This summary perhaps

oversimplifies a process which I found at times like ‘drowning in a deep bowl of spaghetti’, as others have related (Nolan, 2011, cited in Wagstaff *et al*, 2014, p. 6). I was mindful of Paley’s (2017) criticism of IPA that there is a danger of the researcher seeing meaning in the text because of what she brings to it, although this could arguably be part of the double hermeneutic that is an explicit feature of IPA (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). In addition, the commitment to idiographic focus could make finding common themes between cases challenging, which other researchers have also noted (see, for example, Noon, 2018), particularly as there were two sets of interviews over two timepoints. A reflexive attitude, an iterative engagement with the notes made from the transcripts and discussion with my supervisory team all helped with these issues.

Using a phenomenological approach necessitates a consideration of the concept of ‘bracketing’, where a researcher is urged to put aside her own preconceptions about the area under focus to see it in new and interesting ways by developing a curious attitude (LeVasseur, 2003). This is particularly the case with descriptive phenomenology based on Husserl’s work (Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie, 2015) which aims to describe the characteristics of a phenomenon generally, rather than individual’s experiences of that phenomenon (Moran, 2000; Giorgi, 2005). IPA, however, aims to describe, understand and interpret participants’ individual experiences in a situated context (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; van Manen and Adams, 2010), and the researcher needs to be aware of how the political, social and cultural dimensions of that context affect participants. Being an insider researcher helped me to have an awareness of the contexts participants in the current research were studying in, and therefore reinforced the decision to use IPA, but was also a source of danger because I could have made thoughtless assumptions about overlaps between their experiences and lives and my own. It was therefore important to make efforts to mitigate this problem.

There has been much debate about when and how in the research process bracketing should take place, and even the extent to which it is possible to put aside one's own perspective (Tufford and Newman, 2012), or whether there is too much emphasis on trying to reduce researcher bias (Finlay, 2014), particularly when moving away from a postpositive paradigm which posits an objective reality exists (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). Developing a reflexive phenomenological attitude as a researcher might be the closest a researcher can get to setting aside a lifetime of beliefs and understandings (Finlay, 2014), leaving the researcher to embrace her subjectivity as part of her role in making meaning of participants' own meaning-making (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie, 2015).

This subjective-objectivity can be linked with a feminist approach based in taking responsibility for how the researcher interprets what she observes (Bartsch, DiPalma and Sells, 2001). Unlike other definitions of objectivity, which imply a viewpoint taken from everywhere and nowhere (the 'god trick' as Haraway puts it, 1988, p. 581), a feminist objectivity is worked at by explicitly engaging with perspectives that are partial and contextualised within a society with multiple intersections of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Vendramin, 2012). My aim was therefore to explore the experiences of women which have conventionally been disregarded (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018), and find *a* credible account, not the *only* credible one. This approach is congruent with IPA because it is based on the notion that multiple realities are constructed by individuals engaging with the world in unique ways (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Two key areas where I focussed particular attention to identify and mitigate against unhelpful preconceptions were after the initial listening and reading of a transcript, and when finishing the analysis of one transcript and moving onto another (Figure 9, p.117). Reflecting in my journal and discussions with my supervisory team aided this approach.

In making my own views and approaches clear, I have tried to use reflexivity (a concept I return to in more detail later, p.122), which England (1994, p.82) defines as 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher'. This scrutiny highlighted the issue of the difficulty of researching human beings not only as objects located in the physical world, but also the subjects of our own knowledge (Foucault, 1970; Martin, 1988), and endeavours to establish 'truthfulness' in social science. As well as checking my own assumptions and interpretations through a reflective and reflexive approach, I considered strategies to increase the trustworthiness and truthfulness of the research, including member-checking (Carlson, 2010; Birt *et al*, 2016). These strategies are now discussed more fully.

Truthfulness, trustworthiness and quality

All research makes claims about its quality which need to be investigated. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described several criteria of trustworthiness including credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability and authenticity, which I tried to attend to throughout the study. Silverman (1997, p.25) suggested that research needs to answer two questions: 'namely, have the researchers demonstrated why we should believe them? And does the research problem tackled have theoretical and/or practical significance?' Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) argue in addition that research needs to tackle the issue that language is ambiguous and limited in its ability to 'convey knowledge of a purely empirical reality' (ibid, p.371) and they highlight the importance of embracing the tension between empirical material and interpretations that are interesting, novel and creative.

One way to identify trustworthiness of interpretation is member checking, described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a process that can test each part of research from the data collected to the final conclusions by getting feedback from research participants. Returning transcripts to participants was considered

initially to help improve accuracy of the collected data. However, I decided the interview transcripts were a snapshot of how interviewees felt at one particular time, rather than a definitive document that required editing and possibly changing extensively. Participants can find reading their own transcripts upsetting or at very least time consuming (Carlson, 2010), so the downsides seemed to outweigh possible benefits. Importantly, asking participants to check the data analysis also seemed inappropriate because of IPA's double hermeneutic where the researcher is making sense of the participants' sense-making (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Discussion with other researchers using IPA reassured me this was a sensible approach; I therefore decided to adopt other strategies to help increase the trustworthiness of the research.

Firstly, I checked for meaning during the interviews; for example, by asking follow-up questions so I could be as sure as possible participants' voices were being heard clearly. Because the NCT course includes modules on reflective practice and approaches to learning, it seemed reasonable to assume participants would have some familiarity with the concepts of adult learning and would have developed skills in applying these concepts to themselves to a certain extent. I summarised each life history grid co-constructed during the first interview in a document that could be checked by participants during the second interview to ensure I had understood and captured their learning histories, and then retained these as part of the audit trail for the research (they were not ultimately used for this thesis, however).

Becoming part of a community of practice and taking up training opportunities to develop my analysis skills was my second strategy. I participated in training events run by an IPA group local to me (SIPAIG) and attended two IPA international conferences which helped me to develop an awareness of the practice and applications of IPA. I also took the opportunity to check my analysis of excerpts of the transcripts with members of SIPAIG at monthly meetings

which helped me to build confidence I was using standard procedures, as well as discussing my analysis with one of my supervisors in depth, thus building the dependability of the study. Discussion of my findings and themes with former NCT tutor colleagues as critical friends (Appleton, 2010) helped me to test them against their interpretations of NCT practice.

Reflecting on data collection and analysis and having discussions with my supervisory team helped me to uncover personal bias and to ponder on different possible interpretations of the transcripts. Using thick and rich description in this thesis is intended to provide authenticity as well as enhancing reader engagement with the writing about the research participants (Carlson, 2010; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). It has been argued by researchers in the field that IPA naturally provides rich accounts that are 'poignant, emotive and interesting' (Wagstaff *et al,* 2014, p.4), which is what I hoped for in my work. I used triangulation (Atkins and Wallace, 2012) basing my research design in existing theory emerging from engagement with the literature, and also by incorporating the four phases of data collection and analysis to answer the research questions. Sustained and iterative engagement with data over time also helped strengthen confidence in the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Including numerical data contributed to the 'internal generalisability' (Maxwell, 2010) of the study by helping to establish to what extent the themes identified in the interviews were characteristic of the survey respondents.

Reflexivity

It can be argued that trustworthiness in IPA research depends crucially on an engagement with reflexivity (Rodham, Fox and Doran, 2015; Connelly, 2016). This is defined by Horsburgh (2003, p.209) as the 'active acknowledgement by the researcher that his/her own actions and decisions will inevitably impact on the meaning and context of the experience under investigation'. In addition, reflexivity 'entails a sensitivity to the researcher's cultural, political, and social

context' (Bryman, 2016, p. 388). I would argue therefore a key part of reflexivity is maintaining an awareness of the extent to which these contexts were shared by myself and the research participants, as well as the possible differences between my own positions and those of others, and a commitment to constantly revisiting these differences throughout the research process.

One aspect of IPA where this tension plays out is in the double hermeneutic, where the researcher explicitly uses her own knowledge and understanding to interpret participants' sense-making (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Pringle *et al*, 2011), requiring a combination of a 'hermeneutics of empathy' (with participants) and a 'hermeneutics of questioning' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 36). Essentially, using IPA requires a balancing of trust and respect for participants with a quest for understanding what might lie beneath, which Finlay (2008, p.1) describes as:

> … a tension as the researcher moves between striving for reductive focus and being reflexively self-aware; between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight; between naïve openness and sophisticated criticality.

To negotiate this delicate balance and to be open to new ways of understanding how mature women students engage with learning, while avoiding assumptions potentially leading to prejudice and bias (Clancy, 2013), I drew on my experience as a tutor in Reflective Practice and Listening Skills where there is an emphasis on trying to see the other person's perspective and to suspend judgement. In particular, I tried to embody Carl Rogers' (1980) Core Conditions for person-centred therapy of *empathy* (demonstrating I was listening and understanding the participant), *unconditional positive regard* (showing acceptance of the participant's views and experiences) and *congruency* (being authentic and genuine).

My previous experiences and reading around reflexivity led me to using a reflective journal as part of an overall reflexive approach to the research process (Sigurgeirsdottir and Halldórsdóttir, 2008). Vicary, Young and Hicks (2016) highlight how using a journal contemporaneously during IPA research can be useful in helping to move data analysis from the descriptive to the interpretative by helping to capture the researcher's thoughts as part of the double hermeneutic. Reflection helped me to pay particular attention to my thoughts and feelings at each stage, to maintain awareness of the situatedness of my own perspective (Shaw, 2010). This was important, for example, when some of my own experiences overlapped with those of the interviewees, as it would have been easy to assume they felt the same as I did. However, by reflecting on my own feelings, interrogating them and the transcriptions for evidence, I was able to move closer to untangling participants' views from my own and identify differences. At times, I experienced quite strong emotions after listening to some participants' stories and needed to note these and put aside irrelevant aspects during the analysis stage (see Appendix E, p.472). Reflection was also invaluable in helping to ensure ethical issues were consistently centred as part of the research process (Pillow, 2003; Berger, 2015).

Combining and presenting the findings

Twelve interviews and sixty-five questionnaires collected over different time-points provided a vast amount of data, involving a long, slow, iterative process of analysis through the four phases of the study. Studies using IPA with multiple data collection points can convey participants' temporal experiences of a phenomenon, bringing together past experiences and imagined futures (Ashworth, 2016). The life history grids were planned to strengthen this approach, but ultimately, they did not offer useful insights for this thesis as they did not encourage interviewees to reflect on their learning as much as I had

hoped, although they were useful in helping them to tune into the topic of the interview.

Once all the transcripts had been analysed, I had to decide how to present the IPA themes. Farr and Nizza (2019) suggest one approach to structuring themes for IPA with longitudinal aspects is to break findings down into a set of themes *spanning time*, so I decided to explore each theme encompassing participants' progressions through the foundation degree. I have also followed suggestions to identify quotes with pseudonyms and timepoints (Int1 and Int2 for the first and second interview) to offer clarity around participants' learning journeys (Farr and Nizza, 2019).

To present participants' stories of being mature women students and the relevant statistics in a way that grew out of the data, I selected three horizons of experience (taken from Gadamer, 1975/2013) combining super-ordinate themes and sub-ordinate themes from the IPA analysis. Related findings from the quantitative phases were incorporated with the themes to provide context and to indicate how the experiential themes were relevant across the wider sample. The study prioritises the data and analysis from the qualitative phenomenological strand as these offer rich accounts of the experiences of mature women students engaging with heutagogy. However, the quantitative strand offers different and useful perspectives that complement the qualitative strand (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick, 2006; Kington *et al*, 2011). For example, questionnaire respondents reported high levels of confidence using online resources and the internet for their learning at the beginning of the course and even higher levels at the end, which were mirrored by the interviewees. However, the reported usage of various online strategies at the second survey point was much lower than the intentions reported as they started out on the course (this is discussed more fully in Chapter 5).

Chapter Summary

This chapter has described my position as a researcher and the methods I employed in this study, as well as exploring aspects such as ethical considerations, sampling and data collection and analysis. I have presented my justifications for decisions I made around carrying out the research and provided a transparent and reasoned account of the steps I followed. The research is informed by a pragmatic worldview with the aim of contributing to an improvement in practice. It is a matricentric feminist phenomenological study of the experiences of mature women students (mostly mothers) on a vocational foundation degree and as learners engaging in heutagogy, using a multiphase sequential mixed methods design with a dominant qualitative strand.

To answer the research questions identified at the end of the Literature Review chapter (p.69), the following three chapters present the findings using three shared horizons (Gadamer, 1975/2013) which were identified as part of the data analysis. 'Attitudes and approaches to learning' explores the student and her relationship with learning. 'Learning as part of complex lives' has the combining of the student's roles as a self-determined learner with her other roles as its focus. Finally, 'Navigating landscapes of learning' investigates the wider contexts for the student as a self-determined learner engaging in heutagogy.

Chapter 5: Findings I Attitudes and approaches to learning.

Introduction

Participants in this study were all mature women, mostly mothers, returning to study after a break and many had already gained degrees. They were therefore able to provide unique insights about the differences between studying as 'traditional' school leavers and studying as women with family and work commitments. The picture that emerges is one of participants having to constantly negotiate the complexity of deeply embedded social roles and family networks which were absent in previous learning experiences. The findings are presented in three chapters representing three horizons of experience (Gadamer, 1975/2013) of these research participants which start more specifically and then broaden out (Figure 10, below).

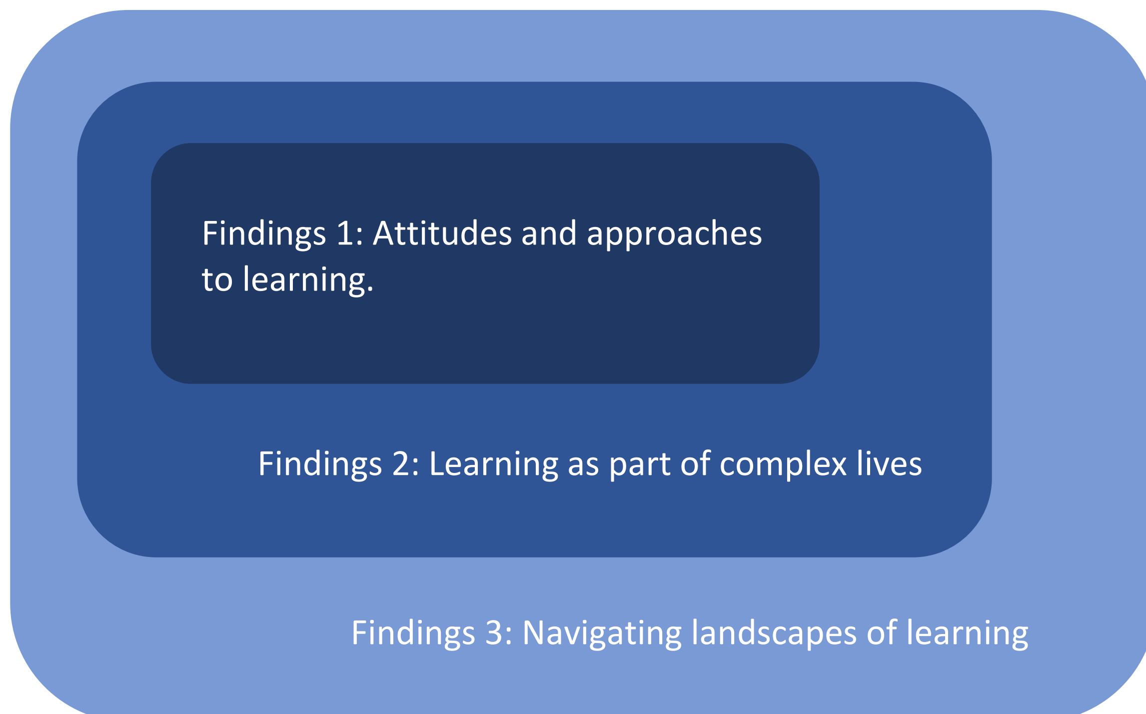


Figure 10: Three horizons of participants' experiences as learners

These horizons emerged from the analysis of the qualitative strand, which was the dominant component of the study (unlike many mixed methods studies where it is often subordinate to the quantitative component, Hess-Biber, 2010). The horizons provide a framework for presenting the findings from both strands: the integration of the qualitative and quantitative findings provide a more robust and complete understanding (Bryman, 2006) of the experiences of the participants as mature women students on the NCT course. The quantitative findings are generally presented first, which offer a context for the qualitative findings, the main focus of this study.

This first chapter examines participants' characteristics and learning identities as mature women returning to HE, and initially provides demographic information about the participants. It is then divided into two main sections: A. Attitudes to learning and B. Approaches to learning. These explore participants' engagement with learning, particularly in relation to four foundational principles of heutagogy as defined by Blaschke and Hase (2016). These include learner agency (students taking responsibility for their learning), self-efficacy and capability (students having confidence in their ability to learn new skills and knowledge and apply them in ever-evolving situations), reflection and metacognition (students thinking about how and what they learn and what it means for them), double-loop learning (constructing knowledge by making connections between new and existing understandings) and non-linear learning (students making their own decisions about which learning path to take).

Chapter 6 widens the focus to look at these participants in relation to their family and work lives and explores the interplay between their studies and their other roles and responsibilities in more depth. The stories of the interviewees are particularly important in this chapter.

Finally, Chapter 7 expands the focus further still to look at participants navigating learning with others in shared real and virtual learning spaces shaped by societal

structures and expectations. Two other foundational principles of heutagogy (communities of learning/practice and lifelong learning) are considered in this latter chapter.

About the research participants

There were 130 women students in the cohort starting at Level 4 in September 2017 on the NCT Birth and Beyond foundation degree course. Upon successful completion of Level 5 they would be qualified to work as NCT practitioners supporting new parents in a range of roles including antenatal teachers, breastfeeding counsellors and postnatal practitioners. All the students were sent a link to an online questionnaire and forty-two answered this first survey (S-1). Twenty-three of the same cohort answered a second survey in May 2019 (S-2); seventeen respondents answered both questionnaires. A small purposive subset of S-1 respondents (n=8) was approached by email and invited to be part of the interview study. Six agreed and participated in both stages of interviews (Int1 in Summer 2018, and Int2 in Autumn 2019; see Figure 11, below).

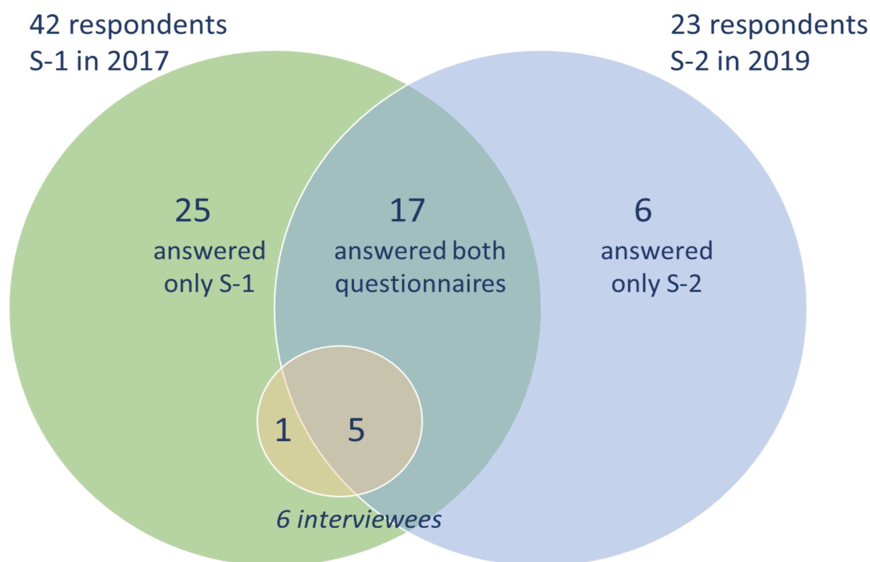


Figure 11: Number of participants

Questionnaire respondents

Respondents at both survey timepoints were asked a range of questions about their attitudes and approaches to learning; they were asked to expand on their answers using free text comment boxes with no word limits.

Most S-1 respondents were aged between 26 and 45 years old (n=33, 79%); just 2 (6%) were younger and 7 (17%) were aged 46 or older. S-2 respondents were also mostly aged between 26 and 45 years old, with none younger and only three (13%) aged 46 years old or older. About three-quarters of both groups had one or two children aged under 11 years living at home at least part of the time (n=30, 72% S-1; n=17, 74% S-2); just a small number of both samples had one or more older children living at home (n=6, 14% S-1; n=3, 13% S-2). They were not asked specifically if they had adult children who had left home, but the free text comments indicated several did; nearly all respondents were therefore mothers. The demographic characteristics of the questionnaire respondents are presented in Table 6 (p.131) (not all respondents answered every question).

Attributes		Survey 1 (S-1) 42 respondents	Survey 2 (S-2) 23 respondents
Age	Age in years	25 or under (2) 26-35 (21) 36-45 (12) 46 or above (7)	26-35 (11) 36-45 (9) 46 or above (3)
Children	Children at home (<11 years)	None (8) One child (18) Two children (12) Three children (2) Four or more (2)	None (2) One child (5) Two children (12) Three children (4)
	Children at home (11-18 years)	None (35) One child (4) Two children (1) Three children (1)	None (20) One child (2) Two children (1)
Education history	Highest level of previous education	Level 3 (8) Level 4/5 (5) Level 6 (22) Level 7/8 (7)	*Not asked*
	Time since last in formal education	Last academic year (3) 2-5 years ago (9) 6-10 years ago (15) 11-15 years ago (7) 16+ years ago (8)	*Not asked*
Student location	Location of study days	In London (21) Outside London (21)	In London (4) Outside London (19)

Table 6: Characteristics of questionnaire respondents (S-1 and S-2) S-1: Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q28 S-2: Q2, Q3, Q4, Q29

S-1 respondents indicated they had a range of previous education experiences. Over two-thirds had previously attained an undergraduate or postgraduate degree (n=29, 69% at Level 6 and Level 7), while just under a fifth (n=8, 19%) said their highest level of education was a Level 3 qualification such as A Levels. The remainder had a Level 4 or 5 qualification such as a Certificate of Higher Education (n=5, 12%). This sample therefore differed from other studies whose

participants had often underachieved academically before returning to HE (see, for example, Stevenson and Clegg, 2011).

Respondents also indicated different lengths of time since last studying. While just over a quarter had been in formal education recently or in the last 5 years (n=12, 28%), over two-thirds had a gap of 6 or more years (n=30, 71%). A third had had a gap of 11 or more years (n=15, 36%); about a fifth had not been in formal education since 2001 or earlier (n=8, 19%).

Interviewees

Demographic characteristics of the six interviewees are presented in Table 7 (p.133). They were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Arwen, Becky, Cora and Esme all had one or two very young preschool age children at the beginning of the course and then had babies during their studies. Freya's children were slightly older, while Darby's children were young adults (she was one of the older students in the cohort). In contrast to some participants, all six interviewees had previously attained at least one degree. All had had a gap of several years since being in formal education, except Freya who had been on the NCT Access course in the year before starting Level 4 (after a gap of several years since her first undergraduate degree). Becky had done a short course in NCT Breastfeeding Peer Support but did not count this as formal education. Arwen was one of several students in the cohort who had dyslexia and dyspraxia; she was able to access some support through the university but felt being off campus limited the helpfulness of this. Two were studying in Scotland, two were in London and two were in the English Home Counties, a relatively affluent area beyond London. Their details are shown in Table 7 (p.133):

Pseudonym	Family responsibilities	Paid employment	Highest level previous education	Age at course start (years)	Time since last in education (years)	Location
Arwen	1 preschool child, new baby during course	No	L6	36-40	11-15	Scotland
Becky	2 preschool children, new baby during course	No	L6	36-40	11-15	Scotland
Cora	1 preschool child, new baby during course	No	L7	31-35	6-10	England
Darby	1 child at university, 1 in 6th form	Part-time	L7	46-50	16+	England
Esme	1 preschool child, new baby during course	Full-time/ on maternity leave	L7	36-40	2-3	London
Freya	1 child at primary school, 1 preschool child	Part-time	L6	36-40	1	London

Table 7: Characteristics of interviewees (Int1 and Int2)

Both sets of interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then analysed using IPA, and super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes were identified, as described in Chapter 4 (p.115).

Overview of IPA themes

An overview of themes is presented in Table 8 (p.135): super-ordinate themes are grouped under different horizons of experience. Each super-ordinate theme has several related sub-ordinate themes. This chapter investigates super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes grouped under *I.A Participants' attitudes to learning* and *I.B Participants' approaches to learning*. In Chapter 6, the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes grouped under *II Learning as part of complex lives* are explored. Finally, super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes under *III Navigating landscapes of learning* are the focus of Chapter 7. Each section includes a table of super-ordinate themes and the corresponding sub-ordinate themes under consideration.

Horizons	Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes
I.A Participants' attitudes to learning	Highly motivated learners	More than getting an NCT qualification Wanting to do well Enjoying learning
	Learning as a mature student is different	Benefits Challenges
	Active, responsible learners	Taking responsibility Constructing and reconstructing how they learn Confident about learning Confident about using online resources and the internet for learning
I.B Participants' approaches to learning	Learning independently using online and social media strategies	Benefits Concerns
	Learning independently using offline strategies	Reading effectively Rabbit holes Revisiting and reflecting
	Revisiting and reflecting on learning	Reflecting alone Reflecting with others
II. Learning as part of complex lives	Integrating study into complex lives	Taking on an extra shift Squeezing study into slivers of time and space Shifting sands of family life
	Impact of studying on mothering	A less available mother? High cost of studying
	Impact of studying on participants	A range of emotions Becoming more critical learners 'Doing something for themselves'
	Impact of studying on participants' relationships	Changes in relationships with partners Lack of social time
III. Navigating landscapes of learning	Landscapes of learning – travelling as women and mothers	Women studying together Women not men studying
	Landscapes of learning - travelling together	Learning as part of NCT and Worcester Physically and virtually located university Learning with tutors and especially peers Studying strategies with peers and others
	Continuing the learning journey	Moving forward into practice with mixed emotions Lifelong learning – benefits and barriers Becoming a learning practitioner and lifelong learning

Table 8: Interpretative phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts: overview of themes

A. Participants' Attitudes to Learning

This section begins by investigating what led participants (questionnaire respondents and interviewees) to embark on the NCT course and the different aspects motivating them as learners. It then examines how they felt about being more mature learners this time around; how they took responsibility for their independent learning; and how they constructed their understanding of themselves as self-determined learners. Finally, their confidence about studying as returners to education is explored, and particularly their confidence about using online resources for learning. The IPA themes for this section are shown in Table 9, below (the process for identifying these was described in Chapter 4, p.117).

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes
Highly motivated learners	More than getting an NCT qualification Wanting to do well Enjoying learning
Learning as a mature student is different	Benefits Challenges
Active, responsible learners	Taking responsibility Constructing and reconstructing how they learn Confident about learning Confident about using online resources and the internet for learning

Table 9: Interpretative phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts: interviewees' attitudes to learning.

Super-ordinate theme: Highly motivated learners

A main reason for undertaking the vocational course was the achievement of a qualification to become an NCT practitioner. However, the research identified a range of participants' motivations beyond this goal.

Sub-ordinate theme: More than getting an NCT qualification

At the beginning of the course, a large majority (n=36, 86%, Q22e) of S-1 questionnaire respondents chose the answer stating they were *'looking forward to a change in direction'*, indicating the course was the start of a new path in their lives. Exactly half (n=21, 50%, Q22n) said they were looking forward to gaining a qualification. Around half (n=20, 47%) indicated it was not often or almost never true that the course was mainly a means to the end of becoming an NCT practitioner, supporting new parents (Figure 12, p.138). At the second survey point, the proportion choosing not often true or almost never true was slightly lower (n=9, 39%, Q15b); participants approaching the end of the course were perhaps more focussed on achieving the qualification than earlier, but many were seemingly still gaining more out of the course than just a licence to practice.

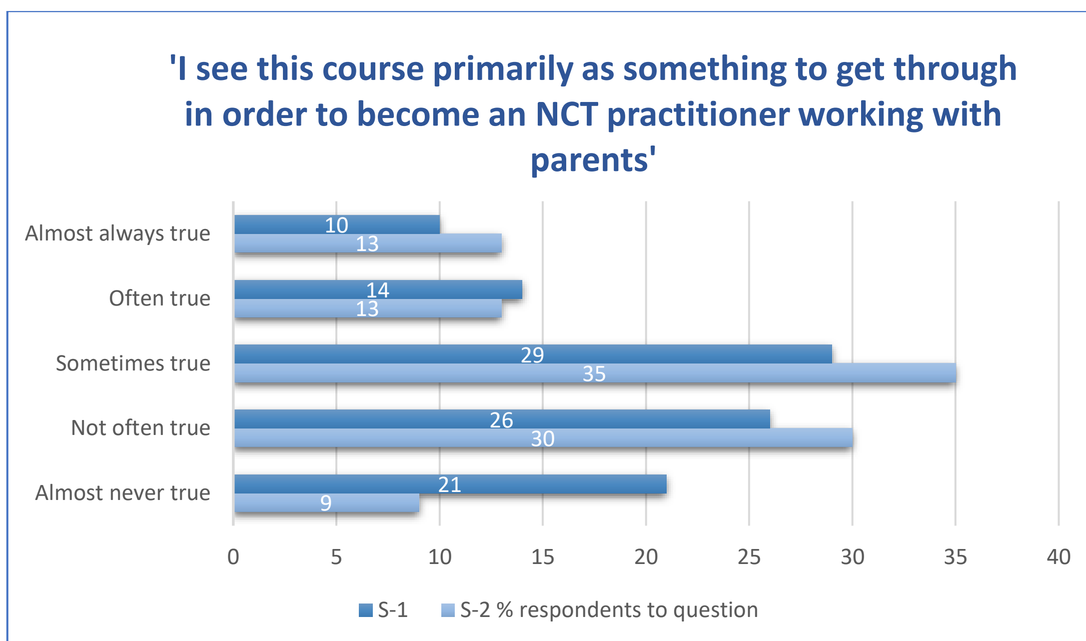


Figure 12: Respondents' views on the primary reason for taking the course (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q16b and S-2 Q15b

Several said in their free text comments they were looking forward to starting a career supporting parents, because it was something that *'interests me wholeheartedly'*. Many highlighted they wanted to do something interesting and worthwhile outside the spheres of family and paid work, that was just theirs and contributed to their personal development: '*having time to study for me, being able to dedicate time to learning about something I'm so interested in'* and *'I am very much looking forward to learning more about myself.'* were typical comments (S-1). Their decisions to embark on the course were therefore multifactorial.

The interviewees also demonstrated a mixture of motivations for starting their training with NCT. Becky wanted to find a career congruent with her desire to help people in a meaningful way so she would be *'valued, and a contributor with valuable knowledge'*; but she also felt it was '*the first thing I had done since having children that was for me'* (Becky, Int1). Cora was motivated by wanting to support parents as she *'likes helping'* and also by wanting something to occupy her mind while her children were very young: *'I think I would really struggle not to do*

something [...] I think I would get bored.' (Cora, Int1). Esme described being inspired to support new parents more effectively than the meagre support available to her and her partner when her first child was born, because she '*really struggled emotionally and mentally with the identity changes and everything else'* (Esme, Int1). Freya had originally been interested in pursuing midwifery, but felt it was too expensive once the UK student midwife bursary scheme ended, so the NCT course offered similar subject matter that was thought-provoking and intriguing:

> *Originally when I did the course it was because I felt like I had this itch. It was a subject I wanted to explore, and I was, "Oh, can I do that, is that something I want to do?" and I kept coming back to it and kept coming back to it.* (Freya, Int2)

She was seemingly driven by the subject matter more than the prospect of an NCT career. Darby too indicated she was motivated not so much by becoming a practitioner – although supporting breastfeeding mothers was important to her – but more by escaping from her previous job:

> *I'm in this very difficult, horrible situation with work: things are kind of falling apart, I need to do something else. Oh, here's something I could do. (*Darby, Int2)

None of the interviewees brought up being motivated by being role models for their children, which contrasts with other studies (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Webber, 2017a). How learning on this course affected participants is explored in more detail in Chapter 6 (p.218).

Sub-ordinate theme: Wanting to do well

Other studies have indicated older students tend to be less driven than younger ones by extrinsic motivations, such as good grades or family expectations, and

more by intrinsic motivations, such as self-esteem and interest. One example is a study of links between the demographic characteristics of students on a UK distance learning course and their approaches and attitudes towards studying (Richardson, 2007). This observed effect can be intensified for older women students, as shown by a study comparing 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' US students (Justice and Dornan, 2001). However, in the present study, the survey answers indicated respondents were very often highly motivated to do well (Figure 13, below) and this became even more likely at the second survey point, with most respondents (n=34, 81%, S-1; n= 21, 91%, S-2) indicating it was often true or almost always true getting high grades was important to them.

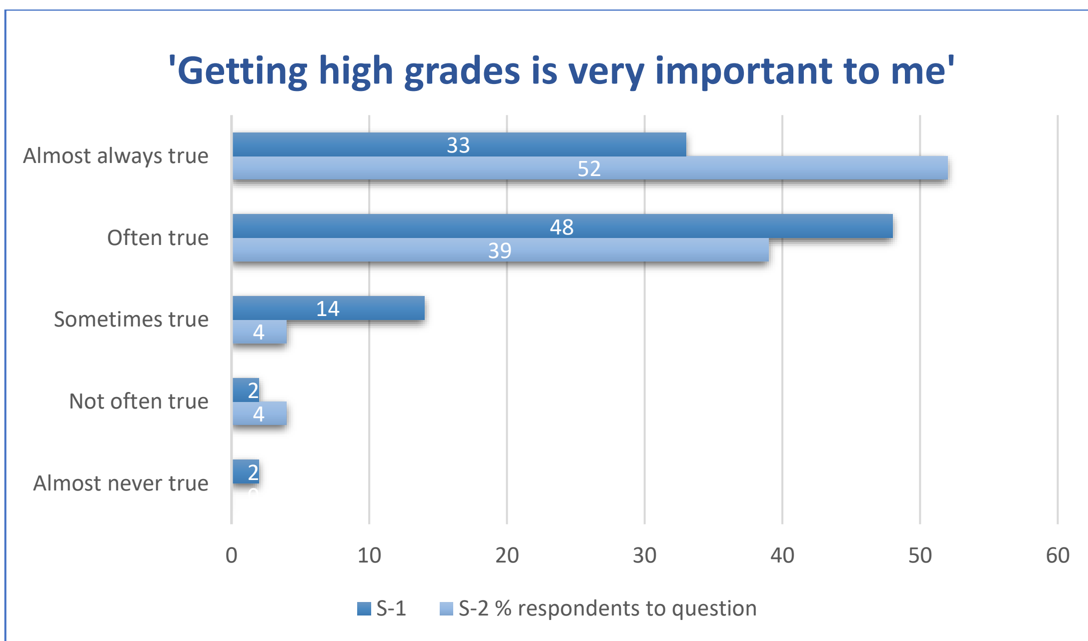


Figure 13: Respondents' views on the importance of achieving high grades (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q16h and S-2 Q15h

Both groups of respondents were asked whether they did only enough work to pass assignments (Figure 14, p.141). Both groups of respondents indicated they were very likely to aim higher than the minimum required, with fewer than one in ten (n=3, 7% S-1; n=2, 9% S-2) agreeing with the statement. At the second survey point, the distribution was more skewed towards the 'Almost never true'

side, with 57% (n=13) saying this, compared to 41% (n=17) of S-1 respondents. This suggests that merely passing assignments and the course was not the main aim of many participants, and indeed that the importance of achieving high grades was higher towards the end of the course.

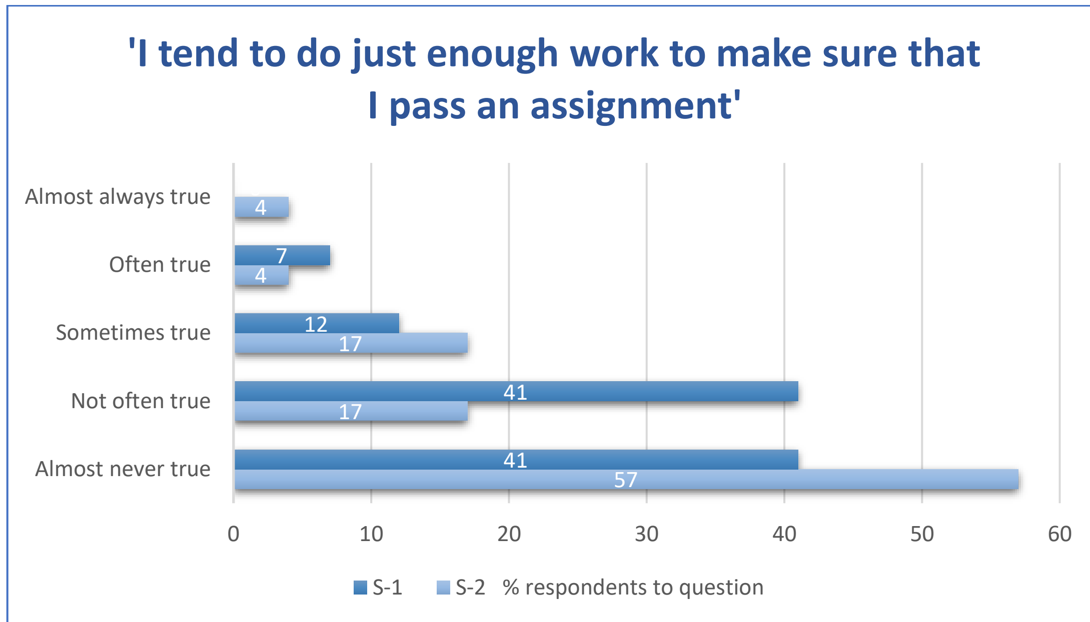


Figure 14: Respondents' views on working to just pass assignments (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Question 16n and S-2 Question 15n

While many respondents commented they felt disappointed when they did not achieve high marks, or felt guilty about not putting in enough work through lack of interest in a subject, a few seemed less concerned. One student described being unwilling to prioritise spending time to get a better grade because of being busy at home. Another mentioned having to come to terms with aiming for lower grades as she had had a baby during the course. A third said constraints on study time available meant she had to *'be pragmatic and focus on passing assignments rather being a perfectionist'* (S-2), which echoes the 'strategic pragmatism' (Duncan, 1990, p. 58, cited in Griffiths, 2002) mentioned in the discussion of approaches to learning in Chapter 2 (p.55). The juggling of study, home life and sometimes paid work is a topic explored in greater depth in Chapter 6 (p.197).

The interviewees also had high expectations of themselves as students, often seeming to be motivated by others' expectations and judgement. The first interview built on the interviewees' previous experiences of learning and how these and their family backgrounds had affected them as learners. Esme (Int1) described herself as always having been a *'high achiever'* while Cora (Int1) stated, *'If I don't get an A, then I'm not happy*.' Apart from Cora, whose parents were *'not too strict'* even though she described herself as *'always quite academic, but … also quite naughty*' (Int1), they all highlighted the expectations placed on them to achieve at school and move on to HE by their families or the schools they attended. Esme and Freya pointed to the specific influence of their fathers, with both of them having been appointed the academic *'shining star'* (Esme, Int1) out of their siblings. Esme described how her parents were very supportive of her, but her father was seemingly the much stronger influence.

None of the interviewees talked much or at all about how their mothers affected their academic careers and ambitions. This contrasts with other studies which have shown mothers tend to be the parents who provide the emotional care around their children's education (Reay, 1998; Reay, 2005; O'Brien, 2008; Plageman and Sabina, 2010; Cooper, 2017), although it is possible the interviewees did not notice any support their mothers provided, or perhaps considered it so usual as to be unremarkable. Considering her first experiences of moving into HE, Esme described how her father (who had not had the opportunity to go to university himself) wanted her to take an Economics degree as a way of moving into a highly paid field offering security, even though it was not what she had in mind for herself:

> *I think he wanted all of us kids to have a comfortable life, and to not have to struggle like he did… so… that's probably why he pushed me to get into… Economics.* (Esme, Int1)

She seemed to feel he prioritised his hopes for her future (security) ahead of her own plans (self-development) and there is a sense of her trying to forgive him for '*pushing*' her, even though she had to strive hard to break away and find her own path, (she made several false starts at different universities) and she tried to take a positive view:

> *He's always been very influential … I think I'm always striving to make sure I'm doing the best I possibly can.* (Esme, Int1)

Even after his death, his desire for her to elevate herself loomed over her and continued to shape her motivation.

Freya too felt her father, who had not attended university either, wanted her to take a certain educational path, including attending a prestigious university, as a way of being successful in life, despite her lack of engagement with the subjects:

> *My father was very keen on me doing Latin, so I did Latin GCSE which I hated - I absolutely hated with a passion. But again, it was that – Greek, Latin, the classics: 'This is what will set you up for life!' So, I think we just had that built into us from Day One. I don't know - I don't actually know what would have happened if I'd turned round and said I didn't want to go to university, or if I'd wanted to go off and travel the world or something. I think he probably would've said, 'Don't be so silly - of course you're going to university!' [laughs].* (Freya, Int1)

Both Esme and Freya portrayed their fathers as seeing HE as the obvious route to take to move into a high-flying career, to support themselves comfortably. Freya's school also propelled her towards A-levels and university because the idea of not going to sixth form and then university was *'unheard-of'* (Freya, Int1).

Going to university the first time around was similarly inevitable for Darby, *'because that's what you did if you got the grades'* (Darby, Int2); she was also a

'precocious early reader' and therefore was brought up with the idea she *'could do anything and the world was my oyster. So, I never thought twice about whether I would go to university.'* (Darby, Int1). This inexorability of going to university to take their first degrees contrasts strongly with the decision participants made to return to HE, where it was their active choice to embark on the NCT course. Like Esme and Freya, Darby's parents had not been to university either and therefore seemed to have unrealistic and ultimately unhelpful expectations:

> *I think I had a vision of myself as someone very capable from a very early age because of the feedback I had from my parents, mostly, because they made me think I could do anything. And then gradually as I went through the school system, I realised I wasn't quite as brilliant as they thought I was.* (Darby, Int1)

At another point, Darby linked this element of always being expected to do well to her feeling *'…sometimes like an imposter. Not feeling good enough or qualified enough'* (Darby, Int1) because her idea of herself as a learner did not match her parents' views. While Freya and Esme seemed to have adapted their sense of themselves as learners as they moved onto the NCT course and managed to cope with the reverberations of their fathers' influences, Darby seemed to find it harder to move away from her parents' ultimately unhelpful views of her:

> *I have reflected and tried to work this out a bit more for myself. Just to - yeah, to know what is enough and what's 'good enough' and that's going to be my challenge. I would like to be better than 'good enough' [smiles], you know what I mean? But I think sometimes my standards for myself might be so high I will never quite…* (Darby, Int1)

She seemed to struggle with an inhibiting perfectionism at times (her '*you know what I mean?*' implies she felt or perhaps hoped she was not alone in this), and her unfinished sentence hints at the edifice of expectation still towering over her.

Her perception of herself as a learner therefore shifted uneasily: was she a slow learner who found some things difficult, or one for whom *'good enough'* was unacceptably low? Research on student transitions to HE refers to a student needing to reconstruct their learner identity, 'where the learner negotiates which aspects of their previous learner identity to maintain and which require transformation' (Turner and Tobbell, 2017, p.714), and it seemed Darby was in the middle of this process. She described at several points the importance to her of getting good feedback and high grades, which were *'an enormous boost'* and *'affirmative'* (Darby, Int1); this could be linked to her need to have others reflect back she was indeed meeting the standards she set for herself, and also to give her a clearer idea of who she was as a learner.

Arwen related how she had not always had positive learning experiences previously, at least in part because of a lack of support and understanding of her dyslexia and dyspraxia. She disliked the idea of being labelled as a student who got low grades and wanted to prove herself: *'I didn't want to be a D student, I wanted to be more than a D student. … I wanted to do well.'* (Arwen, Int2). Like Darby, she gave the impression the grades were not merely an assessment of a piece of work but reflected others' valuing of her as a person.

Becky had a relatively straightforward view of being a learner, depicting herself as always having been a *'good student'* with *'positive learning experiences',* and a friendship set who competed to achieve top grades which motivated her to do well (Becky, Int1). She did not mention her family explicitly but described her motivation to do well as being instilled in her at school, where discipline was important and *'to achieve things, you need to do well'* (Becky, Int1). Like Darby and Arwen, she appreciated the external validation good feedback on study assignments or work projects provided her, and noticed how much she missed this when she became a stay-at-home mother:

I don't think you feel like you achieve when you have babies. … I mean, an achievement is that he is breathing at the end of the day [laughs]. I don't know, you don't get certificates at the end of the month. (Becky, Int1)

Becky and Cora seemed comfortable with the implications of balancing studying with their other responsibilities, and particularly the arrival of their new babies. Cora (Int2) described having *'to lower her standards slightly'* after her son was born and Becky tried to be upbeat about not achieving the high grades she would have liked:

Maybe I didn't do as well in some things as I thought I wanted to do. But I don't feel bad about that because I think, 'Well, I have done the best I could do at this given point.' And there is all this other stuff going on, and I'm ok with that. (Becky, Int1)

Like most participants, Becky's default expectations about doing well and being seen to do well by others had to be examined and re-prioritised in the light of the challenging context of being a mature student with caring responsibilities.

As well as providing students with the chance to start a new phase of their working lives, the course also offered the extrinsic motivation of validation by others, not just from tutors on the course, but also in wider society through achievement of a university-accredited qualification. However, participants also seemed to be motivated by an intrinsic love of learning, which is now explored in more detail.

Sub-ordinate theme: Enjoying learning

Enjoying learning for its own sake was a common trait for respondents at both survey timepoints (Figure 15, p.147). Over two-thirds stated it was often or almost always true for them as they embarked on the course (n=19, 69%, S-1), and nearly

three-quarters concurred at the end of the second academic year (n=17, 74%, S-2). The answers tended to skew towards the positive side, implying a love of learning developed further over the course. Many respondents talked about their enjoyment and excitement around developing their knowledge base and skills: one was '*looking forward to studying all the different areas*' (S-1), while others said, '*I like learning new things all the time.*' and '*I am happiest when I am learning.*' (S-2).

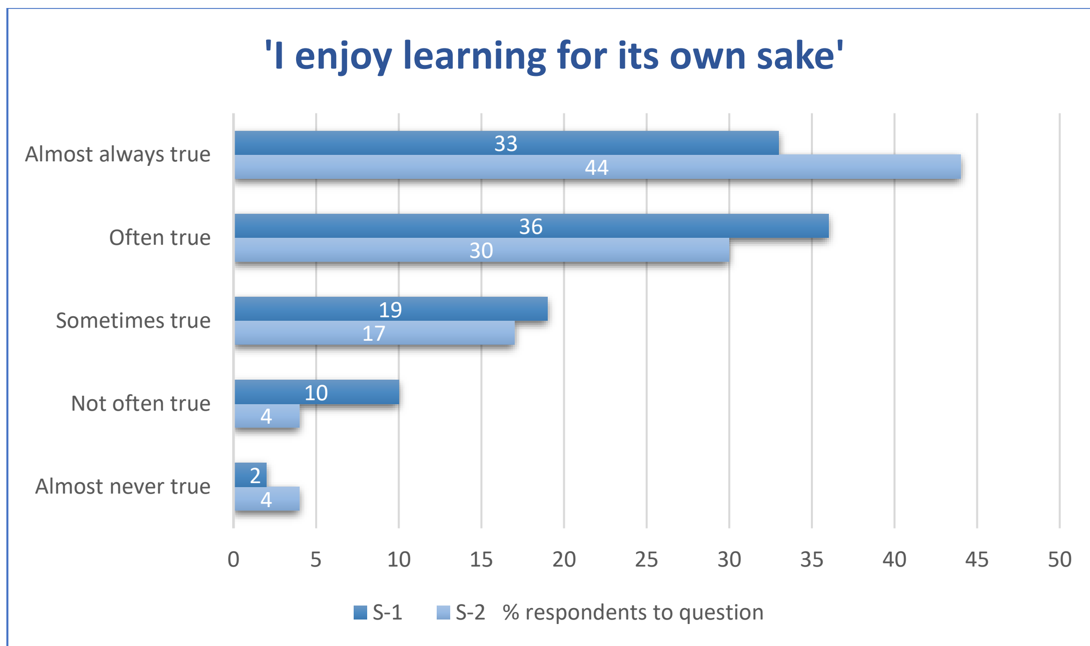


Figure 15: Respondents' views on enjoying learning (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q16a and S-2 Q15a

Respondents were asked how they were feeling as they embarked on the course. Many identified a range of positive feelings, with the majority of S-1 respondents indicating they were '*excited*' (n=41, 98%), '*interested*' (n=30, 71%), '*motivated*' (n=31, 74%) and '*passionate*' (n=27, 64%); just over half said they were '*looking forward to making friends*' (n=23, 55%) and half reported feeling '*confident*' (n=21, 50%). Smaller proportions also identified being '*anxious*' (n=19, 45%), '*concerned*' (n=9, 21%), and '*unsure*' (n=5, 12%).

The interviewees too often demonstrated positive engagement with learning; they often talked about *'loving'* being learners on the course. Sometimes they seemed surprised about how much they appreciated learning in itself. For example, Esme was taken aback at just how much she appreciated engaging deeply with the topics she was studying and would have valued more time to read:

> *I am quite surprised at the - the level of enjoyment I am getting out of it. I mean I have got to stop buying books and the ones here on the shelf are just a starting point … but I could read about this stuff till the cows come home if I had enough hours in the day.* (Esme, Int1)

Freya reported how she had been very engaged in the first year - *'I'm really enjoying this, I really like this, I'm really interested, really inspired.'* (Freya, Int2) - but found the setup of the second part-time year did not suit her so well, as she preferred *'short and sweet, compact courses with a start and end, and I know what I'm getting out of it'* (Freya, Int2). She felt she had *'lost momentum'* because she only had two modules with several long gaps between study days. Part-time students in other studies have reported similar challenges (see, for example, Butcher, 2020). Freya therefore paused before deciding whether to move on to Level 5 and then into practice, because she was uncertain this was the right path for her. Nevertheless, she said she had valued it as:

> *I think generally it's been a very positive experience going back into studying after such a long break … I've enjoyed it, it's been a good experience. And I certainly don't regret having done it.* (Freya, Int2)

For many participants, enjoyment was an important and sometimes unexpected facet of the learning process. Extrinsic and intrinsic motivations were seemingly intertwined for many participants.

Super-ordinate theme: Learning as a mature student is different

This section considers the two sub-ordinate themes of the benefits and challenges of learning as a mature student together, as they were often interconnected; situations that were challenging for some participants were positive experiences for others.

Sub-ordinate themes: Benefits and challenges

One aspect of participants' identities as learners that differed from their previous learning experiences was that many had had a significant gap before taking up studying again (see Table 6, p.131). I wanted to know if participants felt age was a specific characteristic affecting their experiences of returning to study. The questionnaire respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement that learning is easier for younger learners (Figure 16, p.150). Only a small proportion at both survey timepoints felt this was often or almost always true (n=6, 14% S-1; n=2, 9% S-2), while around four in ten S-1 respondents (n=16, 38%), and three in ten S-2 respondents (n=7, 30%) felt this was sometimes true. A couple of respondents thought younger students have brains that are *'more agile'* and *'better at taking in and storing a lot of information';* another respondent lamented her declining memory: '*I feel I have lost more knowledge in the last 10 years than I could ever gain back!'*. Others claimed studying was easier for younger people not because of their age, but because of their life situations, having *'fewer distractions and responsibilities'* and *'more time'* (learning as part of complex lives is explored in Chapter 6). Another difference cited was going from school straight to university means younger students are used to studying so tend to have *'the momentum to keep going'*, whereas those with a gap *'may just find it more difficult to get back into the habit of schoolwork'*.

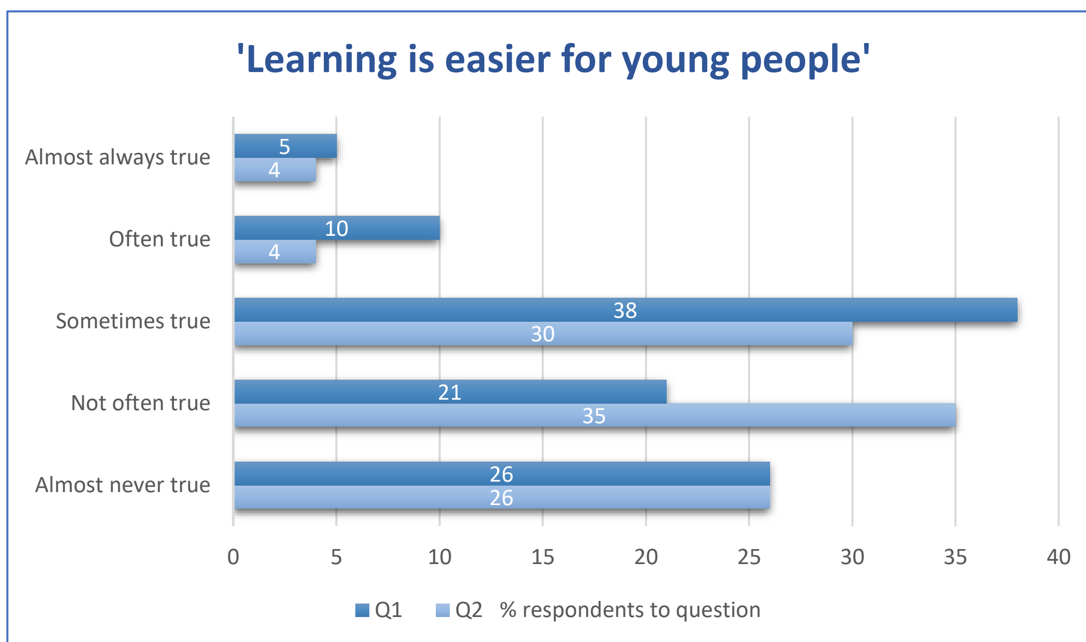


Figure 16: Respondents' views on whether learning is easier for younger people (Surveys 1 and 2) percentages of responses to S-1 Q16x and S-2 Q15s

In contrast, nearly half of S-1 respondents (n=20, 47%) and over three-fifths of S-2 respondents (n=14, 61%) said it was not often or almost never true learning is easier for young people. Reasons given for this included older students having years of life experience to draw on. One stated very positively, '*The older you are, the more life experience you can bring to the table.'* (S-1), although another suggested it might therefore be harder to be openminded to new perspectives.

Several commented on the advantage of being at their age and stage and having actively chosen to return to study, so they were *'more focused'* and more motivated on this course to be a self-regulated learner than students who had just have drifted onto a course because it was expected of them:

> *I think anyone can learn not just young people, sometimes in fact it can help to be a bit older, because you have chosen to learn and spend the time investigating something that is of interest to you. Often when you*

> *are young you just learn because someone has told you that is what you have to do.* (S-1)

One pointed to a balance of benefits between older and younger learners:

> *I think mature learners are likely to have more skills to draw on for their studies, whereas younger students may pick up new ones more quickly.* (S-1)

The issue of age was not referred to explicitly by Arwen, Becky and Esme who were in the average age bracket for the cohort and therefore did not stand out from their fellow students. However, both Darby, who was in the highest age bracket, and Freya, in one of the higher age brackets, alluded to both negative and positive aspects of being older. Returning to study as a mature student had, Freya said, made her re-evaluate her first experience of university, and while it conjured up *'lots of good memories of being a student first time around'* (Freya, Int1), it had also highlighted her tendency not to question or challenge authority at that age:

> *I think being older as well, I'm much more aware of – everybody has an agenda. Every organisation. Everybody has their own reasons for doing things. I think when I was 18 at university, I was just, 'That's what it says in the book!' [laughs].'* (Freya, Int1)

As an older student, she was now more aware of needing to critique other views and develop and articulate her own ideas:

> *It was quite interesting to me, particularly with my first essay, to have to sit down and really think, 'Right, okay: so, what am I trying to say here? Do I think that? Or do I think something else or what do they think?'. And then to actually have to come up with an opinion of my own.* (Freya, Int2)

This gives a sense of the unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable practice of trying to establish what her views were before she could try to give voice to them. An aspect Freya felt had definitely not improved with age, however, was finding herself easily distracted, particularly at the end of a long study day:

> *I definitely need it to be varied otherwise I switch off a bit. I think that comes with age a bit as well. So you start thinking about, 'What do I need to buy? What do I need to add to my Ocado shop?' and all these things – midlife woes! … I am usually pretty focused until perhaps the last half hour.* (Freya, Int1)

Many students need a variety of teaching approaches to maintain their interest at any age, and it could be argued Freya's distraction was less a function of ageing, and more a consequence of having a family to feed and care for. For example, Arwen described the contrast between being a mature student with caring responsibilities and her younger self:

> *I think if you didn't pass or if you didn't do well, you'd put more pressure on yourself because you've got more responsibilities. Whereas if I was a young student back in 1993 and I didn't do so well, I just maybe put more work into - I could easily find time to work a little bit harder on my next assignment. Whereas this time around it's full steam ahead on everything - juggling lots of balls where there were not so many balls before.* (Arwen, Int2)

She had a wider range of things to manage as a student on this course and was steering the fully-laden ship of her family responsibilities, so she found it almost impossible to react quickly to adapt to unexpected extra workload; she mourned the flexibility she remembered having as a younger student to cope with unforeseen changes. Cora also identified this need to be more organised once she had family responsibilities, but pointed out as a younger student she was more

intent on enjoying herself than prioritising her studying, perhaps partly due to taking a subject she admitted she was not very interested in:

> *I think it was more difficult when I was younger because you couldn't really concentrate on your studies because you wanted to do stuff with your life more – that was the more important thing. So, it was sort of – at university – the learning was by the side, an inconvenience.* (Cora, Int1)

Her use of the second person suggests she felt her view on learning as getting in the way of the important things in life was quite common. The difference she highlighted here mirrors the questionnaire respondents who felt this time around they were more motivated by their interest in the subjects they were studying.

Darby, meanwhile, who started the course more as a means of escaping her previous job than because she had fully considered the implications of becoming an NCT practitioner, felt the pressure of being older when considering if she had actually made the right choice to take the NCT course. This was partly a feeling of having less of her working life left than her peers: *'I'm aware I'm not thirty [laughs]. So, you think, 'How many opportunities does one have to reinvent oneself?'* (Darby, Int2) – this idea of reinventing herself links to an unstable sense of her learner identity as discussed earlier, and also a sense of authenticity. She worried being older implied she should be wiser with more developed skills than she suspected she had, although she tried to convince herself others no doubt felt the same sense of being an imposter:

> *I feel like I'm still - definitely still evolving. I think when you're a young person you look at people my age or slightly older and you think, 'They really know themselves really well, and they've … got themselves together.' And I still feel like I'm - but I'm sure that's how everyone is actually, because we're all pretending.* (Darby, Int1)

Increasing age, therefore, was tightly bound up with the other aspects of being a mature learner; participants identified downsides such as having less time or for a few, being concerned about learning less effectively, but also benefits including being more dedicated because they had actively chosen the course.

Super-ordinate theme: Active, responsible learners

Learner agency, where students take responsibility for how and what they learn, is a notable element of heutagogy (Blaschke and Hase, 2016). Some studies have found mature students face challenges in directing their own learning (see, for example, Jossberger *et al,* 2010; Herrera, Brown and Portlock, 2015). One challenge is having a belief in one's ability to tackle tasks successfully, or self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977b). Other studies such as Quimby and O'Brien's (2006) US university study have found mature women students often have high levels of self-efficacy beliefs, and the current study found similar results which is perhaps related to most of the sample having already had HE experience.

Sub-ordinate theme: Taking responsibility

The majority of questionnaire respondents reported taking responsibility for their academic achievement, with nearly nine in ten of S-1 respondents saying the statement '*Success is more down to hard work than luck*' was often or almost always true (Figure 17, p.155: n=37, 88%); only one person was at odds with the majority view of S-2 respondents (n=22, 96%) in agreement with the statement.

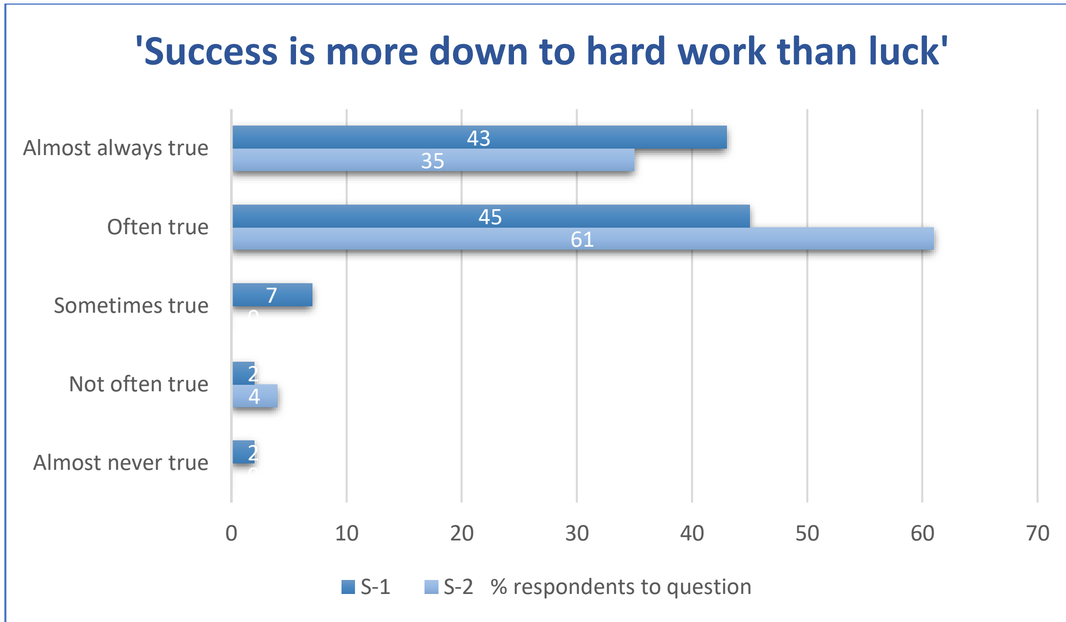


Figure 17: Respondents' views on factors affecting success (Surveys 1 and 2) – percentages of responses to S-1 Q16w and S-2 Q15w

All S-1 respondents said the statement fate was an important factor in their success was not often or almost never true (Figure 18, p.156: n=41, 100%). While a large majority of S-2 respondents felt similarly (n=20, 86%), a small proportion thought it was sometimes or often true (n=3, 12%), which may indicate they had experienced less control over their studying success than anticipated. Generally, answers at both survey timepoints indicated respondents were likely to have an internal locus of control, which can indicate a preference for a less-structured learning environment (Pashler *et al*, 2008).

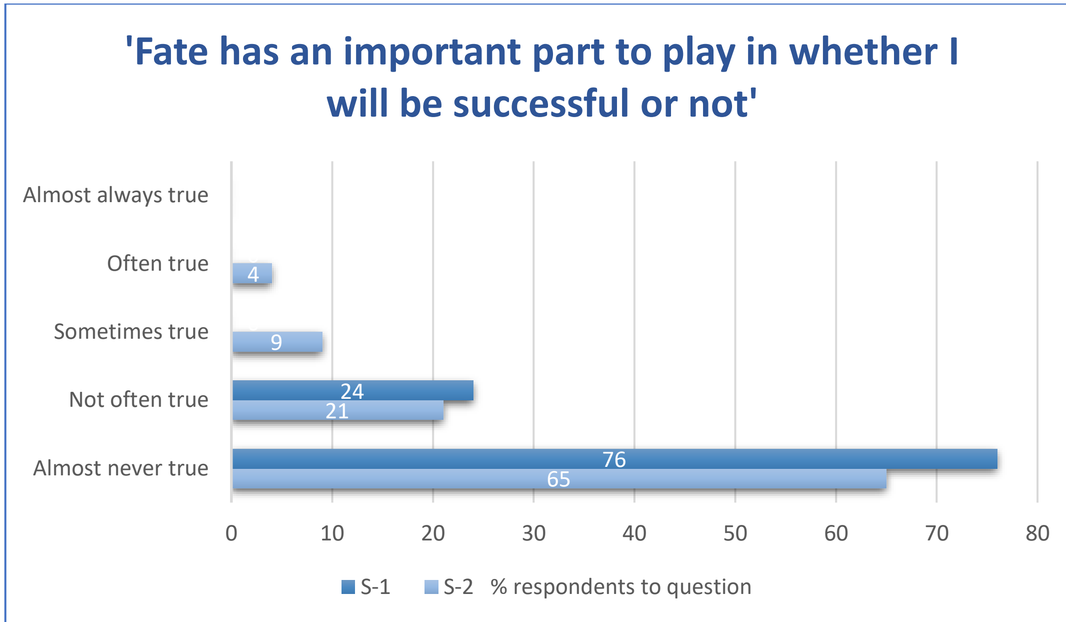


Figure 18: Respondents' views on fate affecting success (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q160 and S-2 Q150

Respondents at both survey timepoints indicated being highly likely to take responsibility for their own learning (Figure 19, p.157): over four-fifths (n=36, 86%) of S-1 respondents and 100% (n=23) of S-2 respondents agreed it was almost always or often true that they were personally responsible for their learning. It is possible the slightly higher proportion of S-2 respondents agreeing indicates the second group had learnt to take responsibility over the course, or it may be those who did not assume this responsibility did not persist on the course. Several respondents nevertheless highlighted the requirement for good support from tutors: *'I am responsible for my success, but I rely on tutors to teach effectively to enable me to have the base knowledge required.'* (S-1).

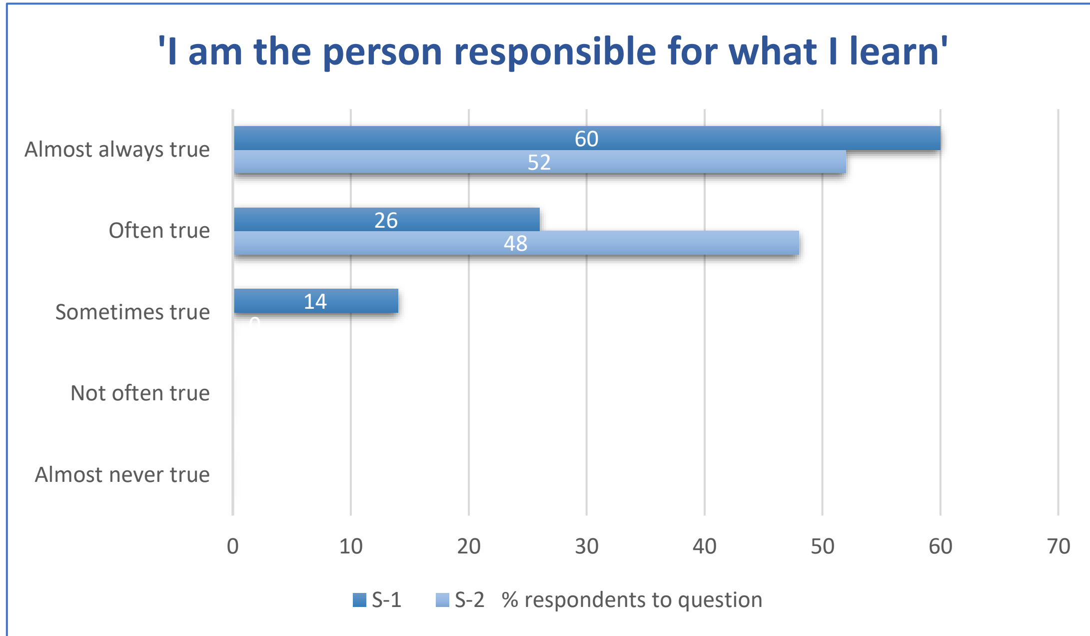


Figure 19: Respondents' views on being responsible for their own learning (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q16i and S-2 Q15i

This support did not necessarily entail tutors always directing their learning, however. About two-fifths of both groups of respondents felt it was sometimes true tutors should tell students exactly what to do (Figure 20, p.158: n=16, 38% S-1; n=9, 39% S-2) but the majority said they should not (n=24, 57% S-1; n=12, 2% S-2).

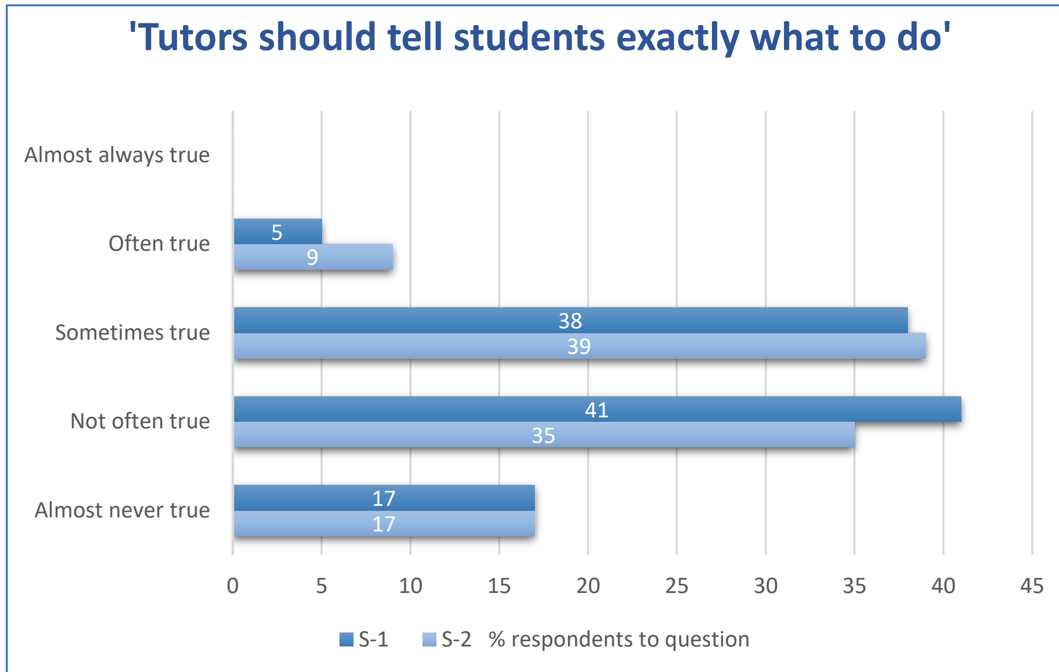


Figure 20: Respondents' views on tutors directing students' learning (Surveys 1 and 2) percentages of responses to S-1 Q16j and S-2 Q15j

Nearly two-thirds of S-1 respondents reported ambivalence about making their own decisions about their learning, however (Figure 21, p.159: n=27, 64%). S-2 respondents were more varied in their opinions, with a fifth preferring not to make their own decisions (n=5, 21%), suggesting that they might have appreciated more direction at this stage, when many of them were contemplating the impending move into practice. This variety underlines how scaffolding (Bruner, 1966, 1978) needs to adapt to the peaks and troughs of learner journeys. In contrast, over two-fifths of S-2 respondents preferred to make their own decisions often or almost all of the time (n=10, 44%). As above, it is unclear whether students who made their own learning decisions were more likely to persevere on the course, or whether they developed this ability during it. Several respondents said they appreciated guidance from tutors they could adapt to work in a way that suited them as individuals: *'I like being responsible for my learning,*

being guided by the tutors but also having flexibility to decide how I approach tasks.' (S-2).

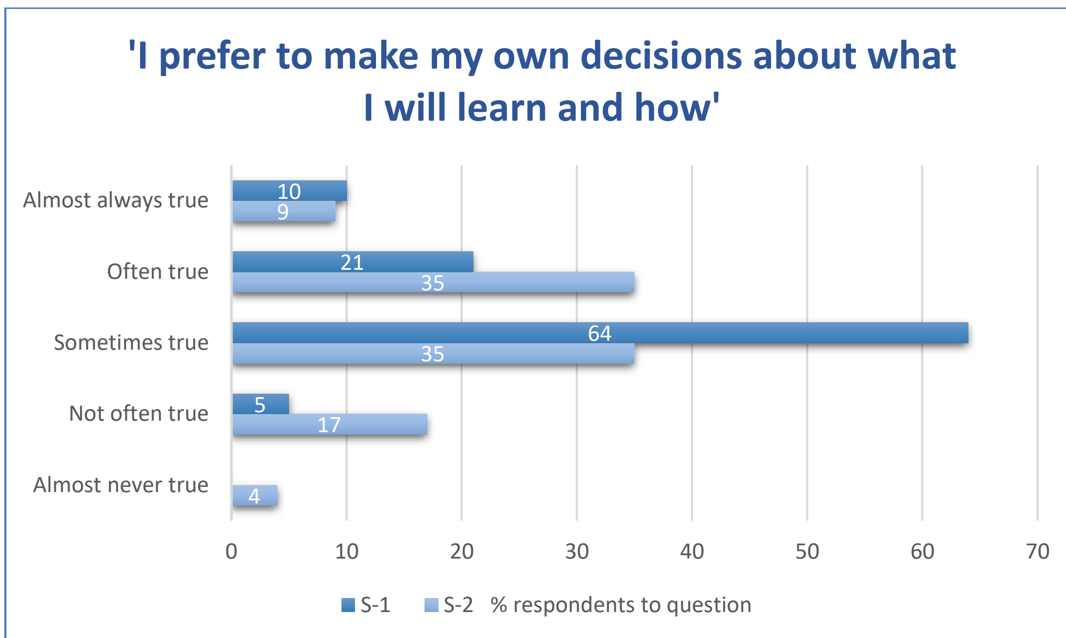


Figure 21: Respondents' views on preferring to make decisions about their own learning (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q16k and S-2 Q15k

Arwen was typical of the interviewees in taking personal accountability for her learning and achievement, stating '*If you put the effort into it and the determination, then you will achieve something. If you don't put the effort into it, then then you don't.'* (Arwen, Int1). She felt it was up to her alone to deal with combining being a student and a mother, which came as a surprise: '*The emotion for me was maybe at home when I was like, 'I've got a deadline to do!' and I didn't –* I *didn't – manage my time properly.'* (Arwen, Int1). She gave no indication of questioning whether the course could have been structured differently to meet her needs, only seeming to perceive her own deficit. She was '*determined to find a strategy and things that work for me so that I can be on top form'* (Arwen, Int1), as failure in the long term was unthinkable. There is a sense here she was going to persevere until she found the right approach; this determination to manage complex lives was common to the rest of the interviewees. These challenges are

explored further in Chapter 6, and the wider implications for the design and delivery of courses to mature women students - particularly those who were mothers - are considered in Chapter 8.

Sub-ordinate theme: Participants constructing and reconstructing their sense of how they learn

Taking responsibility for learning tends to be easier when students can identify how they learn best (Quigley, Muijs and Stringer, 2020); this metacognition, or thinking about strengths and weaknesses as learners, is another important aspect of heutagogy. At the end of the second academic year, S-2 respondents were asked how studying on the course had affected their understanding of how they learned: four-fifths said fairly or very positively (Figure 22, below: n=19, 82%). Reflective practice was pinpointed as having helped to develop self-awareness - '*I've learnt a lot about myself.*' – but another reported she was still struggling to find '*a way of working that works for me*', implying the path to self-awareness can be long and winding.

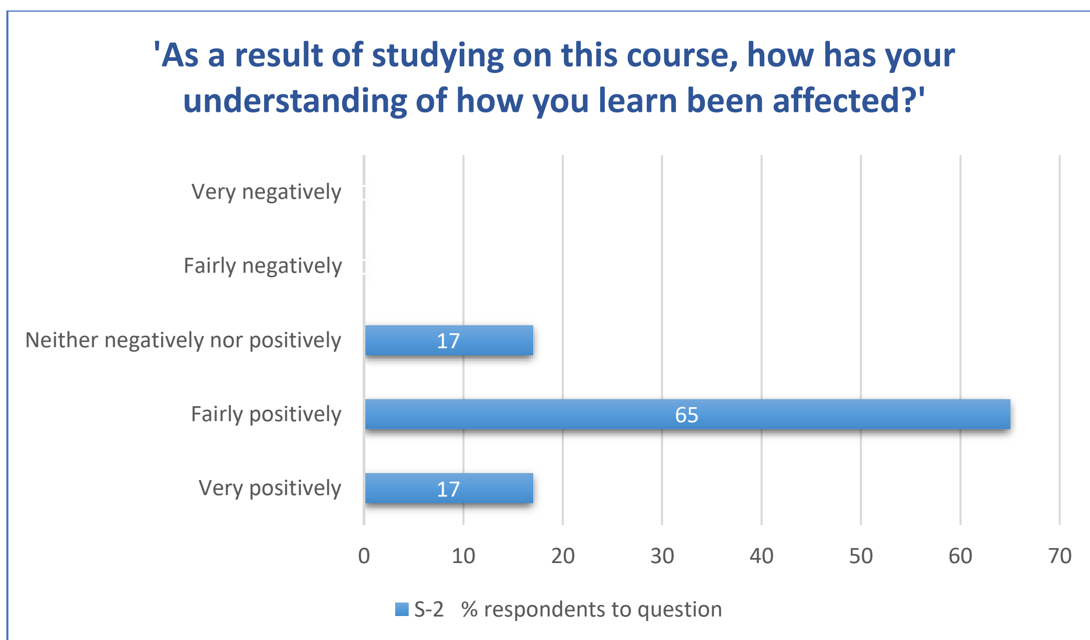


Figure 22: Respondents' views on how their understanding of their learning changed (Survey 2) - percentages of responses to S-2 Q23f

The interviewees too felt they had developed a better understanding of how they learned by studying on the course. Darby claimed she was not a fast learner, despite her parents' belief she was a child prodigy, and wondered about her aptitude for '*having the discipline now to sort of learn things so I can then - you know, regurgitate them'* (Darby, Int1). She likened retrieving information to an unpleasant physical process, giving a sense she worried about being up to the task of feeding information to parents she would be working with. The *'now'* hints at a loss of the aptitude she might have had when she was a younger student. She worried she lacked self-control and was easily distracted; her estimation of her own learning was often seen in relation to a perfect ideal and found wanting.

In comparison, Arwen seemed more comfortable describing herself as always having been *'a slow learner: I like to understand things'* (Arwen, Int2); taking her time afforded her the possibility of deeper understanding. She felt the course had helped her to identify gaps she needed to fill, but this reassessment of her strengths and areas for self-development had not always been easy:

> *It wasn't just about learning my material, my subject but also learning something about my personal strengths, as well as maybe where I need to improve my strengths, improve myself. I think taking a step back has really helped me to not just assume I was great [laughs] if that makes sense. … It was quite a hard lesson to learn at the end of the first year.* (Arwen, Int1)

Arwen had to replace her previous perception of herself as a learner and a prospective practitioner which was uncomfortable and may have entailed a loss of her sense of self. This place of discomfort and instability was common for the other participants too as they learned more about themselves. It chimes with other studies finding evidence of older students having a less stable, more diffuse student identity (see, for example, Crossan *et al,* 2003). It also echoes Mezirow's

(1978, 2000) theory of transformational learning, where students' worldviews are reconstructed through stages of 'de-stabilisation, disorientation and re-orientation' (Atherton, 2013a) as they change how they see themselves - not only currently but in the future as aspiring teachers - and how they fit into the world. To take part wholeheartedly in this continuous transformation (Dewey, 1916, 1938), students need to have sufficient confidence in their self-efficacy and capability, which is now examined in more detail.

Sub-ordinate theme: Confidence around learning

At the beginning of the course, confidence levels around learning new information were generally high, with around four-fifths of S-1 respondents saying they were either fairly or very confident about learning new information (Figure 23, p.163: n=34, 81%). S-2 respondents were also mostly fairly or very confident (n=21,91%). A larger proportion chose 'very confident' (n=9, 39%) than at the earlier timepoint (n=11, 26%); this slight difference may be linked to a growing confidence in their ability to process and retain information as they progressed through the course. Only 7% (n=3) of S-1 respondents and none of the S-2 respondents highlighted learning new topics as one of their main challenges.

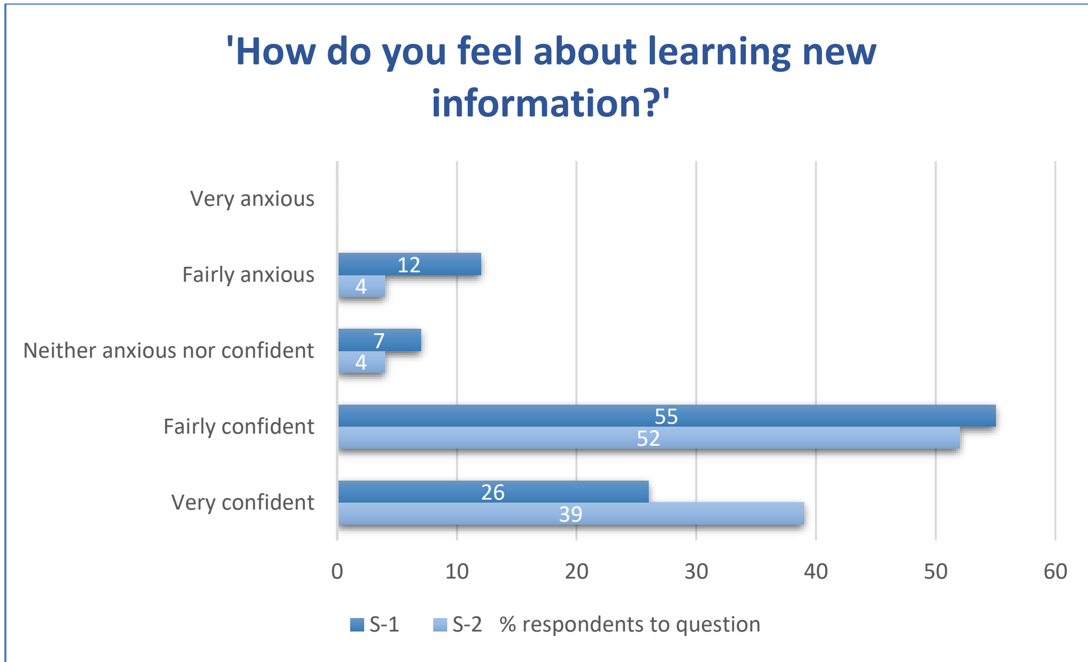


Figure 23: Respondents' feelings about learning new information (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q20a and S-2 Q19a

Over three-quarters of S-1 respondents were confident about learning new skills (Figure 24, p.164: n=32, 78%). S-2 respondents were even more confident overall (n=21, 91%) although they were more likely to say 'fairly' rather than 'very' confident compared to learning new information. This could have been linked to concerns about using skills in practice in the near future. Learning new skills was barely reported as a main challenge of the course at either survey timepoint (n=0, 0% S-1; n=1, 4% S-2).

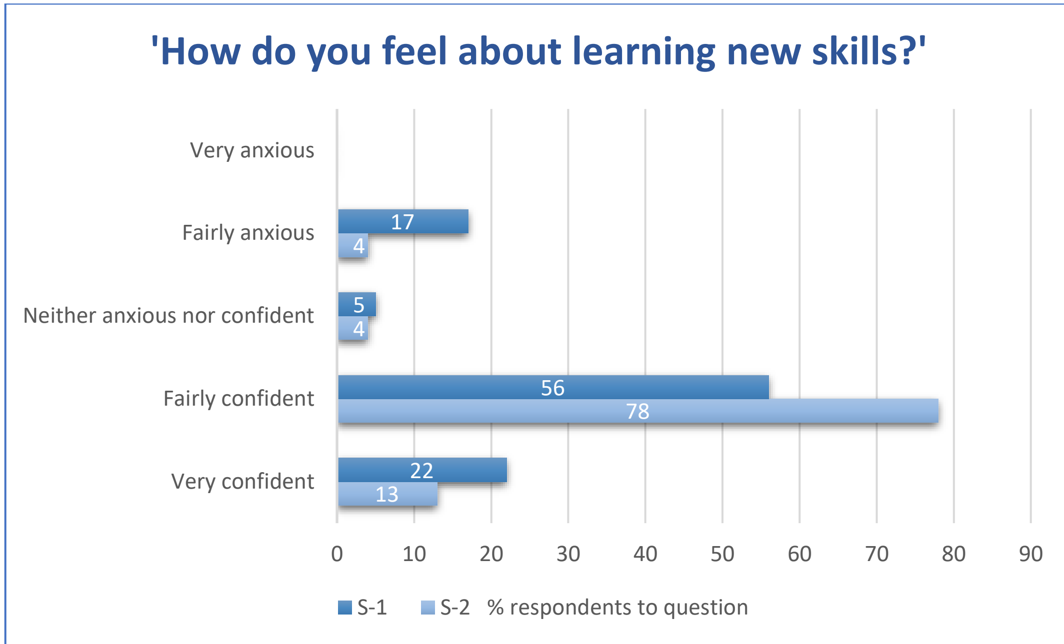


Figure 24: Respondents' feelings about learning new skills (Surveys 1 and 2) – percentages of responses to S-1 Q20b and S-2 Q19b

Several respondents described being excited about learning new information and skills because of their interest in the module subjects. One claimed she was *'very passionate about the subjects, so I find I pick things up more easily'* (S-1). Some raised concerns about being able to understand and remember new information, however, echoing Darby's anxieties about memory issues and age.

S-1 respondents were slightly less sure about exploring their feelings than learning new information or skills, but still around three-fifths stated they felt fairly or very confident about this aspect (Figure 25, p.165: n=24, 59%).

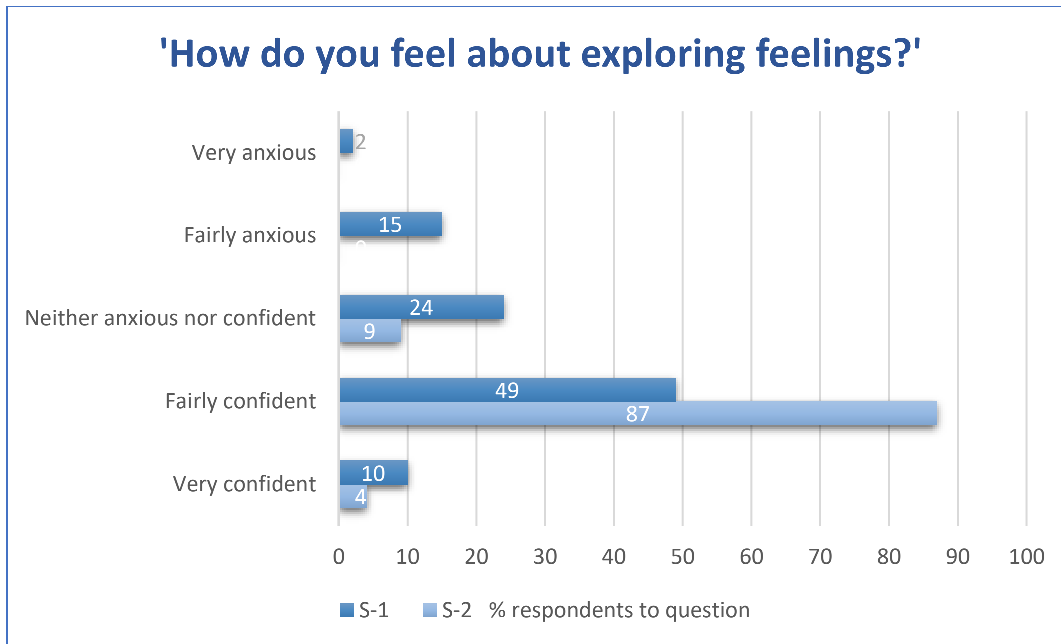


Figure 25: Respondents' feelings about exploring feelings (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q20c and S-2 Q19c

Students on the course were expected to identify and explore their feelings about their own experiences of birth and parenting so they could put unhelpful biases aside when supporting parents. They shared online journal entries with reflective practice module tutors and discussed their perspectives with peers and tutors during contact days. Some S-1 respondents expressed feeling comfortable about the prospect of exploring their feelings as part of their learning, either because of who they were as people – '*I wear my heart on my sleeve.*' – or because they were used to it as part of previous learning or at work. Others expressed concerns about '*exposing myself*' in a group setting or discussing emotions with people they did not know well: '*I am not used to sharing my feelings outside of my family.*' Most commenters seemed to relish developing their knowledge and skills, and seemed comfortable working through their feelings to be able to support parents effectively, as this respondent summed up:

> *I am aware I have some unresolved feelings regarding the birth and feeding of my first child. I am interested to work these through, but also*

> *aware of not bringing a negative view to those around me or projecting onto those I may work with in the future.* (S-1)

Higher confidence levels were reported by S-2 respondents with over nine in ten saying they felt fairly or very confident (n=21, 91%), although the vast majority (n=20, 87%) opted for 'fairly' rather than 'very' confident, despite reflective practice being an integral part of the course. A small proportion of respondents reported 'reflecting on my own experiences' as one of the most challenging aspects of the course at both survey timepoints (n=4, 10% S-1; n=2, 9% S-2); it is possible these participants could have benefitted from more support in this area.

One respondent highlighted the importance of feeling secure, reporting '*the opportunity to practise new skills in a safe environment has been invaluable';* being part of a safe and supportive tutorial group was also considered important when it came to sharing feelings. Several commented on the usefulness of reflecting on their feelings both as part of their studies and as a part of their wider lives, even though it did not always come easily. One described how it had helped her to understand herself and her personal history better:

> *I have learned to reflect on my experiences and take time to process how I feel about things. There are topics that have been challenging personally but I have gained new knowledge which has helped me make sense of some of the decisions and feelings I have had.* (S-2)

Another recognised the necessity of reflection to be an effective practitioner:

> *I am very aware of the importance and value of reflecting on the feelings and triggers that arise from these studies and my future work as an PNL and ANT. I think this is an ongoing process for me and will be something I incorporate throughout my practice.* (S-2)

The interviewees also conveyed this ebb and flow of feelings about learning as a path into practice, and also as they moved on between Level 4 and Level 5, where expectations were often higher. Freya, for example, enjoyed the induction days at the beginning of the course where she was excited by the *'experience of being a student again,'* and also appreciated participating in the study days, especially because she felt she could identify exactly what she had learnt: '*I usually – I* usually *came away from them thinking, "That was worthwhile, I've covered a lot in that!"*' (Freya, Int1). She gave the impression here and elsewhere of seeing learning primarily as a way of accumulating more knowledge and skills to add to her existing ones, rather than altering her perspective on the world. Atherton (2013a) argues this preference for 'additive' rather than 'supplantive' learning can lead to resistance to learning, because it can disturb the learner's certainty about their competence and knowledge levels. In addition, Freya expressed concerns about having to prove herself equal to the demands of the next stage, which may have contributed to her eventual decision to take a year out before considering whether to move onto the next stage:

> *I'm a bit nervous about next year – Level 5 – because I think that is going to be stepping up again, and everybody always says if you do well at Level 4, like if you get an A at Level 4, then that's a B at Level 5. This is what my tutor tells me anyway. But she might be trying to wind me up a bit [laughs] because she knows I'm a bit of a perfectionist.* (Freya, Int1)

Notable here is her lack of certainty not only about her ability to meet higher standards and implications for her high expectations of herself, but also about her ability to trust what her tutor is saying. It seems therefore the course and its delivery did not meet Freya's support needs as well as it might have. Darby also demonstrated this feeling of uncertainty around her personal foundations when she described how she was *'feeling wobbly'* – which links to the destabilisation referred to earlier - when the '*reality struck, going into the specific Antenatal*

Pathway [at Level 5],' she was moving inexorably closer to putting her learning into practice (Darby, Int2). Starting the course was a way for Darby to escape her previous unhappy job; learning for her was a comfortable place but then the harsh reality of having to go back to a potentially challenging work situation was made apparent to her as she approached moving into practice. As with Freya, it is possible Darby's needs could have been met more effectively.

Esme, who had previously preferred to work alone, identified she had built up her confidence in group learning by being encouraged by her tutor to *'find my feet, to then feel like I am able to open up'* (Esme, Int1). She felt her tutor helped provide the sense of stability Darby and Esme lacked, so she was able to lay herself open to the experience of learning with and from others. She could move closer not only to being a more active member of the learning group, but also towards embracing the uncertainty that often accompanies learning that is transformative rather than additive (the uncertainty which Freya and Darby appeared to find unsettling at times).

As this course involved some elements of distance learning, it is important to explore specifically how participants felt about using online resources and the internet to help them learn, especially since this was the first time some were engaging in formal online learning. The global Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated a move to blended learning, so distance learning is likely to become increasingly prevalent.

Sub-ordinate theme: Confidence around using online resources and the internet for learning

Despite possible lack of experience, confidence levels tended to be very high, with over four out of five of S-1 respondents answering that it was almost always true or often true they were confident about using online resources and the internet for learning (Figure 26, p.169: n=34, 81%). As students were encouraged

to access resources online during the course, it is not surprising these confidence levels were higher for S-2 respondents, with over nine in ten (n=21, 91) agreeing, and double the proportion of S-1 respondents answering it was almost always true (n=13, 31% S-1; n=15, 65% S-2). Over a third of S-2 respondents chose using IT as one of the least challenging aspects of the course.

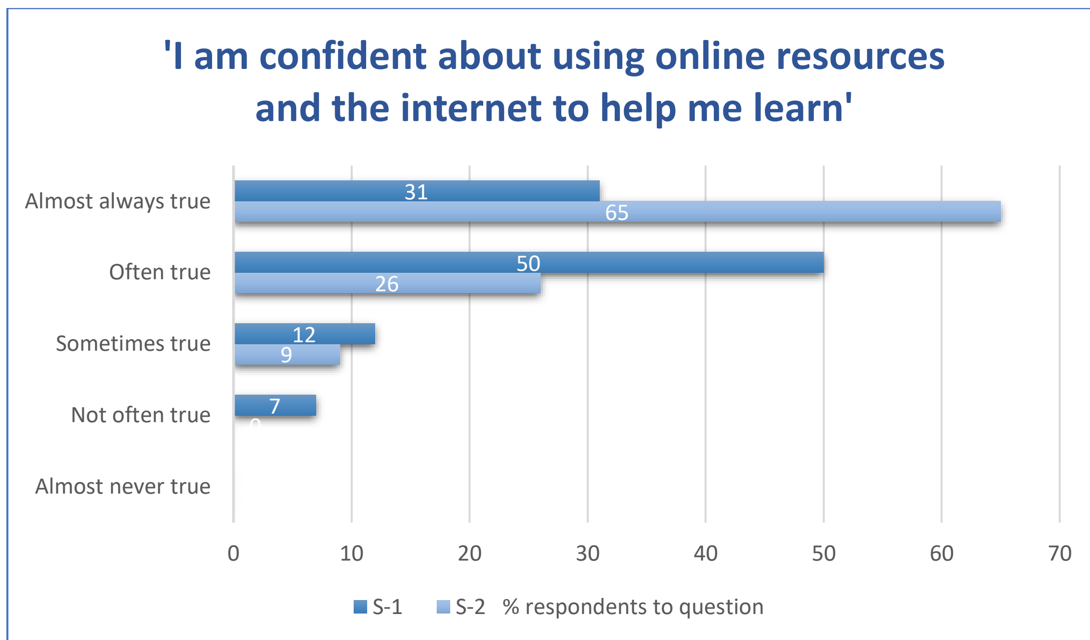


Figure 26: Respondents' confidence about using online resources for learning (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q16g and S-2 Q15g

The interviewees too seemed fairly confident in this area apart from Darby, who seemed less assured using online learning and particularly social media than many of her peers. Although she had participated in online training for work, she gave the impression in her first interview that she found navigating social media particularly uncomfortable, because of the risk of encountering forceful personalities, and because she did not find it a place for nuanced discussion:

> *I've realised how much I don't like it, and I'm trying to get the measure of how much of it I need to do. Because it's like public debating - and I just don't - I'm not very good at that. … I don't have very strong opinions on - or not strong [laughs] - not very strong opinions I am willing to be*

> *very open about, because I'm aware - some people, yeah - might be upset and I would hate to upset anyone and so I always err on the side of being…* (Darby, Int1)

She felt exposed, in a space that did not feel safe enough to share her views or worried others might be distressed if she did. By the second interview, however, she described having developed strategies for dealing with Facebook and WhatsApp by being more selective to benefit from useful information: *'I'm learning to screen out some of the people and posts and things, and work out what works for me.'* (Darby, Int2).

Accessing online resources and using social media for learning is explored in more depth in the next section, which looks at how participants reported their approaches to learning on the NCT course.

B. Participants' Approaches to Learning

This section investigates how participants approached learning: firstly, how they used strategies involving online and social media, and secondly, their use of other independent learning strategies. Participants could build on strategies for learning they had used in their past learning, particularly as many were returners to HE. In addition, they could access a range of new strategies they had not previously used.

S-1 respondents were shown a list of learning strategies and asked to identify those they planned to use on the course that they had used previously, as well as new strategies they had not used before. The second survey revisited this list and asked S-2 respondents to identify strategies they had actually used as part of the course, and also those they intended to continue using in future. The individual answers are grouped into different types of strategy. Two particularly relevant groupings are the use of online and social media and then other self-regulated learning strategies which are explored later. Strategies relating specifically to being part of a community of learning and practice are examined in Chapter 7 (p.252). IPA themes from the interviews are shown in Table 10 (p.172).

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes
Learning independently using online and social media strategies	Benefits Concerns
Learning independently using offline strategies	Reading effectively Rabbit holes Revisiting and reflecting
Revisiting and reflecting on learning	Reflecting alone Reflecting with others

Table 10: Interpretative phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts: interviewees' approaches to learning

Super-ordinate theme: Learning independently using online and social media strategies

The Covid-19 pandemic has necessitated online access to formal aspects of learning that had previously taken place face-to-face in small groups. However, as the research took place before 2020, participants were not asked about these online learning experiences, but instead about their independent learning. Many participants had not used online or social media strategies for learning before. A literature review by Conole and Alevizou describes how e-pedagogy - 'learning with and/or through technology' (2010, p.42) – was becoming a recognisable trend in HE a decade ago, so students who had last been in formal education before then risked lacking experience of learning digitally. As reported above, participants nevertheless reported feeling confident in this area, and by the second survey timepoint no respondents highlighted using IT as a main challenge; indeed, over a third said it was one of the least challenging aspects (n=8, 35% S-2).

Table 11 (below) shows proportions of participants identifying new and familiar strategies they were planning to use on the course (S-1), and then those they did use, and which ones they planned to continue to use in future (S-2).

Online/Social Media Strategies	S-1 Intending to use on course			S-2 Did use	S-2 Will use in future
	Used before	Not used before	Total		
Talking to other students via apps such as WhatsApp	46% 18	49% 19	95% 37	91 % 21	70% 16
Watching YouTube videos on related topics	39% 15	39% 15	77% 30	52% 12	39% 9
Participating in or following discussions on social media such as Facebook	18% 7	46% 18	64% 25	78% 18	70% 16
Reading blogs on related topics	23% 9	28% 11	51% 20	44% 10	30% 7
Listening to podcasts on related topics	18% 7	28% 11	46% 18	30% 7	22% 5
Following discussions on Twitter	13% 5	13% 5	26% 10	4% 1	4% 1

Table 11: Respondents' intentions to use new and familiar online and social media strategies for learning, strategies used during the course and intentions for future use (Surveys 1 and 2) – frequency and percentages of responses to S-1 Q12, Q14 and S-2 Q11, Q13

Nearly all S-1 respondents (n=37, 95%) stated they intended to use applications such as WhatsApp to talk to other students; they were evenly divided into those who had and had not used this in previous learning situations. This strategy is returned to in relation to communities of learning and practice in Chapter 7

(p.260). *Watching YouTube videos on related topics* was an intended strategy for nearly four-fifths at S-1 (n=30, 77%), but only just over half (n=12, 52%) of S-2 respondents reported actually doing this. In fact, *Participating or following discussions on social media such as Facebook* was the only strategy reported as used by a greater proportion of S-2 respondents than S-1 respondents. Otherwise, all the online/social media strategies were used less by S-2 respondents than the stated intentions of S-1 respondents, and even fewer planned to use the strategies in future. *Following discussions on Twitter* had a particularly low reported engagement rate. This respondent's comment was typical: *'When I last studied, we didn't have Twitter, or I had never heard of it. I still have never used it even recently but would be open to using this as a form of learning if required.'* (S-1). Twitter was not familiar to many participants and did not seem to engender enthusiasm as a way of approaching learning. It is possible they did not find it a woman-friendly online space, as this has been identified as a known issue that needs tackling urgently by social network providers (Hern, 2021).

Sub-ordinate theme: Benefits

Respondents' comments at both survey points indicated mixed opinions on using these types of online strategies. Several described the benefits of being in contact with other students on WhatsApp to help each other navigate the course: *'useful to stay in touch and discuss the course', 'help each other to keep on track of the workload', 'can all keep in touch and share things', 'already formed a bond', 'helpful and supportive' (S-1).* Having contact with others seemed to reduce isolation - *'a lifeline'* and *'good to have other women in the same place as I am'*- and the challenge of being physical distant because *'it makes the world a smaller place – we can chat with each other anywhere!' (S-1).* A study of Catalonian university students also found participants particularly valued digital technologies such as WhatsApp and social networks which enabled contact with their peers

(Echenique, Molias and Bullen, 2015). Contact with other students was probably far more important than the technology enabling this contact.

The technology was important in other strategies, however. For example, some respondents valued being able to combine learning with other activities when listening to podcasts such as exercising or doing household tasks - *'I like the fact I can listen and get on with (mindless but necessary) chores.'* and *'Podcasts are great as they can be listened to even during the ironing!'* – or to make the most of time available: *'I find they're a great way of accessing learning at times I wouldn't usually be able to, such as car and train journeys.'* (S-1). Being able to use smartphones at odd moments meant it was easy to *'dip in and out and save articles to read later'*. Similarly, one liked YouTube videos because *'They can be watched quickly and are usually in a format that appeals to me.'* (S-1).

Sub-ordinate theme: Concerns

Although many underlined the benefits of online and social media strategies, several respondents at both survey timepoints cited anxieties around their use, such as reliability: *'You can't always trust the source.'* (S-2). This may be why some particularly valued private Facebook groups (online groups set up by NCT practitioners to provide a dedicated online discussion space). In particular, respondents seemingly appreciated access to these groups to obtain information validated by other practitioners and relevant to their future practice '*as often there are links to topics of interest or further info which provides evidence for practitioners to show clients'* (S-2). In contrast, information shared on blogs was seen as very personal and of limited use, because they were *'interesting to read as will give a different viewpoint but not sure how factual or reliable the information will be,'* and *'very subjective so need to be wary of generalising from them, but they do provide interesting personal experience'* (S-2). One respondent hoped to listen to podcasts '*once I have gotten through the recommended literature for the course'* (S-1); she obviously did not regard them as a priority. Online group chat with

peers was seen as helpful by the majority, although some respondents found they needed to limit their involvement to avoid being overwhelmed, such as this one who felt it could be *'a bit stressful when a big discussion gets going, and I turn my phone to aeroplane mode when I go to bed, because it's important to get a break!'* (S-1).

Overall, questionnaire respondents' use of social media and online strategies during the course was mixed, with some digital approaches being used much less than they had originally intended; S-2 respondents often seemed to foresee their usage in future declining even further. This is at odds with the move to online learning seen generally, although it is important to remember this research took place before the sudden pivot to complete online learning brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. As Conole and Alevizou (2010, p.18) pointed out, even younger so-called 'digital natives' would not automatically have the ability to apply their skills with technology to a learning environment (and the idea of the 'information-savvy' Generation z has been more recently rejected anyway, Kirschner and De Bruuckere, 2019). Additionally, students' access to expensive technology and broadband connections can vary widely; digital inequalities can act as a barrier to learning (Killen and Langer-Crame, 2020). Finally, it may be some respondents perceived social media as distracting and taking time away from their studies, as Nadelson *et al* (2017) found in their study of US undergraduates.

The interviewees too had mixed views about using social media and online learning strategies. There was only one small mention of technical issues; otherwise, confidence seemed relatively high. Becky seemed a particularly enthusiastic smartphone devotee who appreciated the flexible access to learning her device afforded her, because she could '*study or learn any time or read quick articles and things on my phone. Even if the children are asleep in the car, I can sit and do it like that.'* (Becky, Int1). Although she used her laptop for writing

assignments, she continued to make use of her smartphone throughout the course and reported finding it especially useful once her new baby had arrived: '*It was amazing! I took lots of notes and screenshotted lots of different stuff and emailed stuff to myself as I was lying feeding [Baby].'* (Becky, Int2). She appeared to navigate the terrain of blended learning effectively, taking advantage of asynchronous access to resources, so it is unclear why other participants did not talk about using their phones. It is possible they used them but did not find them noteworthy, or perhaps they lacked specific training or encouragement to benefit from using their devices for learning (this is addressed further in Chapter 8, p.298). Despite her use of her smartphone and her enthusiasm for learning generally, however, Becky was less enthusiastic about online training modules because it was '*just information being presented to you, so you're not actually getting to engage in it properly or investigate or question anything'* (Becky, Int2). She preferred to be an active and involved learner, rather than a passive recipient of information.

Esme, who depicted herself as having previously been quite a '*solitary learner',* found she worked much more collaboratively with her peers on this course which was in part facilitated by online contact: '*We tend to bounce ideas back and forth a lot more, and I found that really helpful, on WhatsApp groups and Facebook groups.'* (Esme, Int1). Cora, however, found the WhatsApp chat of limited value, partly because she felt confident about her academic writing but felt it was unacceptable to broadcast this, so tended to minimise her involvement. She felt it was not a medium that easily allowed for others' input to help her develop other more practical skills:

> *We have a group chat thing and people put, 'Oh, I'm really struggling to do this!' and sometimes I feel like I can't really - you can't express being confident. … The academic thing I can do but then it's harder for me to*

> *get help off other people for other things I am not so good at, like presenting.* (Cora, Int1)

Darby expressed ambivalence about using social media to aid her learning. While she was appreciative of support from her peers in WhatsApp chat groups, she found Facebook groups to be quite negative at times. She seemed reluctant to engage in online discussions, particularly as a new student in an ill-defined space with shadowy participants where you *'just see names, you don't know any of the people'* (Darby, Int2). She described feeling compelled to keep using it in case of missing out on the benefits of keeping up with conversations on current topics, but similarly to the questionnaire respondent quoted earlier who needed to switch off at times, Darby found social media could be intrusive:

> *I didn't have WhatsApp really much before and Facebook – it's now become quite a large bit - and you don't feel you can really opt out, because then you won't know what's going on and when you need support it's important, and you want to support other people. But it's still – I'm just aware of how much time it occupies in my head.* (Darby, Int2)

This discomfort could be linked perhaps to a less-developed digital literacy than the other interviewees, and perhaps a more introvert personality (Cain, 2012).

Freya compared her previous university experience with this course and emphasized the difference technology made so resources were more readily available online, instead of having to physically go to a library and use a microfiche to access journals:

> *It's just there, I can read it. I haven't had to move a muscle other than the hand on my mouse… and it's there, I've got it. So, in some ways it's so much* easier *now… I want to grab students and say, 'You don't know you're born, you're so lucky, you've got all this!' (*Freya, Int1)

This extreme ease of access could have downsides, however; she wondered if course tutors therefore had higher expectations of students' reading more widely. The overwhelming quantity of sources of varying quality could also cause difficulties:

> *I find it harder sometimes – when you do a Google search there's so much information and* everybody's *written a blog about something - trying to get into your head about what's credible, what's a reliable source of information.* (Freya, Int1)

The mixed feelings the interviewees demonstrated towards using online and social media learning strategies echo and amplify the comments made by the questionnaire respondents and go some way to explain why the S-2 respondents reported a lower use of these types of strategies than S-1 respondents had planned, and the relatively low rates of intention to use them in the future. Recommendations and implications for tutors and course designers are addressed in Chapter 9.

Super-ordinate theme: Learning independently using offline strategies

Questionnaire respondents also shared their views on other types of learning strategy typical of independent learners. The percentages and numbers of respondents choosing each strategy are presented in Table 12 (p.180).

The table shows differences between S-1 participants' intentions around using familiar and unfamiliar strategies, compared to those S-2 respondents reported they actually used. Also shown are strategies they were planning to use in the future. Strategies used previously were noticeably more likely to be used than unfamiliar ones, except for writing in a journal after study days, which was explicitly encouraged by tutors.

	Other Self-regulated Learning Strategies	S-1 Intending to use on course			S-2 Did use	S-2 Will use in future
		Used before	Not used before	Total		
Reading strategies	Reading journal articles	67% 26	21% 8	87% 34	87% 20	82% 19
	Dipping in and out of set texts	77% 30	5% 2	82% 32	100% 23	78% 18
	Reading other sources not on the list of set texts	64% 25	13% 5	77% 30	96% 22	78% 18
	Reading set texts from cover to cover	52% 22	22% 8	74% 30	39% 9	17% 4
Reflecting alone	Making notes on what I read	87% 33	8% 3	95% 36	78% 18	35% 8
	Writing in a journal after study days	21% 8	44% 17	66% 25	44% 10	44% 10
	Making mind maps	33% 13	18% 7	51% 20	30% 7	17% 4
	Revisiting my notes or recordings or mind maps on a regular basis	41.% 16	10% 4	51% 20	26% 6	13% 3
	Recording myself talking about topics	5% 2	34% 13	39% 15	9% 2	13% 3
Reflecting with others	Discussing topics with friends or family	56% 22	21% 8	77% 30	78% 18	57% 13
	Discussing topics with my partner	59% 23	13% 5	72% 28	57% 13	44% 10

Table 12: Learning strategies: intentions to use, reported use and intention to use in future (Surveys 1 and 2, % of respondents to question) – frequency and percentages of responses to S-1 Q12, Q14 and S-2 Q11, Q13

Sub-ordinate theme: Effective reading strategies

Each course module offered a list of set texts and suggestions for further reading including books, journal articles and online resources. About three-quarters of S-1 respondents said they planned to read set texts from cover to cover (n=30, 74%); this was a new strategy for a fifth of the group (n=8, 22%). Some felt it was required or thought *'Reading a text as a whole will give me an understanding of the subject.'* (S-1). Others said they wanted to read whole books because they were interested in the topics, despite being dippers previously: '*I will be more inclined to read more of the texts cover to cover as the subject matter is so much more relevant and interesting to me!'* (S-1). However, by the second timepoint, only two-fifths of S-2 respondents reported reading whole texts (n=9, 39%), and less than a fifth planned to do this in future (n=4, 17%).

Reading texts selectively was more popular: four-fifths of S-1 respondents indicated that they planned to dip in and out of set texts (n=32, 82%), and all S-2 respondents reported using this approach. One typical S-2 respondent explained how time pressures entailed a more targeted approach than she had used previously:

> *I used to be a 'read everything cover to cover and remember it' learner, but as time has gone on (and my baby has had fewer naps!), I've had to prioritise reading and make it count by either using bookmarks or making notes. (S-2)*

Time was not the only factor affecting respondents' choice of this strategy, however. Some found dipping suited them better as learners, such as this respondent who preferred to approach a text by reading it in small sections, so she could cope and stay engaged:

> *I find when I feel I need to read a book cover to cover I get overwhelmed and quickly lose interest. If I stick to reading bits as and when I need,*

> *using the chapter descriptions and index to guide me I get far more accomplished and eventually end up reading the majority anyway. (S-1)*

An S-2 respondent said reading selectively '*with a question in mind (for example, an essay question) rather than reading broadly*' helped her remember more effectively. Over three-quarters of S-2 respondents planned to continue this approach, which suggests they found it useful (n=18, 78%).

Cora found the arrival of her baby son forced her to change her approach to reading because she had less time available, so had to fit in bursts of a few minutes or take her books to bed, rather than reading a whole book and making copious notes as she had previously. She discovered this had a positive effect in forcing her to be more strategic about how she worked:

> *I just had to dip in and out of books, and actually that was quite good, because I was thinking, 'Actually I don't need to read every book cover-to-cover - maybe I can do a bit less'. So that has helped having the question that I can - when I'm reading it, instead of just reading a book without a purpose, so that was - maybe I learnt a way of being a bit quicker about it.* (Cora, Int2)

Reading journal articles was another popular strategy, with 87% (n=34) of S-1 respondents planning to do this, and the same proportion of S-2 respondents stating they actually did (n=20, 87%); nearly the same percentage said they would continue to do so (n=19, 82%). Several participants found reading journal articles was a more manageable way of learning about a topic than reading whole books, because they offered '*nice bite sized pieces of knowledge in a predictable format*' (S-1) easily accessed online.

More S-2 respondents said that they read beyond the reading list than S-1 respondents had indicated they planned to (n=30, 77% S-1; n=22, 96% S-2), which suggests many could prioritise time for extra reading when needed. Reading

widely appealed to some as a way to *'help deepen my understanding of a subject' (S-1).* One said sometimes she did not find set texts easy to read or to access from her local university, so took her initiative and chose different resources, which helped develop her knowledge base in unexpected ways: '*I found reading from the reference lists of articles I discovered led me down rabbit holes which helped expand my knowledge around the subject.'* (S-2).

Sub-ordinate theme: Wandering down rabbit holes

Freya and Esme also talked specifically about going down 'rabbit holes' but had very different views. Working in a demanding job as well as studying limited Freya's time available for reading, and information overload and the danger of being distracted continued to be issues for her throughout the course. She said accessing too many articles was unhelpful because they '*take you down another line altogether and you think, "I got lost down that rabbit hole." There's almost too much information sometimes.'* (Freya, Int2). Completing assignments was her priority and she wanted to limit her reading without what she felt were unnecessary distractions. Esme too talked about having to be very *'disciplined and rigid'* to avoid '*going off down rabbit holes'* but for her this was something to be regretted; she was looking forward to engaging with her book collection more deeply after finishing the course: '*I've got a lot of books up there I really want to start that I have just skimmed, that I really want to go and engross myself in.'* (Esme, Int2).

Perhaps the interviewees identified more with the White Rabbit, forever running late, than Alice exploring a strange wonderland (Carroll, 1865) of new ideas. One of the principles of heutagogy is non-linear learning (Blaschke and Hase, 2019) which Glassner and Back (2020, p.179) describe as 'wandering' backwards and forwards, taking risks and following instincts. This was a luxury participants could not always afford because of their other responsibilities - learning inside the context of their complex lives is explored in Chapter 6 (p.197) – and they

needed to focus on working towards completing the assessments set for them. Participants were not always able to follow their own hunches about what was interesting and useful to them personally. It is likely time was not the only hurdle, however. There may also have been some unwillingness to engage in Atherton's (2013a) 'troublesome supplantive learning' and its associated undermining of their stable sense of self in the world. For some, the rabbit holes might resemble Meyer and Land's (2005) concept of transitional spaces which students need to pass through to move from lack of understanding to deep learning, which they might find uncomfortable and emotionally destabilising. Others like Esme and the questionnaire respondent above were perhaps more willing to embrace the journey into unknown worlds.

Sometimes participants wandered back to revisit previous learning. Arwen described how returning to her set texts in the second year helped to strengthen her knowledge base, and was surprised to find she was more engaged with them the second time around:

> *I thought this was quite an important year, so I sat down again and made notes and went over the basics again. ... I took the texts and I read them more thoroughly than I did before in sections. I found the textbooks quite interesting this year - maybe it's because I had a different head on, that I maybe took them - or looked at them in a different way. (Arwen, Int2)*

Her perspective had changed so much it was as though she had become another person with *'a different head on',* having an alternative learner identity with an interest in textbooks. This change could partly have resulted from intensive tutor support; perhaps increasing confidence in her ability played a role.

Participants varied in their approaches to reading and fitting it into their lives, and some of these approaches changed over time because of outside impacts such

as changes in their family responsibilities. Some respondents reported planning to make notes on their thoughts on their reading; this approach is explored next.

Super-ordinate theme: Revisiting and reflecting on learning

Reflecting on learning is an important aspect of heutagogy, as it aids learners to make links to their existing knowledge and skills, and to help them to identify how they learn as well as any gaps they need to fill (Blaschke and Hase, 2016). Reflection is also an important element of developing double-loop learning, which is a consideration of how implications of new understandings interact with learners' values and beliefs (Agonács and Matos, 2019) and influence their future practice.

Sub-ordinate theme: Reflecting alone

Although almost all S-1 respondents said they planned to make notes on their reading (n=36, 95%), slightly fewer S-2 respondents said they actually did this (n=18, 78%). While half of S-1 respondents had intended to revisit their notes (or other ways of recording their thoughts) regularly (n=20, 51%), in fact only a quarter of S-2 respondents actually did so (n=6, 26%), and even fewer planned to do so in future (n=3, 13%). Some respondents said making notes helped them engage with texts – *'It makes me read it properly and in more detail, rather than not really concentrating and skim reading.' (S-1)* – and to keep track of references for assignments. Several also specified with relish the range of stationery tools needed to do the job properly - highlighter pens, post-it notes, and even *'a pink notebook'* (S-1).

Arwen felt writing notes on her reading was not helpful because she was not always sure she had grasped the points being made and could not confirm if she had without checking with someone else – *'I'm better having a conversation with*

someone.' (Arwen, Int2). She found some equipment provided to support with dyslexia and dyspraxia invaluable, however, especially '*tools that can read things back to you, so I can print it out and I can have it being spoken back to me'*, because she could rewind and listen again as many times as she needed.

The strategies *writing in a journal after study days*, *making mind maps* and *recording themselves talking about topics* were not familiar ones for many S-1 respondents and, although around half said they intended to try them, relatively few S-2 respondents said they had actually used them; very few planned to use them in future. One respondent questioned the value of using mind maps, as she had *'mainly used them for revising for exams which there are not many of on this course'* (S-1). While hardly any reported having previously recorded themselves talking about topics (n=2, 5%), several S-1 respondents said this was an approach they planned to try (n=13, 34%), either as a way of developing confidence in talking to parents, or to capture thoughts easily to revisit later. Only a small proportion of S-2 respondents identified recording themselves as a learning strategy they had actually used (n=2, 9%), but one of those who did, reported its value in helping her make sense of her learning:

> *I find when I am walking the dog, or as I am lying in bed waiting for my children to fall asleep, ideas seem to fall into place and become clearer. My phone is full of voice recordings from during these times where I record ideas about facilitating and voice memos for essays. (S-2)*

Some learning strategies require creativity, which is why Freya said she particularly disliked them:

> *There are some things I don't particularly enjoy, which I know work for other people, like making mind maps and that sort of thing - some people find those really helpful - or pictures and things. I'm not a particularly creative person, that just makes me cringe.* (Freya, Int2)

Freya was perhaps limited by her perception of herself in which case she could have been encouraged to extend her limits, or perhaps she was aware of her learning preferences.

Only a quarter of S-2 respondents (n=6, 26%) stated they revisited their written notes (or recordings or mind maps), despite some reporting doing so helped them to remember information more easily. It is also unclear whether the respondent quoted previously listened to her phone memos regularly, or whether the action of making them was sufficient.

Reflective practice helps students in making sense of ideas and what they mean for themselves as future practitioners by encouraging them to consider situations from different perspectives (Brookfield, 1995). This personal meaning-making aspect of learning may have contributed to the eventual - and in some cases, unexpected - enjoyment many participants described above. Just under half of S-1 respondents (n=17, 44%) said writing in a journal, and particularly using reflective writing, was something new to them. They could identify potential benefits of developing this skill, however, despite initial discomfort in some cases:

> *Although it feels a bit unnatural, I know it will become easier as I understand the various approaches better. Reflective practice is vital to this course, and to practising in any of the future roles, so I just need to keep doing it, and learn from feedback how to do it better. (S-1)*

Nearly three-quarters intended to write in journals after study days (n=28, 72%); only 44% (n=10) of S-2 respondents reported doing so, but the same proportion planned to continue, suggesting they had embedded this strategy as part of their learning.

Becky was initially dismissive about reflective practice – *'This sounds really faffy … like a crazy hippy thing.'* - but came to value it, to her amazement, and found it became a helpful and integrated part of her approach to learning: '*It really*

surprised me actually how useful it was, and how natural it actually became.' (Int1). Esme described how she reflected on what she had been learning to tackle assignments:

> *Taking a piece of literature or whatever I'm reading and using the time when I am maybe reflecting on it, qualifying it, mulling it over and coming to my own position. And using that to inform the assessments I'm doing or the essays I might be writing.* (Esme, Int2)

Esme sounded much more comfortable contemplating and developing her position than Freya. This may be due to personality differences, or could be linked to Esme having completed all the assignments at Level 5 by this stage so she would therefore have had more opportunity to make it part of her learning approach, just as Becky had.

Sub-ordinate theme: Reflecting with others

Discussing topics with others (whether online or in person) helped to make sense of the personal implications of learning, as well as checking for understanding and areas possibly requiring more work, as one respondent explained:

> *I find when I discussed topics with others, I more easily identified gaps in my learning. My partner/friends may ask a question I didn't know the answer to, which would prod me to research more. I find if I can explain a concept to others well enough for them to gain a basic understanding, I am confident in my own knowledge of it.* (S-1)

Nearly three quarters of S-1 respondents said they planned to discuss topics with their partners (n=28, 72%), but this proportion dropped to 57% (n=13) for S-2 respondents, and only 44% (n=10) thought they would continue. However, a similar proportion of S-1 respondents planned to discuss topics with friends and family to the proportion of S-2 respondents who said they did this (n=30, 77% S-1;

n=18, 78% S-2) - although the proportion who reported intentions to carry on in the future was lower (n=13, 57% S-2) - so it was seemingly the 'with partners' aspect that was problematic for some. Although discussing with partners was less commonly reported by S-2 respondents than discussing with friends and family, only one specific comment was made by an S-1 respondent who described a supportive and engaged partner (although whether this support was maintained throughout the course beyond the first survey timepoint is unknown):

> *I find my partner is a really good soundboard for me to bounce ideas off. He has little knowledge of birth and beyond outside of his own experiences with our children, so thinks very critically, helping me with reasoning and looking at a greater depth, just by him exploring the topic with me as we chat.* (S-1)

Apart from Darby, who portrayed her husband as very accommodating, with the *'patience of a saint'* (Darby, S-2), the interviewees did not talk about their partners much beyond vague assertions they were supportive. It is unclear whether this was because their partners did provide specific support, such as engaging with them about their studies or taking on additional household tasks, and this was taken for granted, or conversely because they did not talk and listen or take on domestic tasks much, and again this was found unnoteworthy. Participants' views on support are discussed in more depth in the next chapters.

Chapter summary

This chapter has explored participants' attitudes and approaches to learning and how they engaged with elements of heutagogy as mature women returners to education, revealing a range of experiences as individual learners on the course. Although age was not seen as an important factor by many, most of the sample were older than typical school leaver students, and their approach to learning was affected by their life experiences and knowledge. They could be more critical

learners, reflecting deeply on what they learnt and also the processes of learning. They were often highly motivated to do well as confident self-regulated learners. Although they intended at the beginning of the course to use social media and online strategies – and many said they felt confident doing so – the second survey responses showed respondents actually had lower rates of engagement in these types of strategies, possibly connected to lack of technology skills and other barriers. Similarly, some more creative self-regulated learning strategies were also reported at the second survey point as being used less than S-1 respondents had intended. This might also be linked to lack of skills; related implications and recommendations are developed in Chapters 8 and 9. Strategic reading was popular, however, presumably at least partly because it could be more easily fitted into the slivers of time and space participants had to carve out for themselves. Participants often faced challenges around juggling studying with their often-complex lives and their multiple roles; this is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Findings II Learning as part of complex lives

Introduction

Participants in this study often had a wide range of family and sometimes work commitments they needed to manage, as well as dedicating time and effort to their studies. This dual or treble set of commitments was different from those usually managed by 'traditional' students, and some participants made major changes to their lives to make it possible to undertake the course. They also needed to study differently. They had to make space and time for self-regulated learning outside contact days, exploiting any opportunities that arose by switching quickly into studying mode. Long study sessions were not always possible due to lack of childcare, or because participants risked interruption as they had to be prepared to drop their studies to meet the urgent needs of their children, especially if they had new babies during the course. Longer term planning could be disrupted in challenging and unexpected ways too. This research took place before the Covid-19 pandemic which has had profound effects on how people live. It is likely coping with the impacts of the pandemic have intensified the challenges mature women returners to study need to negotiate.

This chapter focuses on participants' experiences of managing their lifeload (Kahu, 2013), drawing particularly extensively on the stories of the interviewees. It starts by outlining participants' family and work situations and the issues they highlighted as being challenging. It then explores how they integrated studying into these existing commitments. The final section investigates how returning to study affected participants and their families.

About participants' commitments outside studying

This section considers the roles and responsibilities of all the research participants, firstly respondents to the questionnaires at both timepoints (S-1 and S-2) and then the interviewees.

Questionnaire respondents

Questionnaire respondents reported a wide range of work and family commitments beyond their studies (summarised in Table 13, below). Most respondents reported having caring responsibilities for dependent children. Nearly three-quarters of S-1 respondents described themselves as the main carer for their children (n=31, 74%), with just three (7%) describing themselves as joint carers. The remainder had no children at home - either because they had none, or their children had left home (n=8, 19%) - or they did not specify.

	S-1 Respondents n=42	**S-2 Respondents** n=23
Caring responsibilities	Main carer of children 74% (31) Joint carer of children 7% (3) No children or children no longer at home 19% (8)	Main carer of children 91% (21) Carer for ageing parent 4% (1) Children no longer at home 4% (1)
Work responsibilities	Part time paid work 48% (20) Full time paid work 14% (6) Part time voluntary work 12% (5) No paid work 26% (11)	Part time paid work 39% (9) Part time voluntary work 9% (2) No paid work 57% (13)

Table 13: Respondents' caring responsibilities and work commitments (Survey 1 and Survey 2) (more than one option chosen by some respondents)

Nearly all S-2 respondents described themselves as main carer or mother to their dependent children (n=21, 96%); one had older children who had left home, and one was caring for her parents. Nearly all S-1 respondents (n=40, 95%) had been

working in the last five years before they started the course, ranging from part-time administration jobs to full-time very successful professional careers. Just over half S-2 respondents undertook paid or voluntary work outside the home–mostly part-time - alongside their studies (n=12, 52%). They therefore had to manage a range of competing claims on their time and attention which was wider than might normally expected for 'traditional' students but has often been identified for mature women student in previous studies (see, for example, Pascall and Cox, 1993; Green Lister, 2003; Webber, 2017a).

Both groups of questionnaire respondents were asked to identify their three most challenging and three least challenging issues from a long list of options; the most frequently chosen are shown in Figure 27 (p.194) and Figure 28 (p.195). Combining study with family was highlighted as the biggest challenge at both timepoints, although a smaller proportion of S-2 respondents chose this answer (n=26, 62% S-1; n=11, 48% S-2). They might have developed strategies to study in a way that worked for them and their families, or it is possible students who found combining study with their other roles an insuperable problem had dropped out by the time of the second questionnaire, towards the end of the second year. It might be supposed those participants without children at home found studying easier, but this very small group did not comment specifically.

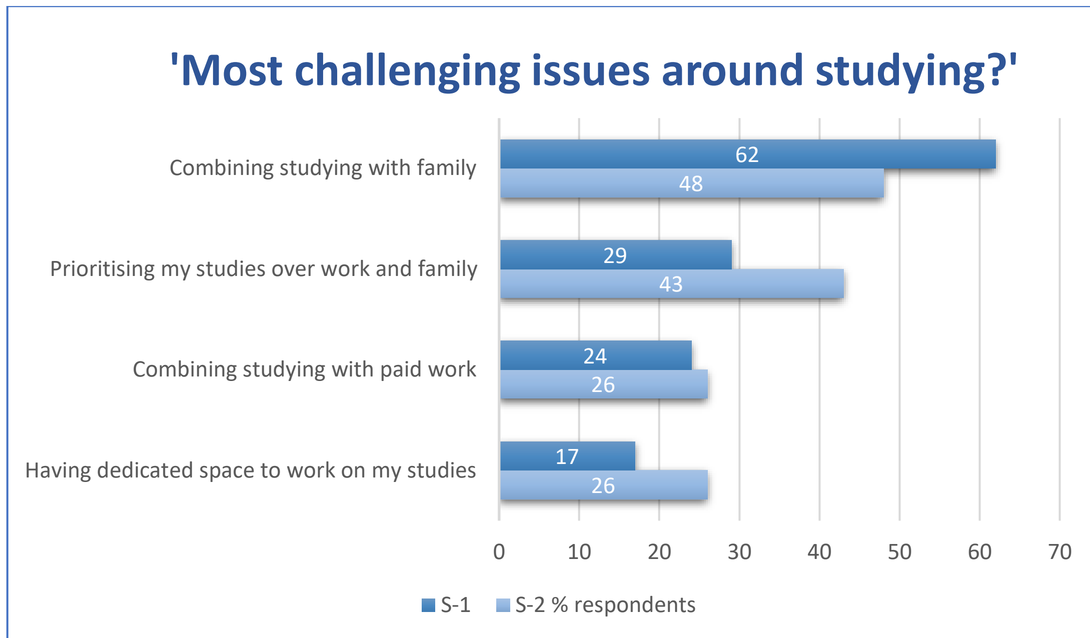


Figure 27: Respondents' views on the most challenging issues around studying (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q18 and S-2 Q17

Respondents at both survey timepoints highlighted difficult aspects related to managing study as part of their lives, including combining studying with paid work, having dedicated space to study and prioritising their study over their other commitments, although both groups varied in their attitudes to problems around trying to fit study into their lives. Having dedicated space and being able to prioritise study seemed to be more difficult for S-2 respondents than at the earlier timepoint, which indicates that, despite any strategies they might have developed around coping generally, they were not able to completely mitigate issues around finding time and space to learn.

Other issues were highlighted as less challenging than others (Figure 28, p.195): respondents at both timepoints were less likely to report having concerns about accessing resources (n=10, 24% S-1; n=5, 22% S-2), reading widely (n=9, 21% S-1; n=5, 22% S-2) and working with others (n=9, 21% S-1; n=5, 22% S-2). Half of S-1 respondents reported that working independently was not a concern, but less than a quarter of S-2 respondents chose this answer (n=21, 50% S-1; n=5, 22% S-2),

which may suggest independent working was considered more difficult at this later timepoint. However, an extra option was included in the second questionnaire about using IT, and this was chosen by over a third of respondents (n=8, 35% S-2), which may account for lower numbers for the other options. None chose this as one of their most challenging issues, which is compatible with the relatively high levels of confidence using IT that were reported (as discussed in the previous chapter).

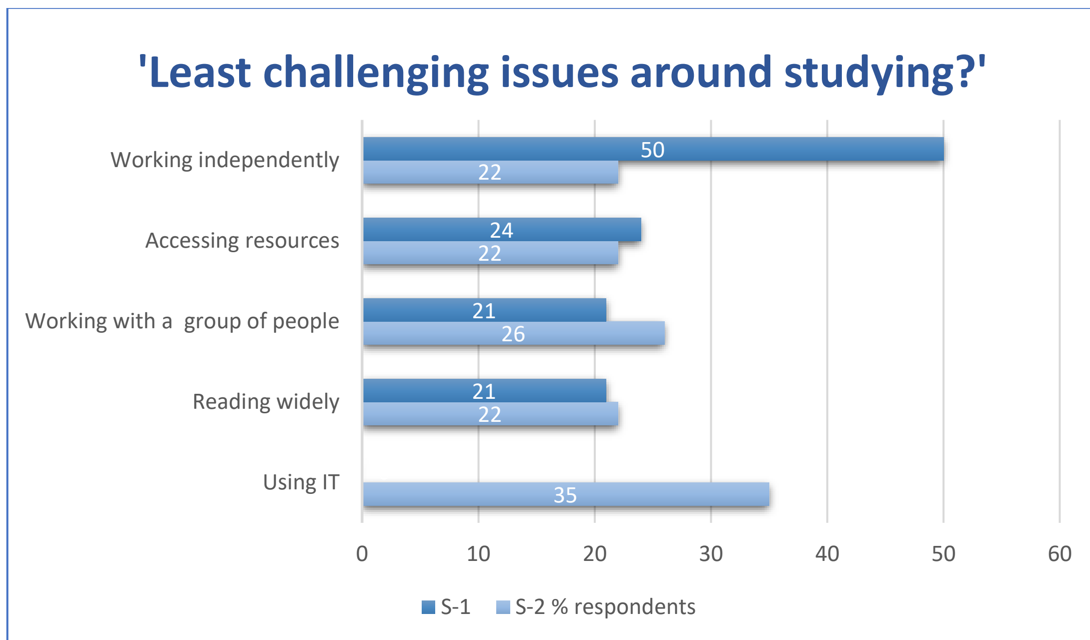


Figure 28: Respondents' views on the least challenging issues around studying (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q18 and S-2 Q17

The challenging issues identified by the questionnaire respondents shaped the question schedules for the interviews; they are explored in this chapter and the next (Chapter 7).

Interviewees

The interviewees shared information about their circumstances during their interviews. Freya had two young children at nursery and school, and also worked outside the home. Darby had young adult children, while Arwen, Becky, Cora and

Esme all had at least one young child and then had another baby during the course, which had particular effects on their ability to put aside their mother roles to study. Esme took maternity leave from her job for several months. All interviewees were living with male husbands/partners, four of whom were working full time and two who were made redundant during the period of the course. Interviewees' family and work commitments are summarised in Table 14, below:

Pseudonym	Family responsibilities	Paid employment	Voluntary work
Arwen	Main carer for 1 preschool child, new baby during course	No	No
Becky	Main carer for 2 preschool children, new baby during course	No	No
Cora	Main carer for 1 preschool child, new baby during course	No	No
Darby	Main carer for 1 child at university, 1 in 6th form	Part-time	Part-time
Esme	Main carer for 1 preschool child, new baby during course	Full-time/ on maternity leave	No
Freya	Joint carer for 1 child at primary school, 1 preschool child	Part-time	No

Table 14: Interviewees' caring responsibilities and work commitments

All six interviewees talked in depth about their experiences of being mature women students and the difficulty of integrating their studying selves with their roles as mothers, wives/partners and daughters. Several super-ordinate and sub-

ordinate themes were developed from the interviews (Table 15, below) which are integrated with the questionnaire data analysis in this chapter.

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes
Integrating study into complex lives	Taking on an extra shift Squeezing study into slivers of time and space Shifting sands of family life
Impact of studying on mothering	A less available mother? High cost of studying
Impact of studying on participants	A range of emotions Becoming more critical learners 'Doing something for themselves'
Impact of studying on participants' relationships	Changes in relationships with partners Lack of social time

Table 15: Interpretative phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts: interviewees' experiences of studying as mothers

Super-ordinate theme: Integrating study into complex lives

This section explores participants' reports of the impacts of incorporating studying into their already full lives.

Sub-ordinate theme: Taking on an extra shift

Hochschild (1989/2012) popularised the term 'second shift' for working mothers who also had the major responsibility for looking after children and the home, and this could also apply to mature women students who are trying to juggle

being the main caregiver at home and being a student. Arwen was typical in seeming disappointed her family responsibilities did not lessen when she added being a student to her roles:

> *Everything else doesn't change. So, the workload becomes more, because you're still a mum and you still do everything you've done before. The workload doesn't get shared because suddenly you've got this other role, it just becomes a lot more. So becomes a lot more stressful, so you become a bit more snappy, and maybe have a bit less time for yourself.* (Int2)

She had previously explained her husband was revising for professional examinations and was therefore unable to take over much household management (she did not discuss why his need to study took precedence over hers) but there is still a sense of surprise in her words and a resentment at the lack of flexibility (using the second person implies she saw this as a common experience). Husbands and partners who did take on a larger share of childcare and household chores in the evenings and weekends to enable students to study were presumably also taking on a second shift, which could potentially cause additional family stress.

As mothers with paid working roles, Freya and Esme were taking on a third shift of university work (Kramarae, 2001; Meyers, Bennett and Lysaght, 2003), managing a difficult 'balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money' like the mature women students on access courses researched by Reay, Ball and David (2002, p10). Both interviewees had some childcare arrangements already in place and took advantage of their train commutes, the threshold time and space between home and work, as Esme described:

> *I suppose when I was back at work, I had the beauty then of being able to travel on the tube so I could - I've got an hour and a half to get into work - so I could sit there and read.* (Esme, Int2)

Her use of *'beauty'* implies this was an especially useful and appreciated aspect of working outside the home: she could focus fully on her reading. The rest of her studying had to be fitted into weekends when her son was napping, or – once her second baby arrived and she was on maternity leave – when he was being looked after by their au pair: *'[Younger son] slept on me in a sling, so whenever he went to sleep, I would literally have my books out and be cracking on.'* (Esme, Int2). Even though she seemed very organised and said she was '*quite self-motivated*', she sometimes needed the pressure of a deadline to give her a push, however:

> *I can leave things until the 11th hour and then I find the adrenaline rush I get - my house will be spotless but then I will be - I will finally get it done.* (Esme, Int1)

Instead of doing assignments she would do household tasks as displacement activity, until the fear of missing strict deadlines made her concentrate on her studies.

In this research, a key issue reported by the questionnaire respondents was being able to fulfil all their domestic, course and work responsibilities at a standard they felt was satisfactory. This was even more difficult for those who carried out paid or voluntary work as well as studying (n=25, 74% S-1; n=9, 43% S-2), although fewer S-2 respondents were in this situation; it is possible some had reduced their outside roles to focus on their studies. Some S-1 respondents reported enacting major modifications to their working situations to study. For example, several reported reducing their working hours, or changing their work to be '*less mentally draining, though lower paid*' (S-1). Some left jobs but still needed to earn money in the few hours available, which one said meant she

would *'need to engage in work that is much lower paid (and status) than I have previously done'* (S-1). This might entail having to come to terms with changing perceptions of how she fitted into society. Another said she had retired, *'which is huge because it means our household income will halve'* (S-1); again, this might involve coming to terms with her altered social standing. Another had downsized her house because *'Reduced working hours will make it difficult to manage paying rent.'* (S-1).

Some participants found their work-study equilibrium changing through the course: '*I found the work/life/family balance hard. There were times I had to prioritise work.'* (S-2). One respondent commented specifically about being unable to concentrate on her studies as much as she would have liked because she had to continue working to pay the bills:

> *I am frustrated by having to do paid work. It's not so much the time it takes as the requirement to shift my focus from what I'm really interested in - I want to be able to fully immerse myself in the topic, but 3 days per week I have to think about other things! (S-1)*

Studying on the NCT course in addition to their family and work commitments meant participants could find it problematic finding time and sometimes space for their studies, so the next section investigates these aspects in more detail.

Sub-ordinate theme: Squeezing study into slivers of time and space

Most participants had children meaning they had a range of specific challenges to deal with, including how to fit study temporally and spatially with their families' needs. Those without children did not comment specifically on these aspects; being a mother rather than a woman was perhaps the challenge here.

A place to study

As author Virginia Woolf famously said, a woman who wants to write needs a 'room of her own' (Woolf, 1935, p5); finding physical and mental space to work was a challenge some participants highlighted, especially if they were mainly doing their independent study in the family home. One questionnaire respondent dreamed of the luxury of dedicated space:

> *Sometimes I think it would be nice to be able to stretch out in a study* or *in a library and just spend a few hours 'studying' during daytime hours but sadly this is not possible at the moment. (S-2)*

Not being able to *'stretch out'* implies the time and space for her studying was restricted by the other parts of her life. In contrast, another acknowledged how she was lucky to be able to study away from the family:

> *'I am fortunate we have a box room set up as an office already which I have made into my space. I find it very distracting if I try and work in a room with the family, even if just reading, so having a separate space has been invaluable.' (S-1)*

'*Distracting*' hints at the noise and demands her family made when she was not in the same place as them; another respondent found the same: '*The house is always full of activity and there is very little quiet*.' (S-1). Not having space meant the studying and domestic spheres were harder to manage, and also made it difficult for one respondent to maintain focus on her studies because she was having to start afresh every day:

> *I work from my dining room table; we have an open plan house and there is no room for a dedicated area. I have current work collecting on the end of my kitchen island, work from last year in a laundry basket in my bedroom. When working I sit with my laptop at the kitchen table,*

> *and at the end of the day I have to scoop everything up and store it on top of my daughter's play kitchen to make way for us to sit as a family to eat dinner. This means I always seem to be starting from scratch each day, having to familiarize myself with what I was doing, re-lay everything out in order to continue. (S-2)*

Her study and her home life were tangibly intertwined, with her previous work stored in a laundry basket and her laptop having to be relegated to the same space as her daughter's toys (perhaps mentally as well as physically) as she shifted back into mothering. Lacking dedicated space meant it was much harder for some to fit studying into short bursts during the day, as another respondent commented:

> *I don't have a big house so mostly I have to work on the kitchen table or on my bed and clear everything away at the end of the session. It would be nice to have a desk where I could leave my notes and books out and just dip in and out whenever I had a few minutes. (S-1)*

Many indicated how they managed to merge their learning selves into the family space by making the most of times when their children were out of the house at nursery or school, while those who worked outside the home often mentioned reading on the commute to work. Those participants with houses which had separate space for study and more money to spend on childcare had an advantage over those without, which raises issues of structural inequalities.

Some interviewees had to use shared living space to study, such as Freya who used the kitchen table because *'We don't have a spare room where I can go and lock myself away and study.'* (Freya, Int2). However, even when they did have a dedicated space, they might not use it. For example, when Cora had just one small child, she seemed to find studying straightforward when her daughter was out of the house, either at nursery or at her mother's house: *'I didn't find it hard, I*

just had to be very organised.' (Cora, Int1). She realised she was fortunate compared to some of her peers in being able to study away from her family:

> *I'm very lucky because I've got nursery and I've got my mum. … I've got an office here so I, I feel I am quite - not privileged, that's not the right word – I've got the right set-up to be able to do it.* (Cora, Int1)

She seemed to perceive her arrangements as a basic studying requirement - hesitating to say she was *'privileged'* - until discovering other students did not all have similar set-ups. However, when her son was born, she often left her office empty to be in the same space as her daughter:

> *I haven't sat down and read a book in my office, I've only read books around the house or whatever. So sometimes while [baby son]'s asleep, we watch… we sit and watch TV and [daughter] will let me read a bit of a book. I try and read a chapter, while she is sat… I try and make it, 'You watch a film and I'll sit with you.'* (Cora, Int2)

She felt she had to be there physically on the sofa, although not emotionally as she was reading textbooks instead. At times she needed to absent herself from the home, such as when her partner was supposed to be looking after the children but did not manage to keep them separate enough for her to concentrate:

> *I found it a lot easier when I said, 'Right, I'm going to my mum's from 9 till 12, I'm not going to be here.' It was easier to just leave rather than being upstairs, and have them coming in and asking for me.* (Cora, Int2)

Being out of the family home meant she could slip out of her mother role for a while and focus on being a student, although she found it difficult to step away completely from parental responsibility, particularly during the stage she was breastfeeding her young baby, because she thought it was impossible *'to switch*

off, especially when they're babies' (Cora, Int2). Her son was a constant presence, even in his physical absence. Conversely, when she was spending time with her family, she found it difficult to put aside her studies: '*It's always at the back of your mind, you're thinking "I should be doing something".'* (Cora, Int2). Her mothering and studying roles were closely intertwined.

Becky was adept at incorporating study into her daily routine and, unlike some of the others, was skilled in using her smartphone, so was able to access the university library from home easily. She could read in short bursts and make notes for her assignments, because '*the library is at my fingertips now and I can sit at the kitchen table while the children are... during the day, they don't need to not be there'* (Becky, Int1). She did not feel it necessary to displace the children from their home and could combine her roles of being a mother and being a student, with the kitchen table doubling up as a desk, like other participants. She did find it impossible to write assignments in the presence of her children, however:

> *I could do lots of reading, even when the boys were there. I could take it in, but I couldn't write, and when they were there [laughter] I couldn't form a sentence. (Becky, Int1)*

It seems her academic voice was mute when she was mothering, so when she needed to be able to focus on writing assignments rather than reading, she found it better to absent herself from the home and out of her mother role into a local coffee shop '*because it was the only place that had internet access [laughs]. It wasn't quiet [laughs] but it was away.'* (Becky, Int1). Despite the noise, moving out of the domestic space was vital for her as deadlines loomed.

Arwen described how the course differed from previous learning experiences because she *'had a toddler in the background, taking books off the bookshelf'* (Arwen, Int1): there is a sense of her child undoing her learning by removing the tools she needed for study. Her son was too young to play independently so, like

some of her peers, she worked late at night or again removed herself from the domestic scene: *'I go to the library so I don't get caught up with ironing or questions.'* (Arwen, Int1). The library books would stay on the shelf until she was ready to take them off, and she could concentrate on her learning rather than domestic chores or engaging with her son's demands on her.

Freya preferred to keep her studying and her family life as separate as possible. However, even when she was outside the home on contact days, she, like Cora, found it difficult to *'entirely switch off'* from her mothering role, and felt compelled to check her partner was meeting the children's needs:

> *If [the contact day] was a Saturday, then when we had a break, I would text my partner and ask, 'How did swimming go? Are the kids alright? Are you all falling out?'* (Freya, Int2)

She worried the family would be disintegrating without her input, even from a distance. This has echoes of Lynch's (2008) notion of 'intensive mothering' discussed earlier (p.36).

Students having suitable space to learn can be taken for granted by HEIs, despite Barnett's (2007, p.137) exhortation for them to 'offer space to each student to forge … her own becoming', which is surely not limited to the geographical campus. For many participants, geographical space for studying at home could be transient, hard fought over and limiting of their pedagogical space.

Finding time for study

To find out how participants fitted studying into their busy lives, S-1 respondents were asked when they planned to study and S-2 respondents about when they tended to do their studying (Figure 29, p.206).

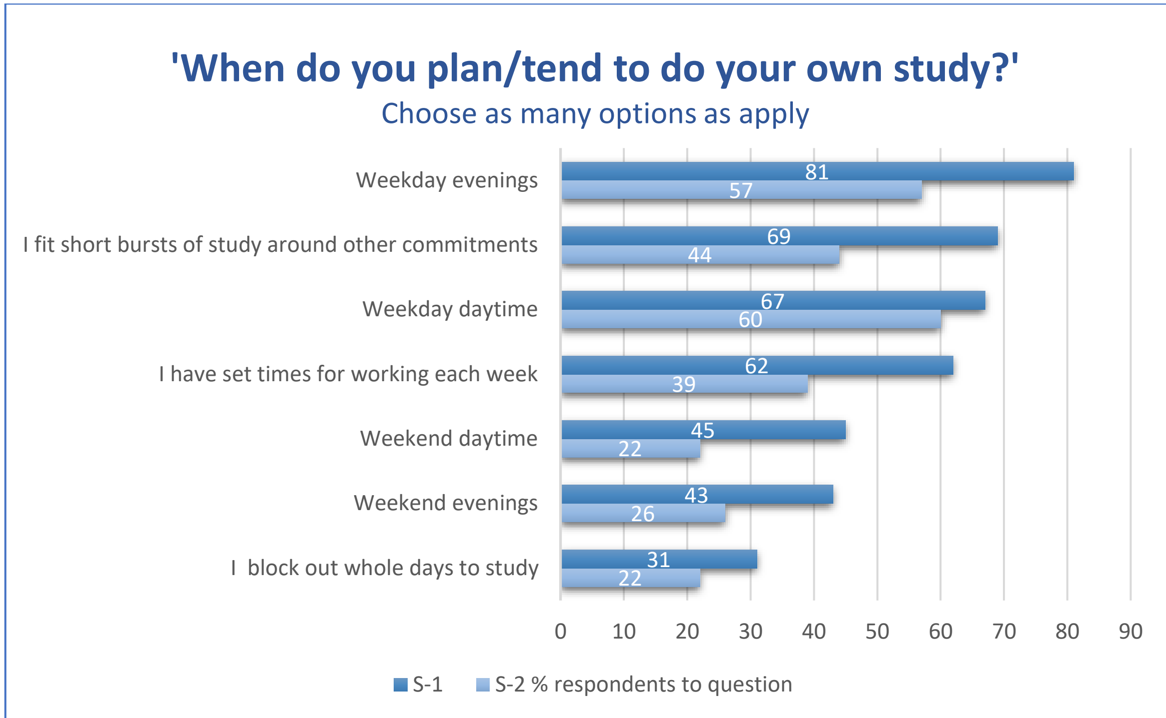


Figure 29: Respondents' stated intentions (Survey 1) or tendencies (Survey 2) around when they would study outside contact days – percentages of responses to S-1 Q9 and S-2 Q8

As S-1 respondents started the course, their most common planned times for studying were weekday evenings (n=34, 81%) followed by weekday daytimes (n=28, 67%). Weekend evenings and daytimes were much less popular (n=18, 43%; n=19, 45%) as weekends were presumably more likely to be seen as family time. Over two-thirds planned to fit short bursts of studying around other commitments (n=29, 69%). A smaller proportion of S-2 respondents (n=13, 57%), reported studying in the evening during the week than S-1 respondents, and they were less likely to say they fitted study into short bursts around other commitments (n=10, 44%). It is possible they managed to study while doing other things (such as childcare and housework), or that they did not find short bursts practical or helpful. They were also much less likely to work at weekends during the evening (n=6, 26%) or during the day (n=5, 22%). Slightly under two-thirds of S-1 respondents planned to have set times for working (n=26, 62%) but this dropped to around two-fifths for S-2 respondents (n=9, 39%), and this was

echoed in the comments many respondents made about having to improvise when they could study, depending on what else was happening in their lives. Overall, S-1 respondents suggested they hoped to study at a range of different times. S-2 respondents, however, indicated they were able to study at more limited times. It is possible their lifeloads were heavier than they realised when they started, or accommodations made for their studying did not happen as expected.

Elaborating on their plans, some S-1 respondents commented they intended to fit study around the times when their children were asleep or busy, or when they were in nursery or school, or being looked after by family members. Some relied on partners to look after the children in the evenings or at weekends, although fewer S-2 respondents chose these times, which suggests this strategy was not always successful. While some seemed confident in their plans, one highlighted the uncertainty associated with caring for children: *'I think it may be stressful to try to plan around naps as this will not be a set amount of time.'* (S-1). Studying when the children were out of the house, or they were out of the house on the way to work reduced the likelihood of being interrupted. Some worried like this respondent that '*finding time to study and dedicate as much time as required without missing out on too much family time'* would be a difficult balance to achieve (S-1).

Having children to care for while studying was a novel dimension for many, making this learning experience more complex than previously, as this respondent described:

> *Getting the balance between full time work, studying and family is going to be one of the most challenging things. I have done work and study previously, but I did not have children, and this adds an extra layer of difficulty to planning my study and family time. (S-1)*

Being the main carer with the responsibility for managing house and family was a possible source of difficulty too, as in this respondent's situation:

> *I will find it hard to combine studying with family life as I am the person in my family who does everything at home. My daughter is very dependent on me and so is my partner. (S-1)*

It is difficult to tell whether she was content or resentful about being the person her daughter and husband depended on, but there is a sense of her family being the 'greedy institution' Coser (1974, cited in Wright, 2013, p214) describes as 'requiring [women's] constant allegiance and availability to cater to all physical and emotional needs in a way that is not required of men'.

By the second survey timepoint, respondents had had more practice managing these competing demands, although their comments hinted some continued to find it difficult juggling the various aspects of their lives. Some would get up before the rest of the household, while others would work late at night after the children had gone to bed, particularly if deadlines were looming. Some managed to study when their younger children were napping, but this could interfere with *'one-to-one time'* spent with older children. Participants were often juggling not only their studies with mothering, but also trying to meet different needs of individual children. Many found it difficult being unable to plan with certainty. One said she was able to study during her baby's nap times only *'when they occurred'*, while another was able to work in the evenings only *'when and if my children go to sleep'*. Many therefore relied on time when their children were out of the house, whether at school or nursery, or being looked after by others - *'Coming up to deadlines I am also able to work at weekends as my husband will take him out for the day.'* - or when they were on the train commuting to work (or as one admitted, during quiet times while actually at work). Many respondents had to capitalise on spare time when it became available; they could not count on

a particular length of time. This perhaps partly explains fewer S-2 respondents reporting set times for studying (Figure 29, p.206).

Respondents often recounted making considerable adaptions to family life to free up time for studying, such as altering caring arrangements for their dependent children. Some arranged for children to spend longer in childcare outside the home whether with a childminder - *'My youngest attends a childminder an extra day a week to allow me to attend contact days.'* (S-2) – or at '*nursery so I can attend core sessions and study*' (S-2). Others used '*wraparound care at school'* and some made *'significant changes'* to how they and their partners apportioned childcare responsibilities: '*My husband will be the primary care-giver in my absence rather than it being shared when he is home.' (S-1).* Others reallocated time to studying they would have spent as family leisure time, as this respondent related: '*I am having to spend slightly less time one-to- one time with my daughter …. I am less able to go out for days out with my partner.'* (S-1).

The interviewees too highlighted difficulties around finding time for study, especially because of the lack of stretches of uninterrupted time to prepare for and complete assignments. They talked about '*grabbing time'* (Becky Int, 2; Esme, Int1) as though they had to snatch it for themselves from demanding families, and also about lacking a predictable structure, echoing the questionnaire respondents' experiences.

Those who had another baby during the course found juggling even more complicated. For example, Cora found the birth of her son changed her approach because he became her main focus, especially while he was very young. She had no formal childcare for him and therefore did not have planned, dedicated study times:

> *Before I was much more structured: 'This is when I'm going to do my work, this is what I'm going to do.' When he was small it was just*

> *literally whenever I got a spare half hour. I had to do it a lot more in little bits rather than getting it - and I found it quite difficult because I think I'm better if I spend a couple of hours rather than doing - because by the time you get started … I think I just had to lower my standards slightly to get something in.* (Cora, Int2)

Her son and his needs were non-negotiable and fixed; her studies had to be adapted to work round him. Prioritising her baby's needs over her work meant she lacked long study sessions at regular times, so she felt she had to come to terms with producing lower quality work than she would have liked, to meet approaching deadlines. She reported co-sleeping with her baby meant her sleep was not too badly affected when he was young, but found she had far less time available overall for studying: *'I could do the work mentally - it was just literally not having the time to go and sit at the computer.'* (Cora, Int2).

Like Cora, Arwen benefitted from some regular grandmother childcare so she could study at home:

> *I suppose my mother-in-law … helped out a little bit - well, a lot - with [Older child]. She used to take [Older child] every Thursday and I used to work in the living room, and she would look after [Older child] for me, so that was really supportive.* (Arwen, Int2)

The revision of her assessment of mother-in-law's contribution from *'a little bit'* to '*a lot'* could arise from comparing her situation with her peers', as Cora did, or perhaps she did not want to sound ungrateful. It is notable she stated her son was being looked after as a favour for her specifically, rather than jointly for her and her husband, suggesting she felt childcare was her responsibility alone. She also took complete responsibility (emphasising the 'I') for bad time management when she was struggling to get work done: *'I didn't -* I *didn't manage my time… so I felt like I was… firefighting.'* (Arwen, Int1). She was having to deal with

emergencies as they came up, rather than concentrating on her studies; the shifting sands of participants' lives are explored in more detail below. Once her second baby arrived, Arwen described how she nevertheless had more study time on Level 5 than Level 4 (her husband was more available to look after their elder son having finished his examinations), and she also accessed paid-for childcare:

> *I really made extra time. [Older child] went into daycare for an extra day, so I had an extra day, an extra day free to work and that's really helped. And I've worked more on the weekends and my husband's taken [Older child] a lot more.* (Arwen, Int2)

Her repetition of *'extra'* suggests she appreciated the additional time during the week, although her studies encroached onto family time at the weekend. Again, there is a sense she felt her husband was doing her a favour by taking over the childcare at times.

While Cora and Arwen had regular and reliable childcare support from family and nursery which gave them some childfree time, Becky was less fortunate, like participants in other studies for whom affordable, reliable childcare was a barrier (see, for example, Griffiths, 2002; Lynch, 2008; Kensinger and Minnick, 2018). She related how her planned approach to incorporating study into family life did not happen as hoped:

> *We had a plan that I would have a whole day of study that would just be me studying and somebody would look after our children, and then I would have my uni day separately. But it never transpired – not once! It was more like if I had deadlines for things, then I would have people take the kids or babysit.* (Becky, Int2)

Becky returned to this disappointment several times throughout both interviews. On looking back at her experiences at the end of Level 5, she identified how supporting her study was simply not a priority for others in her family circle,

making it *'challenging to carve out time'* so she had to work late at night or make do with smaller slivers of time: *'It was just very "as and when" - it was not ideal.'* (Becky, Int2). Part of her family' and friends' apparent disinterest could be linked to their lack of awareness of exactly what the studying for this course entailed. This invisibility of participants' study commitments to friends and family is explored further in Chapters 8 (p.319) and 9 (p.337). Becky found nursery too expensive to be a regular option so had to *'cobble together'* childcare in creative ways or beg for assistance as deadlines approached: *'I would say, "Mum, I really, really need you to – for even half an afternoon".'* (Becky, Int1).

Freya made the most of her commute to read, like Esme, and then studied when her children were finally asleep at night:

> *My kids are terrible for going to bed on time so, they wouldn't go to bed until like 9 o'clock - tidy up and it will be 9:30pm: 'Right, going to sit down and do some studying now!' [laughs] then it would be, 'Oh, it's midnight, I've got to go to bed, I've got to get up at 6 to get to work!'* (Freya, Int1)

Although her description hints at the relentless pace of her life, as a self-confessed *'night owl'* she accepted the need to work late. Sometimes she would work even later to meet approaching deadlines:

> *I did have a couple of nights where I went a little bit later, but then at least I know I've broken the back of it and I can get back to it, and I know it's only for a few nights and then I'll have got it done.* (Freya, Int2)

Framing the late nights as a temporary intrusion into her normal routine made sacrificing her sleep to finish her assignments more acceptable. She seemed less tied than those with younger children by her sons' needs, as they became more self-sufficient:

> *You feel like you have got a little bit of extra thinking space - maybe not physical time, but maybe some thinking space, some headspace where you're not worrying about this tiny, tiny baby anymore.* (Freya, Int2)

Having *'headspace'* free from concerns about her children compensated somewhat for her lack of time overall.

Some interviewees were surprised by the amount of time needed for studying outside contact days. For example, Esme had assumed she would be able to cope easily:

> *I probably thought it was going to be a bit of a walk in the park to begin with! … [Husband] said, 'Oh, you will just wing it and you will be fine.' But it was a lot - it was a lot of work! So, I had to juggle it around this little one and work.* (Esme, Int1)

She had to manage her needs with those of her child and her employer which became more complicated after the arrival of her second baby, although she was able to take some maternity leave.

Even participants with much older children could be surprised when they did not find fitting study into their lives easy. Darby, whose children were young adults, had plenty of time and flexibility in theory, but she found managing her time difficult in practice, comparing herself negatively with others with more commitments:

> *I constantly look at other people and think, 'How are they working, and they've got small children?' And I think I almost had - again, too much time and found it difficult. … I need a bit of adrenaline, I think. … I never really did stick to a particular plan I had, unless there was a deadline.* (Darby, Int2)

She seemed disappointed in herself for not being able to find effective time management strategies, requiring the adrenaline rush of upcoming deadlines to motivate her. She still needed to prioritise her mothering role - *'they still carry on having crises'* - and found it '*difficult to compartmentalise'* because study time *'bleeds into life'* so she found it hard to say *'Right, I'm going to go and sit down and work for two hours.'* (Darby, Int2). Sometimes she would resort to *'just going downstairs in the middle of the night to sit and think'* to find headspace, like Freya. Darby's lack of ability to concentrate at times could be explained as an intrinsic aspect of being a mother, of needing to put her needs aside to attend immediately to the needs of her young children. As Olsen explained in her description of the challenges for women authors trying to combine writing with motherhood, it is impossible to concentrate on other things without a constant awareness any task might have to be stopped at any time because:

> … more than any other human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible. Children need one now… It is distraction, not meditation that becomes habitual: interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil. (Olsen, 1995, p. 942)

Being ready to meet the needs of their children at a moment's notice was no doubt usual for Arwen, Becky, Cora and Esme as they had young children and then had new babies whose needs they had to put first. But Darby and Freya too struggled to sidestep being responsible for their children no matter how far away they were or how they old they were. Participants working from home might experience a double pressure of having to plan to be interrupted because modern working practices often make them 'constantly contactable' by employers via telephone and email (Smith *et al*, 2011) and messaging apps. Therefore, participants could not count on regular time for study and needed to continually reappraise how and when they would study and complete assignments. It is

notable interviewees seemingly felt challenges around combining studying with their complex lives were individual, personal issues to solve, without input from their tutors (accessing tutor support is returned to in Chapter 7, p.258). As well as having to incorporate study as a 'marginal activity' (Wright, 2011, p93) into their constantly changing daily lives, they sometimes had to cope with major life changes; the next section gives an indication of the wide range of demanding situations participants faced during the course.

Sub-ordinate theme: Shifting sands of family life

Note: To help maintain confidentiality, this section will not attribute specific quotes to interviewees.

Mature students with more complex lives tend to be more likely than younger students to face huge changes and also smaller ongoing changes in their lives which can cause uncertainty and affect their studies. For example, a questionnaire respondent explained how moving house deprived her of a suitable workspace for the foreseeable future:

> *We are in the process of moving house, so I have no clear, quiet place to work currently, and don't know where to put one in the new house yet. (S-1)*

Interviewees also found their lives changed over the two years, whether in anticipated or unexpected ways. Two were organising intercontinental house moves during the second year. Four had new babies during the course; three were going from one baby to two which requires a particular rebalancing of the family dynamics. One found she was expecting twins but then sadly lost one of them. Those expecting babies were unsure how the new arrivals would affect their family lives:

Not knowing how this bump might be in terms of demands. [Son] was a pretty easy child – terrible sleeper, but on the whole he's pretty easy going. (Int1)

Even those who reported feeling fairly confident demonstrated an element of uncertainty: '*I am hoping it will be ok. I am a little bit nervous, but 99% of me thinks it will be fine. But a little bit of me thinks, "What if?".'* (Int1). She had a constant small voice in the back of her head questioning and catastrophising, undermining her trust in her ability to learn effectively once her baby arrived. Being pregnant again while studying could also be a challenge even as a second-time mother:

I think actually what I didn't realise was how it felt to be pregnant and doing assessments. You just forget how stressed you get; you just don't want to do anything. I thought, 'Why am I doing this to myself?'. (Int2)

The new babies added to participants' lifeloads considerably when they arrived: *'When I had him [new baby], it was a real struggle.'* (Int2).

Children's needs changed over time in different ways: they moved to different childcare providers or started school or university, needing extra support; they became involved with different activities outside the home often resulting in *'less time to study, less time to read around the subjects'* (Int2). One child was diagnosed with speech development issues while another developed anxiety; both situations are likely to have required time-consuming sourcing and accessing of extra support, as well as causing concern.

Partners' situations could change in unexpected ways too, including at work, which affected participants:

> *My husband's job became a lot more intense in the last year which we hadn't anticipated. We had thought he would still be a lot more flexible and actually he is probably away – physically away – a lot more. (Int1)*

Her partner was less available at home for support as he had to travel for work. Another said her husband's sudden redundancy meant he would be at home constantly '*so that's thrown a slight spanner in the works'* (Int1) because it would affect when and where she was able to study. Another interviewee's husband had also lost his job without warning and struggled to find work, and then decided to change careers completely and start an unfamiliar way of working, fundamentally affecting the whole family:

> *The whole balance of everything will change, because he'll be doing shift work. And as a family, we've never had anybody in our family working shift work, so it will require quite a big change for me, the kids – everybody, really. (Int2)*

Unforeseen life events could be hard to deal with, especially when a range of different issues came one on top of another:

> *It was a more stressful than anticipated year with a new-born baby, my oldest with his multi-agency meetings and my husband's mental health issues. So, it was quite full-on last year; it was quite a stressful year last year for everything and there was a lot going on. (Int2)*

In addition, some faced new challenges around their own parents getting older and more infirm:

> *Dealing with ageing parents is definitely something on the agenda at the moment and has definitely, suddenly – in the space of a year – become more of an issue. ... So, I think it will be on the horizon for the foreseeable future now – looking after them, or keeping an eye on them at least.* (Int2)

This meant some participants were potentially adding yet another shift as they became part of the 'sandwich generation' with caring and sometimes financial responsibilities not only for their offspring but increasingly also their parents (Veritas Care, 2019). It is likely they would also be re-evaluating and reshaping their relationships with their parents, which might be unsettling for some.

Participants in this study therefore experienced a range of difficult life events, many of them unexpected, as well as the normal constantly evolving fabric of family life. This expanded their lifeloads, making it more difficult for them to plan and prioritise their studies. The next section moves from the different dimensions of the complex and complicated lives of participants to explore the impact of studying on participants as mothers.

Super-ordinate theme: Impact of studying on mothering

Studying on the course entailed making changes so participants could successfully gain the qualification and move into practice. Questionnaire respondents at both timepoints were asked about the effect these changes had made on them. They highlighted a range of areas affecting their lives as mothers, both negative and positive. Many talked in terms of making sacrifices and guilt arising from their decision to study despite (or perhaps related to) their enjoyment of the course.

Sub-ordinate theme: A less available mother?

Previous research has found gender differences between students who are parents (see, for example, Laming, Morris and Martin-Lynch, 2019). Mothers, more than fathers, often feel guilty about balancing the needs of their families with their studies (Longhurst, Hodgetts and Stolte, 2012; Brooks, 2015); the student mothers showed this clearly in this research too. Many discussed difficulties around balancing conflicting demands on their time. They could feel

they were letting their families down – *'I always feel guilty if I am spending time studying when I could be spending time with my daughter and partner.'* (S-1) and *'I feel I have neglected the children at times.'* (S-2) - or conversely, not spending enough time on their studies – *'I worry about meeting deadlines as ultimately my son comes first.'* (S-1). One declared, *'A degree of family time will have to be sacrificed.'* (S-1); using the third person suggests she was trying to distance herself from causing this situation.

Unlike Esme, who might clean as displacement activity when deadlines were approaching, several respondents pointed to the effect of lack of time on housekeeping standards. One found her house was *'a lot messier'* (S-1), while another commented that even though her husband had been '*amazingly supportive, my house has gone to wrack and ruin!'* (S-2). It is uncertain whether her husband provided emotional or practical support, or a combination. Another said she coped by changing her expectations and *'lowered [her] standards in terms of cleaning and gardening'* (S-2). All these respondents gave the impression cleaning and other chores were their responsibility and the domestic arena was theirs alone to manage (even if their partners took on tasks) rather than jointly shared (this is returned to in Chapter 8, p.303).

There seemed to be no easy answers to getting a good study-life balance, and one said this led to her *'feeling resentful at times'* (S-2). Some reassured themselves the impossibility of meeting conflicting demands was not permanent: *'I understand it is only temporary and my husband is supportive of me studying generally.'* (S-2). The use of *'generally'* hints at specific times when her husband was not supportive.

Although many participants struggled with juggling the needs of their families with their studies, Figure 30 (p.220) shows over half of S-2 respondents reported feeling that studying on the course had positively affected how they engaged with their families (n=12, 52%). Some were neutral (n=7, 30%) but as this student's

comment shows, they could still recognise they had changed: *'I don't think how I engage with my family has changed but I do think more reflectively now on certain things.'* (S-2). It is not clear to what extent respondents felt under pressure to identify positive aspects of their studying experience, however, considering the sacrifices entailed for many.

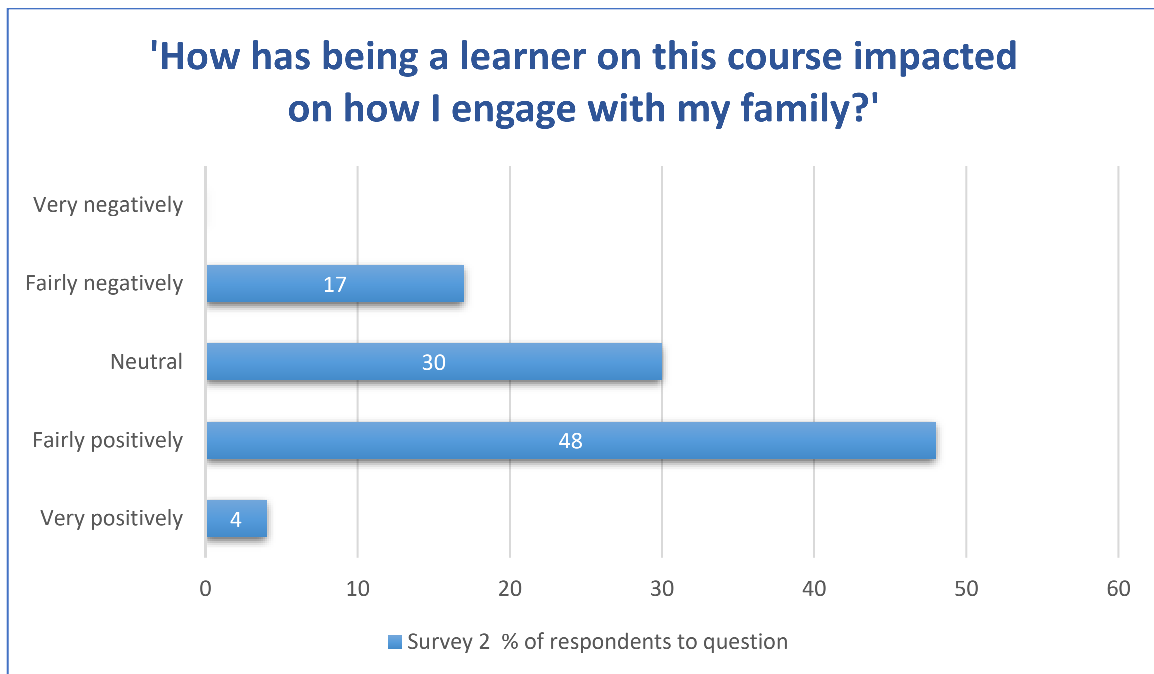


Figure 30: Respondents' views on how learning on the course affected how they engaged with their families (Survey 2) - percentages of responses to S-2 Q23h

Like the questionnaire respondents, the interviewees indicated that balancing the needs of themselves as students and of their families caused feelings of guilt and concern that they were not performing well in either role. For example, Arwen described the effects of trying to do all the usual tasks with her young son as well as studying and finding she was exhausted by *'burning the candles at both ends'* (Arwen, Int1), using up all her personal resources and working all the hours she could. She worried about effects on her relationship with her son:

> *It was hard, because you go to all the baby groups, trying to do a little bit in the afternoon as well as get the tea going, clean the house, do the*

> *washing. He was awake in the afternoon and then you try to put him to bed but he's not settling so maybe you do your coursework from nine till one but because you're so tired so - so there's - and you felt sometimes it took you away from being a good mum. … It was something important for me to give him a mum who was fully there, and not… not a half mum.* (Arwen, Int1)

She felt she was at risk of splitting herself in two, half student and half mother, and being less than the ideal mother she had wanted to be to her son. Her use of the second person implies she thought others might have this experience too, and indeed other interviewees did refer to this dilemma. Becky wondered if she was being present enough with her boys, even when they seemed content, when not giving them her full attention:

> *The older children were perfectly happy to go off and play, so I took those opportunities to read and study and whatever. And I would be sitting down here, on the laptop, and they would be playing somewhere. And I thought, 'Maybe I should be sitting with them more than reading a paper?'* (Becky, Int2)

Even when her children were having their needs met and seemed *'perfectly happy'*, she had a constant pricking of guilt she should have been focussing on them, not her studies. Esme too was preoccupied by the effect studying had on how *'available'* she was to meet her children's needs against the ebb and flow of studying, and wondered what sort of mother she would have been if she was not studying:

> *There were times when all the assessments were piling up and I know I was getting stressed and tense – and was it worth it? Did they - I think I managed reasonably well but I think I probably would've been less*

> *stressed - I think I probably would have been a more available mum…* (Esme, Int2)

Even though she gave herself some credit for managing satisfactorily, Esme acknowledged studying closed her off from her children at times. She had constant '*niggles*' about whether it was the right thing to do, whether it meant her younger son had received '*second-class treatment'*, and if it was *'fair to drag him out in the cold'* to contact days (Esme, Int2). She compared herself to the image she had of a *'selfless mother'* and debated if she should have renounced her desires and even her selfhood for her sons' wellbeing. She tried to convince herself building the possibility of a better future for her sons was a worthwhile compromise for having a less than perfect mother when they were very small. Despite her rationalising, she found it '*hard, sometimes: thinking about what you're forsaking' (*Esme, Int1*).* Her use of the strong word '*forsaking*' suggests biblical abandonment and desertion, which gives an idea of the depth of her concern over transgressing the expectations of motherhood.

Becky, Cora and Esme all found themselves weighing up the impact of their decisions to study and seemingly having to argue themselves rationally out of an emotionally difficult situation. Becky was concerned about studying while her children were still very young, but reasoned she was still with them most of the time:

> *The boys were in nursery, and they went for a full day. And they were quite upset at the beginning of the year, because they had never been for a full day. So that impacted and made me feel like they were upset because of me, because I'm choosing to be away for the whole day. So, there is that… guilt. And I know - rationally - I'm there a lot more than other people, and it's not like I'm going to Ibiza or anything like [laughs], I'm going to uni. But it's still my choice to put them there. […]*

So was not great; I didn't feel good. But we're past that now. (Becky, Int2)

She was not doing something purely for enjoyment - such as a decadent holiday - but still felt her choices had caused her children upset, which was something she had to come to terms with. Her protestations *'we're past that now'* and they had moved on hint at negotiations having taken place with her partner.

Cora too wondered if she was spending enough time with her daughter but justified her decision by claiming she would doubtless have felt guilty whatever her decisions:

She's doing full school hours [at nursery] and part of me thinks, 'Oh God…' - she is quite happy doing it - but I think, 'She's only three, I could spend more time with her.' But then I think, 'Well, what if I was at work?' so even though you're there quite a lot of the time, you still feel a bit guilty about her being in childcare, but I think whatever you do you still feel guilty. (Cora, Int2)

Her '*Oh God*' echoes Esme's use of '*forsaken*'; however, doing nothing was not an option for her own sanity – '*I couldn't not work, I couldn't not work, I'd go mad.'* (Cora, Int1) – so she rationalised studying and starting a new career as the better option.

Freya was on the threshold of a different stage as her boys became '*a little bit more self-sufficient'* and she felt able to start thinking about taking time for herself again, without bargaining like some of the other interviewees:

The boys go off to do sporting activities. They're actually running around for an hour and sometimes you're stood around going, 'Oh, okay, they're *busy, what should* I *do for forty-five minutes?' So, an*

> *opportunity to start to think about me as a person, I suppose, me as an individual…* (Freya, Int2)

She was still on the periphery of their activities - and would still have to be 'instantly interruptible' for those forty-five minutes - but she could risk taking some time for her own development, be herself rather than a mother or a partner.

Considerations of being a 'good' mother always on hand to meet children's needs were not limited to those with younger children. Darby described how she had always been the main carer for her sons emotionally and seemed to regret her inability to carry on this role as she would have wished while also trying to study:

> *I am the person that's there for them most of the time and goes to all the school stuff. So, I'm not sure that - particularly the start of Level 5 - I haven't been as emotionally present in lots of ways.* (Darby, Int2)

Moving up to the more intense Level 5 involved a greater degree of uncomfortable detachment from her mothering role.

The interviewees' stories demonstrate the difficulty they had in incorporating a new learner identity with their roles as mothers specifically. For example, Arwen reflected on how studying had altered her in a different way to her first university experience:

> *So maybe going back to university or college or study changes you as a partner or maybe as a mother, because you've got other things you're trying to fit in as well. …. And I think you – as a mother, I suppose - I sometimes just seem to get on with it, and people maybe don't see the amount more you're doing compared to a student who is 21, doing it for the first time without responsibilities. You have more than one role.* (Arwen, Int2)

She felt the multiplicity of her roles and responsibilities made it hard for her to be a learner; her use of the second person indicates she thought this was an experience shared with her peers, but not seen by others. Chapter 5 (p. 160) referred to transformative learning and Atherton's idea of supplantive learning, where unlearning and replacing knowledge and skills can be problematic in shaking students' world views (Atherton, 2013a). Altering students' perception of themselves could arguably be even more testing. In their study of 'working class' women attending an Access course, Brine and Waller (2004, p97) describe this unsettling process:

> This [...] is not a straightforward one [process] of simply shedding old identities and donning unproblematic new ones, but is instead a period of reflexivity and risk, confusion and contradiction.

Participants in the current research seemingly combined their roles in new ways so their identities became multi-layered palimpsests made up of scraps and overwritten elements of their past experiences as learners and as workers, and especially as mothers - but also wives or partners, daughters, sisters and friends - and their experiences as learners on this course. While this rewriting of themselves was hard for some, others seemed to relish gaining a greater understanding of themselves, particularly through skills learnt on the reflective practice module:

> *The reflective practice element has been really liberating. Making sense of past events and emotions makes me feel more in control of my life. (S-2)*

For this student, developing self-awareness was a path to freedom, a sentiment that chimes with Freire's (1976/2006) theories around the emancipatory purposes of education.

Sub-ordinate theme: High cost of studying

Costs of course fees, associated travel and childcare combined with the reduction in time available for paid work meant studying could affect participants' family finances adversely, at least for the duration of the course. One questionnaire respondent commented on *'having to make cuts in lifestyle to save money as I'm not working but paying for childcare'* (S-1). Another reported she would *'need to stop taking on freelance contract work as I will be using all babysitting offers and using time to study, so we will experience a drop in income*' (S-1). Studying changed the dynamic of responsibility for household income for some, such as the respondent who said giving up work meant '*putting more pressure on my partner to be the breadwinner'* (S-1). Others found having fewer hours available for paid work reduced the quality of work available, increasing their reliance on financial support from other family members, as this comment demonstrates:

> *I left my paid job to enable retraining. As I need to earn some money but with low hours, I accept I will need to engage in work that is much lower paid (and status) than I have previously done. The drop in finances has meant we have had to cut our cloth accordingly, and budget to much a greater extent than before, and use rather than add to savings. I am very fortunate I am receiving support from my wider family. (S-1)*

It is likely her sense of self as a financially independent, successful working woman would have been affected as she moved to '*lower status'* work and had to rely on family assistance for the duration of the course. Some respondents related making major changes to reduce costs so they could afford to study, such as '*moving to a cheaper apartment as reduced working hours will make it difficult to manage paying rent'* (S-1) or moving house '*to release equity to pay for the course fees'* (S-1). House moves can cause major upheaval for all concerned; students making huge sacrifices would probably have felt under immense pressure to succeed on the course.

The interviewees also referred to the combined financial effects of studying on the course. As Becky noted, the fees were just part of the equation:

> *It costs money to study, and it costs money for me to go to [city] every week. And it costs money in terms of any spare time I did have, it wasn't going on a part-time job or it wasn't - it was going on reading up and study, so it was probably… And the cost of the fees – I'm still paying off, effectively [laughs]. … And I'm paying for childcare while I'm away as well, so it's cost a lot.* (Becky, Int2)

Financial pressures piled up and seemed to be her responsibility rather than a household one, although she acknowledged she would be gaining a renewed sense of financial independence once she started earning money as a practitioner: *'We're going to be getting extra money and the money will be mine.'* (Becky, Int2). It is noteworthy childcare costs also seemed to be hers alone, rather than a joint responsibility.

Cora had stopped earning because she had '*given up a well-paid job and now it costs me money to learn'* which made her feel uncomfortable, even though her husband supported her decision - '*He doesn't care about finances, he lets me do it.'* (Cora, Int1) – although she still seemingly needed to get his permission to study.

The financial costs of studying could be extensive, therefore, and could affect participants and their families deeply; other consequences of studying are explored in the next section.

Super-ordinate theme: Impact of studying on participants

This section explores the range of effects studying had on participants themselves, both positive and negative.

Sub-ordinate theme: A range of emotions

Returning to study can affect mature women students emotionally (Pascall and Cox, 1993; Ward, 2009; Webber, 2017a). Questionnaire respondents were asked how they felt about being a learner on the course as they started and two years later. While small proportions of both groups indicated feeling *'unsure'*, *confused, concerned* and *liberated*, respondents at both time periods tended to report a range of positive feelings (Figure 31, below).

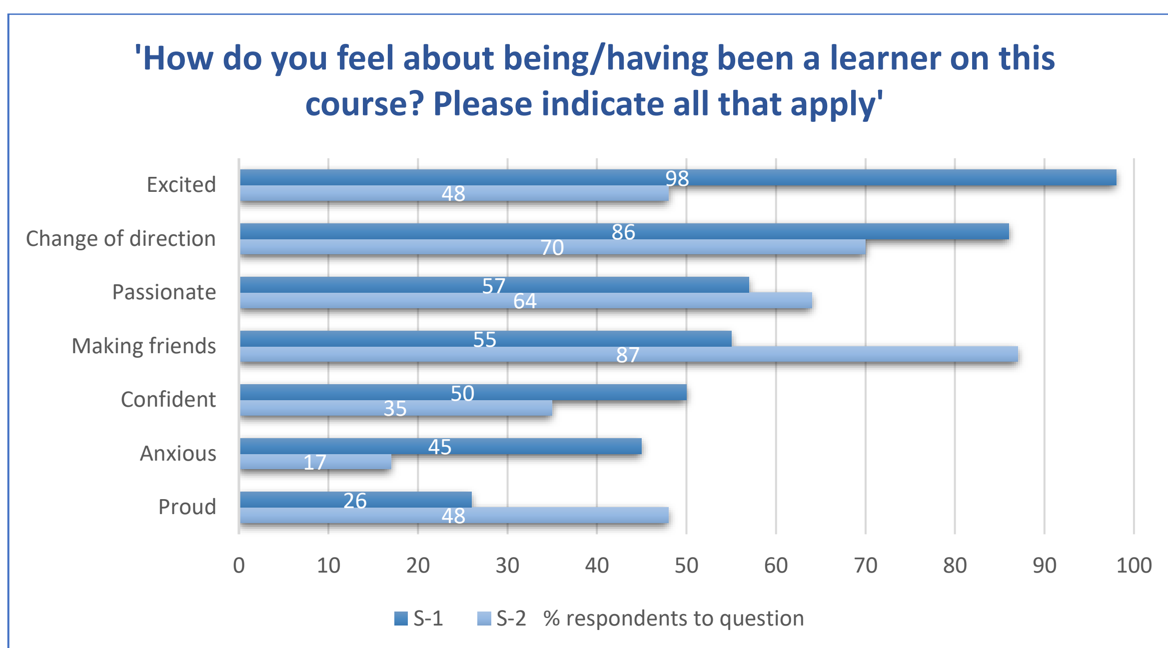


Figure 31: Respondents' feelings about being/having been a learner on the course: most frequent choices - percentages of responses to S-1 Q22 and S-2 Q21

As they started the course, S-1 respondents said they were mainly feeling *excited* (n= 41, 98%, S-1) and *looking forward to a change in direction* (n=36, 86%, S-1), although some were also anxious (n=19, 45%, S-1). When asked how they felt having been learners on the course, S-2 respondents placed the greatest emphasis on having *enjoyed making friends* (n=20, 87%, S-2). This was a much higher proportion compared to what S-1 respondents were looking forward to as they started out (n=23, 55%, S-1), emphasising the unexpected social aspect of learning on the course. The interviewees highlighted how support peers provided to each

other was pivotal to their success; this is explored further in Chapter 7 (p.260). Towards the end of the second year, many had *enjoyed a change of direction* (n=16, 70%, S-2) and were also feeling *engaged* and *looking forward to the next stage* (both n=15, 65%, S-2) and *passionate* (n=13, 57%). Almost half were *excited* and *proud* (n=11, 48%). Although anxiety levels were lower for S-2 respondents (n= 10, 24%, S-1; n=4, 17%, S-2), there had been a drop in general confidence, with only just over a third saying they were feeling *confident* compared to half at the beginning of the course (n=21, 50%, S-1; n=8, 35%, S-2). One or two comments indicate this partly related to changes NCT had been undergoing as an organisation at the time, but the drop could also be linked to some respondents being close to moving into practice, which can be a time of increased anxiety. Overall, many respondents reported a range of feelings, including pride and a sense of achievement, coupled with an anxious anticipation at moving onto the next stage (on to Level 5 or into practice), as indicated by this typical comment: *'There is a mixture of excitement and nerves about my abilities and facilitation to parents in real life.'* (S-2).

Studying on the course seemed to increase reported levels of self-esteem for many participants. At the second survey timepoint, respondents were asked how studying on the course had affected their self-perception (Figure 32, p.230): about three-quarters (n=17, 74%) said it had had a positive effect. It is unclear whether the remainder were not similarly affected, or whether they already had high levels of self-esteem.

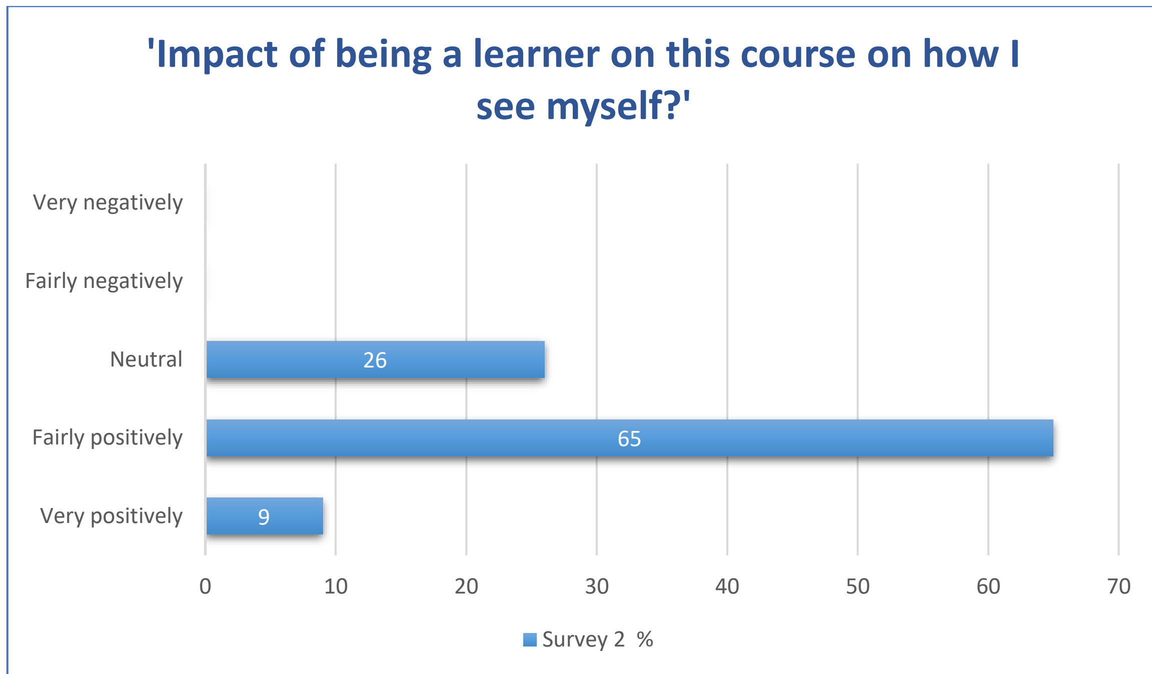


Figure 32: Respondents' views on how studying on the course affected their views of themselves - percentages of responses to S-2 Q23j

Completing the course successfully contributed to participants feeling positive, such as this respondent who was proud of completing the course, despite difficulties she had faced:

> *I was surprised how I rose to the challenge and pushed through to the end. I was surprised how well I did academically, given all my challenges at home for carving out study time. (S-2)*

She gives a sense of the tenacity required to get through the course and difficulties around whittling out slices of study time. Another commented about the affirmative effect on her self-confidence of taking a daring change of direction: *'I've successfully stepped away from a good wage to do something I want to do.'* She felt she had also gone up in others' estimation: '*I can see others applaud me for this*'. Another respondent's comment she was *'more confident in my abilities in general, even if I struggle to get started with an assignment, I know I*

will get there in the end' showed her resilience had grown along with her confidence.

Interviewees talked about challenges of studying, all referring to the *'struggle'*. Lack of time - particularly time without other things on their minds or the danger of interruption – was a main cause of stress, principally when *'assignments were coming thick and fast'* (Arwen, Int2) and it was *'one thing after another'* (Darby, Int2) and *'everything is 100 miles an hour'* (Darby, Int1) or as Freya (Int1) said, *'quite intense when deadlines have been coming'*. The sense of being almost overwhelmed comes through strongly in their comments. However, they seemed keen to present the positive aspects of their learning experiences including how they managed to make the most of whatever time they did have available, as Becky explained:

> *I think because I knew I only had set times, I was super-efficient. So, I did all my reading and did all the things before, and I had all my research there so when I got away on my own, I had it and I was 'pfft!' and I was just writing it. So, I had a strategy, and it was fine [laughs].* (Becky, Int1)

By preparing as much as possible beforehand she was able to focus and *'just write'* her assignments when she was on her own; adapting to a less than ideal situation seemed to be a source of pride.

Sub-ordinate theme: Becoming more critical learners

Developing metacognitive awareness through studying on the course was another positive aspect for many respondents, as indicated in Figure 33 (p.232).

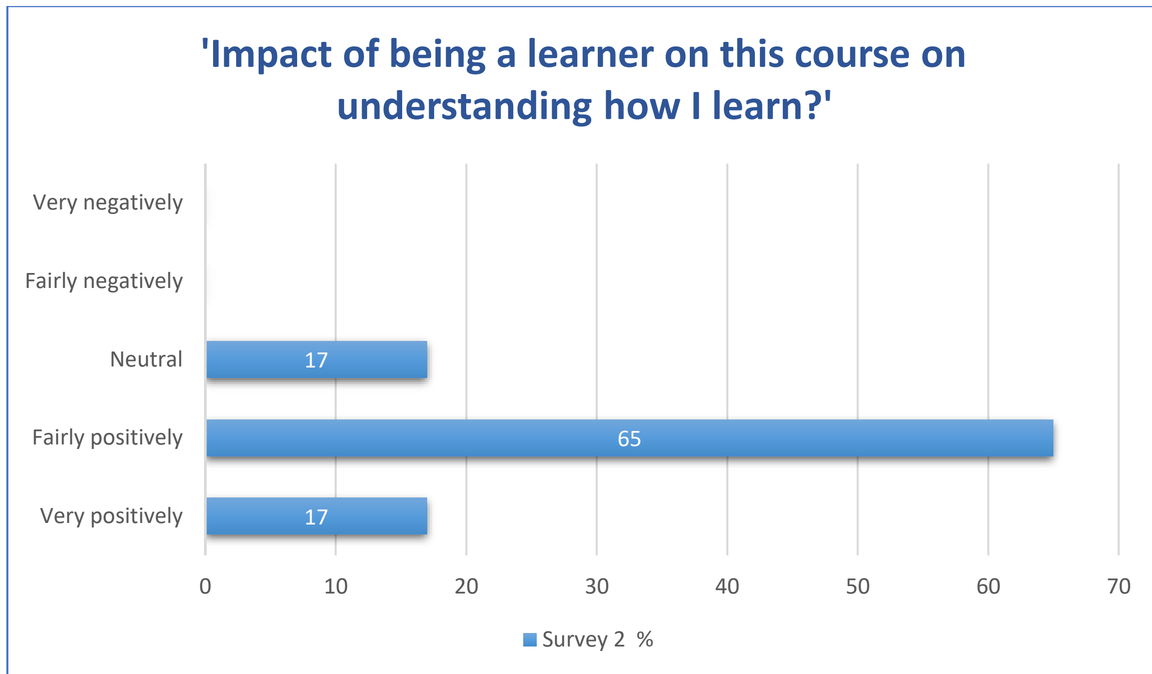


Figure 33: Respondents' views on how studying on the course affected their understanding of how they learned (Survey 2) - percentages of responses to S-2 Q23f

Four-fifths of S-2 respondents reported feeling that studying had had a positive effect on their understanding of how they learnt (n=19, 82%), with none reporting it a detrimental effect. An even larger proportion of S-2 respondents felt studying had improved their critical thinking (Figure 34, p.233: n=21, 91%), as exemplified by this respondent who said she now knew '*more about deciphering information and trying to ask questions about its reliability and credibility*'. She hints at feeling there was a hidden code she needed to crack to know if information was trustworthy. This gives a sense of her joining a secret society with privileged knowledge, linking back to the idea of learning as emancipation mentioned earlier, and also to the notion of the exclusive university (Brooks, 2012).

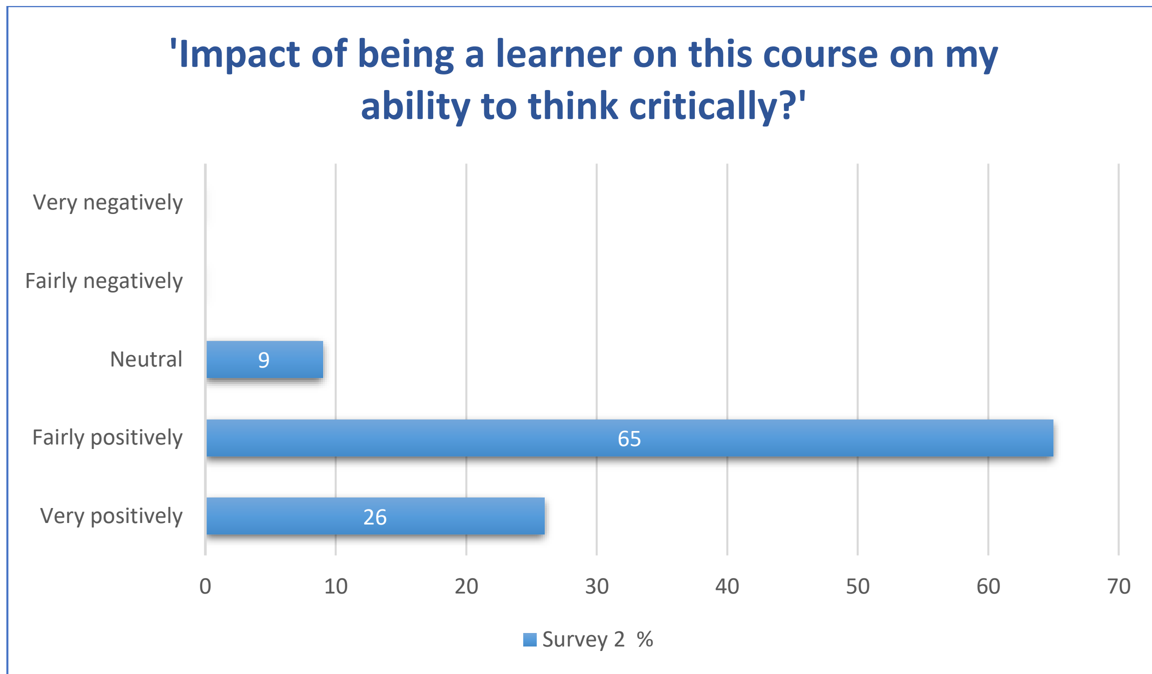


Figure 34: Respondents' views on how studying on the course affected their ability to think critically (Survey 2) - percentages of responses to S-2 Q23e

The interviewees also appeared to develop awareness of themselves as learners as they progressed through the course. Specifically, they all highlighted finding themselves thinking more critically about issues, and how this had spilled over into their lives and affected how they engaged with the world. For example, Freya referred to her first degree when she would *'very much just give two sides of the argument and then just have a conclusion'* but felt a combination of studying and getting older had led her to improve at *'critiquing things, or challenging things'* (Freya, Int2). Becky felt the skills and knowledge she had learned by the end of the first year had boosted her confidence in this area:

> *I feel like I am in a place where I can view things and have a perspective and look at things and appreciate [laughs]. I am in such a good place. I feel more patient and more - I don't know, I process things in a more - I don't know the word - I'm not as quick to be, 'Well, this is rubbish, or this is terrible.' I look in and go, 'What about this and what about that?' ... It's given me a lot of confidence because I feel knowledgeable, I*

> *feel educated. I feel like I know what I'm talking about. I just feel a better person.* (Becky, Int1)

Her studying had moved her to a different space, so she was looking at the world and its inhabitants in new and interesting ways that were both more accepting but also more analytical. By the second interview, there is an even stronger sense she thought it was not just her standpoint that had altered but her whole self, echoing Arwen's transformation (p.184):

> *I feel like I listen better to my friends, and I listen better to other people. I hope I appear more empathetic with everyone - you know, things like that. So yeah, I think it's definitely changed me – changed my personality, changed who I am and how I approach things. Yeah, it's been ok – it's been the best thing.* (Becky, Int2)

Her whole life appeared to have been altered which is congruent with Mezirow's (1978, 2000) theory of transformational learning. In particular, she felt being more critically aware helped her to think more deeply because she was '*not just reading the surface anymore, I'm really getting down to it and finding out, "Well, why?"*' (Becky, Int2). She was able to investigate beneath and beyond the surface, becoming a deeper, more substantial person. Although perhaps not quite as wholeheartedly as Becky, Darby too felt studying had helped develop her confidence in her abilities:

> *I can be self-critical, but I do generally have a good sense I can do things if I put my mind to them – so I think [finishing the course] just confirms for me I can do it.* (Darby, Int2)

Darby pinpointed how having to accurately reference her written work, a new process for her, helped her to develop her critical thinking skills because '*The discipline of it has made me realise if you're going to take a position on something, you need to know where it comes from.'* (Darby, Int1). Elsewhere she had discussed

finding it hard to take a stance on issues, so having information helped her to back up her opinions and share them more confidently with others. By the second interview, she seemed to have further developed her perspective on assessing the quality of information:

> *I think I have a slightly different approach now, since studying this particular course. And just an understanding really of how all the - why certain pieces of research get done and others don't, and how things might be skewed, depending on who's doing it - so it probably makes me look at the world in general a bit differently.* (Darby, Int2)

Like Becky, Darby seemed to evaluate ideas more thoroughly. Esme also felt she had changed how she engaged with information in her personal life because studying had helped in:

> *… broadening my mind out to alternative ways of thought and thinking. I've gone from a position where I was like, 'Give me every single drug and every single intervention [for childbirth]!' to 'Back off!'* (Esme, Int2)

She had made a complete reversal on her views about what made for a positive birth experience because of novel (to her) ideas she had explored on the course. Like the other interviewees, she valued developing different ways of looking at herself, and her experiences as a new parent in particular:

> *It's been a lot of self-learning, I think. You're discovering a lot about yourself. … So that's been - self-exploration has been really helpful. And I think - we call it expensive therapy [laughs]!* (Esme, Int1)

Her use of *'we'* suggests she and her partner were both making sense of their experiences together; *'expensive'* hints at some questioning of the value, whether by Esme or perhaps her partner. She also found the course had an impact on her working role, helping her to make sense of her paid work which could be quite

challenging: '*Because of the nature of what I was doing as well, it was probably quite cathartic.'* (Esme, Int2). Cora, meanwhile, described gaining a better understanding of how people vary:

> *It's definitely made me more aware of different personality - the personality types. And probably I need to be more patient - not patient, but people aren't all the same as me [smiles]. So, people will react to things differently.* (Cora, Int1)

She had seemingly developed a new perspective on people who were unlike her, and a new understanding of how she might relate to them better.

Sub-ordinate theme: 'Doing something for themselves'

Another aspect identified by interviewees was the idea of studying as fulfilling a need to do something for themselves. Freya discussed her observations on contact days:

> *It's been a very positive experience meeting everybody else on the course, and I think it's been quite unique in sense because we are all women and 95% of us are mothers. … And for some of them, it seems this is really the first opportunity they've had to do something for themselves.* (Freya, Int2)

She underlined this as something particularly relevant for students who are women and specifically mothers. This links to the theme of *A less available mother?* (p.218), as by admitting they were doing something for themselves they risked feeling they were denying their children's and partners' needs. This may be why Freya distanced herself from the concept by using the third person. Darby found putting her own wants and needs first problematic:

> *I sometimes found it difficult - it felt a bit - I don't know, call it selfish - but it felt difficult to completely focus on studying, because it was all*

about me, so quite difficult to just say, 'Right, I'm going to do this, because this is for me.' (Darby, Int2)

She seemed to feel uncomfortable about claiming time and space for herself, because as a 'good' mother, this was not what she expected of herself. Arwen too struggled with implications for her son of her taking more time to study:

As much as it pains me to put him in another day at nursery, I have to - if I want to achieve what I want to achieve, I've got to do it. (Arwen, Int1)

Although it caused her almost physical discomfort, she was perhaps driven to continue her self-actualisation through education to reach her highest level of personal fulfilment (Maslow, 1954; Akçay and Akyol, 2014). As Otway and Carnelley (2013) point out, this drive to self-actualisation requires maturity, so might have been a much stronger motivator for participants at this later stage of their lives than when they were younger students.

In contrast to some of the others, Becky seemed to feel less conflicted about revelling in taking time off from her mother role:

I'm doing it for me. Well, I am doing it for…obviously I am doing it to earn money eventually for our family, I don't mean that, but I mean the learning bit. … And even though it was stressful working to deadlines and things like that, I enjoyed it because it was, 'I've got an essay to do!' And so it gave you: 'I've got something to do.' (Becky, Int1)

Despite the challenges, her enthusiasm for engaging with other adults comes through strongly, as well as having a purpose beyond her family and a way of developing her own potential, against which earning money for the family was a lesser priority. The concept of the university as a constructed space (one where

Becky could have adult conversations, for example) and the implications for women students are explored in Chapter 7 (p.253).

Overall, participants identified a range of positive and less positive impacts of returning to HE. They also described effects on their personal relationships, which is the topic of the next section.

Super-ordinate theme: Impact of studying on relationships

Returning to study seemed to affect participants' relationships in a variety of ways, particularly with their partners, but also with their friends. Questionnaire respondents were not asked specifically about how studying affected other family relationships, and interviewees were fairly unforthcoming about this topic.

Sub-ordinate theme: Changes in relationships with partners

As they came to the end of the second year, S-2 respondents were asked about areas affected by studying on the course. Figure 35 (p.239) shows, despite difficulties they faced, nearly half (n=11, 48%) reported that studying had affected relationships with partners fairly or very positively, with around a third (n=8, 35%) reporting no effect. Some respondents commented that the skills they had learnt helped to enhance the way they communicated, as this one describes:

> *It has improved my relationship with my partner as I am able to be more empathetic and listen better. So, it's helped us argue less and he is proud of what I am achieving, considering what else I am doing. (S-2)*

Listening skills were therefore seen as particularly useful.

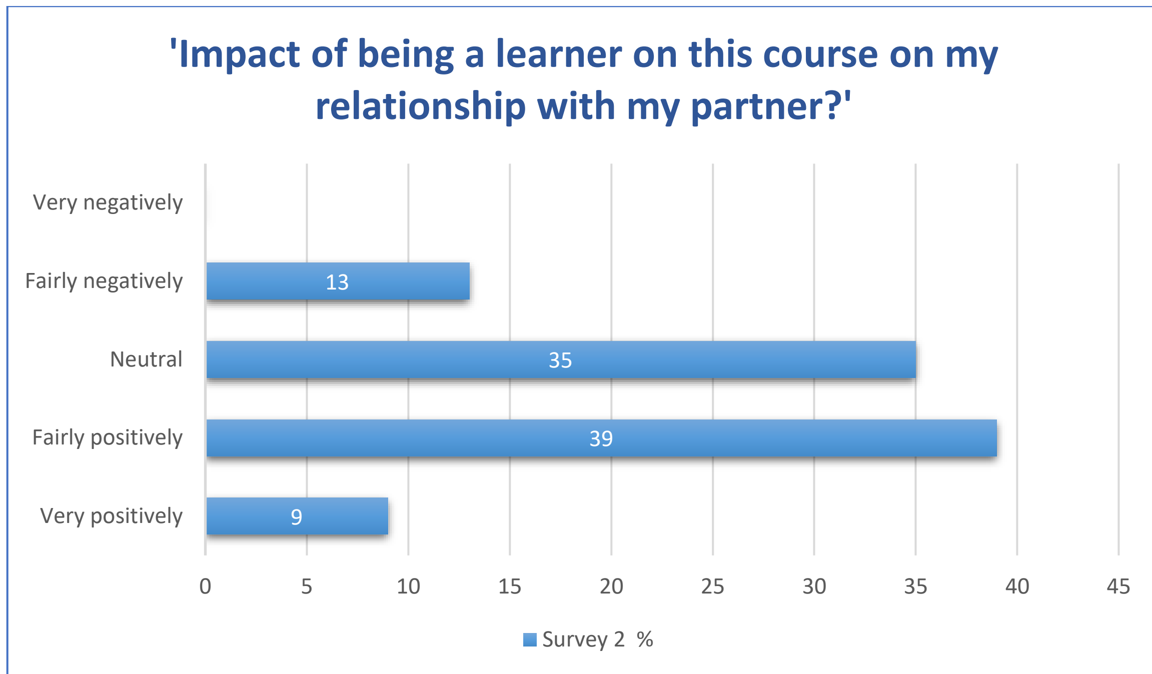


Figure 35: Respondents' views on how studying on the course affected their partner relationships (Survey 2) - percentages of responses to S-2 Q23i

A small proportion (n=4, 13%) felt that studying had been detrimental to their partner relationships, however. Some mentioned studying making life difficult generally ('*can cause tensions at home*'), while others reported how studying had developed their belief in themselves which contributed to rifts in marriages or partner relationships:

> *My self-confidence and my confidence in my abilities have improved drastically. However, this has come at the cost of my relationship and quality time with my family, and nearly cost me my marriage. I have grown as a person while my husband has maintained the status quo. (S-2)*

Her studying led to personal growth, leaving her husband behind, which had a detrimental effect on her relationship, a phenomenon seen in some other studies (see, for example, Edwards, 1993; Pascall and Cox, 1993; Baxter and Britton, 2005)

and also explored in the play (and subsequently film) 'Educating Rita' (Russell, 2007).

Less clear, however, was the effect of studying on interviewees' relationships. Apart from Darby who mentioned her husband *'had the patience of a saint – he just wants me to find something I want to do and to be happy*' (Darby, Int2), the other interviewees did not talk much about their partners beyond making vague references to them being supportive (it is possible they felt uncomfortable sounding disloyal). Arwen indicated she would have appreciated her husband having a greater awareness of what she was doing and the difficulties around incorporating study into the other aspects of her life, although she seemed hesitant to complain too much: '[*Husband]'s been supportive but maybe not as understanding as - as what I maybe wished he could be.'* (Arwen, Int2). Cora was more sanguine as she pondered effects of studying on her husband and her relationship with him:

> *It's probably made it more stressful for my husband than if I was just on maternity leave. But I don't know, I'd have to ask him about that. He might think the same as me in I've got something to do, so I'm happier, so I'm easier to live with or he could see it as a - … We would have found something - if we hadn't had my work for me to get huffy about [laughs].* (Cora, Int2)

She was unsure he would share her view that she was happier with something to occupy her; she hinted at occasional arguments but felt they would probably have happened anyway. She did not seem too concerned about his perspective: *'I'd have to ask him …'* suggests she had not really considered it before. Freya did not say much about her partner's views either, apart from a certain lack of interest:

> *The only thing he has really noticed is the steady stream of Amazon deliveries and books, which then take up space. And we had to go to*

IKEA to buy a new shelf [laughs] to make room for all these books I didn't quite get round to reading all of. So, he just thinks, 'What's she got coming through the post now?' [laughs]. (Freya, Int2)

Her comments suggest he was mainly aware of needing to find more physical space for the growing number of books, which she pointed out she did not actually read anyway. This implies a certain ambivalence about whether she felt she deserved more support if she was not going to study wholeheartedly.

Both Esme and Becky made jokes about divorce which hinted they had at times found their relationships on slightly rockier ground than they were perhaps comfortable with: *'We're not getting divorced – hopefully [laughs]!'* (Becky, Int2). At other times, Esme was also serious however, as she realised concentrating so much on completing the course put a major strain on her partner and her relationship with him:

I think it was hard though, I think it was hard on [Partner], it was hard on our relationship, I think, you – because this had to be the focal point, there was no downtime for either of us. (Esme, Int2)

Overall, participants in this study related a range of experiences of how studying on the course affected their relationships.

Sub-ordinate theme: Lack of social time

Allocating time to study limited participants' ability to engage with their social networks and leisure activities, which was also a feature of other studies (see, for example, Moss, 2004). These comments from S-2 respondents were typical: '*My social life is practically non-existent.'* and *'I have had to cut out any social activities and purely focus on my studies to make this work.'*. They forfeited leisure time for themselves too; one said she had *'less time for hobbies',* while another reported '*sacrificing down time in the evenings'*. One said she had given up watching

television and would '*just survive on less sleep for a week or so'* when coming up to deadlines. A few did manage to organise life so they could still have *'some social time'*.

The interviewees indicated surprise at how studying had affected their social lives. For example, Darby had had ambitious ideas about improving all aspects of her life as she embarked on the course, perhaps partly linked to escaping a stressful job that was causing unhappiness:

> *At the beginning of the two years I thought, 'I'm going to get really fit, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do Pilates, I'm going to go for bike rides, I'm going to make sure I see friends.' And often when I've got a deadline looming, I can't do anything else; I can only do this. I might still waste some of that time but [laughs] – but I can't possibly go and meet a friend for coffee.* (Darby, Int2)

When she was engaged in the reality of the course, she had to put aside all nonessential activities beyond her studies to fit the ebb and flow of the assignment timetable; even if she wasted her study time, she would have felt guilty leaving her desk to socialise. Arwen too *'lost quite a few contacts with friends'* because she '*had to stick to a schedule'* (Arwen, Int2*). S*he had underestimated her lifeload compared to previous learning experiences, especially because she thought the course would be less demanding than her first degree:

> *I thought maybe because it was a two-year course, it wouldn't be much and because I did a degree – I was working to quite a high level before – it would just be easy. I didn't think about being a mum or a wife or a friend as part of that equation.* (Arwen, Int1)

Just as studying disturbed her idea of herself as a good mother, it also affected her perception of herself as a good friend. Nevertheless, Arwen demonstrated determination to prioritise completing the course.

Chapter summary

This chapter has focussed on participants in relation to their social settings and explored how they tried to find time and space for learning in their busy and often unpredictable lives, and the consequent effects on their relationships. As student mothers, negotiating their new additional studying role could be challenging and many felt guilty about taking time and attention away from their families and their employers to study. Many were frustrated at not being able to perform any of their roles as well as they would have liked due to time and other constraints, and their concept of themselves as 'good' mothers could be disrupted. Some were able to combine mothering and studying activities, at least some of the time, while others preferred to separate their roles as much as possible. Studying on the course had a range of sometimes profound and often unexpected effects on participants and their mothering. The costs (financial and social) could be high, but many enjoyed the experience of studying and doing something for themselves their other roles did not seem to offer.

Participants often became more confident and capable as learners, particularly in questioning and interrogating topics more deeply than in previous learning experiences, developing new and interesting perspectives. This often spilled into other parts of their lives. The issues explored in this chapter have often mirrored other studies' findings as discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2 (p.25). However, a new finding in this research not referred to in similar studies is the effect of the unpredictability of participants' complex lives on their learning; this is returned to in Chapter 8 (p.310). The next chapter broadens the focus to explore participants' experiences as learners as part of a community, negotiating learning in physical and virtual spaces.

Chapter 7: Findings III Navigating landscapes of learning

Introduction

Previous chapters explored characteristics of research participants as learners and then the complexity of their lifeloads; this chapter broadens out the focus to examine wider contexts for their learning, including their social and academic environments. It offers less quantitative data than the other Findings chapters, as many relevant questions were answered in free-text boxes from the two questionnaires, and there is a strong focus on the IPA findings from the interviewees, which are combined with the questionnaire respondents' comments. The super-ordinate themes developed from the interviews form the chapter's structure (Table 16, below).

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes
Landscapes of learning – travelling as women and mothers	Women studying together Women not men studying
Landscapes of learning - travelling together	Learning as part of NCT and Worcester Physically and virtually located university Learning with tutors and especially peers Studying strategies with peers and others
Continuing the learning journey	Moving forward into practice with mixed emotions Lifelong learning – benefits and barriers Becoming a learning practitioner and lifelong learning

Table 16: Interpretative phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts: interviewees' experiences negotiating landscapes of learning

The first section explores different aspects of participants' experiences of being women learners shaped by societal structures and expectations. The second section investigates participation in communities of learning and practice supported by tutors and especially peers, and particularly where and how participants learned as part of a group. Finally, participants moving on to the next stage – into practice for some – and the role learning might play in their lives are the topics considered in the third section. Communities of practice and development into lifelong learners are foundational aspects of a heutagogical approach to learning.

Participating in an all-women course was a new experience for many participants, offering a sense of a shared journey towards becoming NCT practitioners. Supportive relationships with peers were key during the course and also beyond, as they moved into practice, particularly as peers were best able to understand the challenges and satisfactions of being mature women learners.

Super-ordinate theme: Landscapes of learning - travelling together as women and mothers

The previous chapter explored how participants' identities as women with caring responsibilities affected and interacted with their identities as students. This section examines how participants negotiated their learning journeys in the light of their different roles.

Sub-ordinate theme: Women studying together

Some degree courses offered in the UK are much more likely to have women rather than men students. For example, 79% of HE students on subjects allied to Medicine, such as Nursing and Midwifery, in 2019/2020 were female (HESA, 2021a). This course was different because all students were women, and most were mothers. This was a novel experience for many participants, which many

found rewarding. While Cora wondered if men would have been a constructive addition because they would *'probably chill the group out a bit'* (Cora, Int1), hinting at having experienced a certain level of drama and difficulty, most were positive about their peers being women and mothers. Freya typified the views of other interviewees:

> *There just seems to be this unspoken support network, a camaraderie – I don't know what it is, whether we've all been through something, or we're all looking for something, maybe. So, that's different, I think that's massively different. … So, that's definitely a good thing, but very different from anything I've ever experienced before*. (Freya, Int1)

She seemed to appreciate how an all-women course could provide mutual support and the sense of a journey based on shared hopes and experiences, despite different backgrounds and situations. Participants were often clearly passionate about learning to support new parents, but others in their social networks might not share or understand this enthusiasm. The degree might be seen as less valid than others, as Becky argued, because *'I wasn't doing Dentistry or Accountancy or something like that, I was studying birth … a 'womanly' type of degree.'* (Becky, Int2). Participants seemed to value finding common ground with each other in their enjoyment of the course, even though it was perhaps not as valued in wider society as other degrees, and the shared goal of becoming NCT practitioners.

Sub-ordinate theme: women not men studying

The interviewees discussed their experiences as women rather than men returning to study, often making sense of them in relation to being mothers and primary carers for their children.

Women students in an unequal society

Participants were sometimes surprised when studying added a second or third shift to all their responsibilities as mothers and wives or partners, rather than replacing some; the patriarchally subscribed mothering role was perhaps difficult to escape. For example, Becky felt being a woman was fundamental to her experience partly as a function of how she and her husband divided caring responsibilities, because *'my husband is not the primary caregiver, I am'* and therefore *'as a woman – [sighs] as old-fashioned and as awful as this sounds – the onus is on me to look after the children.'* (Becky, Int2). She seemed perturbed by how others might see her family as fitting conventional stereotypes. She also thought men who might be studying professional qualifications could integrate study into their working lives more easily than student mothers adding it into the domestic sphere:

> *I've got a few male friends who through work have been facilitated to return to study and do postgrads and add-ons and things, and it's just incorporated into their work. So, they get to go in work time and it's all… that's all kind of taken care of.* (Becky, Int2)

Arwen found this the case when her husband was taking professional examinations during her first year, when his study commitments seemed to take precedence over hers. He could distance his studying from his family – making her feel *'alone'* – because it was seen as Arwen's role to manage the household, whether she was studying or not. Cora's assigned role too was default caregiver; she felt her husband and mother were seen as doing something out of the ordinary if they provided childcare:

> *If my mum or [Husband] has the children for more than about three or four hours on their own, I'm expected to be, 'Oh, are you ok?' and listen*

to them and check they are alright [laughs] … it doesn't even cross their mind I've had them for seven hours. (Cora, Int2)

When Cora had time off from caring for her children, she still had to attend to her husband or her mother's needs, while her caring was *'just presumed'* because she was not the designated breadwinner. She therefore she felt she had to negotiate a change to this arrangement if she wanted to study – *'I always felt like I had to ask permission to go and do some work.'* (Cora, Int2). Even when she was studying however, meeting her children's needs was always on her mind, which she felt was more common for women as men were often able to '*just walk out the door'* and leave the caring – and the constant thinking about caring – to their wives or partners. Multitasking and bearing the emotional load can be a source of increased stress for mothers even when not studying (Offer and Schneider, 2011; Daminger, 2019). It is likely student mothers will continue to struggle with combining studying with caring responsibilities, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated gender inequality in this area, according to research from around the world (Andrew *et al*, 2020; Czymara, Langenkamp and Cano, 2020; Fodor *et al*, 2020; Power, 2020).

One aspect of studying women might find easier than men in contemporary society, however, was if they had less developed careers, as Darby indicated:

It's probably slightly more acceptable for women, to take this amount of time out from work to study. … I think it feels like it would be easier for me to do this than my husband. … I've tended to drift from one thing to another – I haven't really had a plan – and so I think it was always going to be easier for me as a woman to choose to study something at this stage. (Darby, Int2)

Having a career secondary to her caring responsibilities meant it was easier to change her path; being less well-paid entailed less financial sacrifice when she

stopped work, *'because it would never have been the case on what I was earning, I could've carried the family – mortgages and things.'* (Darby, Int2). Becky was in a similar situation with a low-paid career making it reasonable for her to take time out:

> *There is no way I would have been the main breadwinner anyway, so it was nothing to do with gender; I opted to stay at home. [Husband] would have loved to have stayed at home but I was – 'Sorry, you earn more money than me, you are the one going back to work!'* (Becky, Int1)

Her claim gender was irrelevant is at odds with data on gender pay gaps (Offer and Schneider, 2011; ONS, 2020b). Nevertheless, she seemed content that low pay facilitated her to stay at home and then delay returning to employment, although it is possible that she was justifying her life decisions to herself.

Expectations around mothers who return to study

Participants could feel conflicted about combining or separating their identities as mothers and students; sometimes they linked this process with their feelings of what was expected of them by society in general. For example, Becky felt pressure to concentrate on conventional mothering rather than sometimes accessing childcare to allow her to study. She felt studying was seen as less acceptable than employment – '*nobody bats an eyelid about you going into work and putting your children into childcare.'* (Becky, Int2) – and was perhaps viewed as an indulgence distracting her from meeting her responsibilities to her children because *'I as the woman, and I as the mum, should be putting them first and foremost before everything.'* (Becky, Int2).

Although it is expected of women, mothering is not a highly valued role in society (O'Reilly, 2021). Arwen wondered if studying therefore elevated her social standing in the view of her husband's colleagues (which links back to the notions

of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation discussed in Chapter 5, p.137), because they perhaps rated the mothering role less highly than she did:

> *Maybe the studying has given me an extra badge that I feel is all shiny and new and people find that more acceptable than being a full-time mum. Does that make sense? I don't know. … The question is in my head: 'What – what is the difference? Why do I feel that I need…?' It's not me that feels it – I suppose that's what it is, it's how people perceive you.* (Arwen, Int2)

She struggled with thinking others perceived full-time motherhood as low status, seeming ambivalent about whether her '*shiny new badge*' was made of a precious metal or perhaps something cheap and tawdry, worth less than it first appeared.

Participants sometimes wondered about the right time to return to study. For example, Becky questioned whether she should have postponed her plans until her children were older:

> *There were a few times when I was, 'Why am I doing this? Is this the right time to do this? Have I made a mistake in terms of – not putting myself first, but not – maybe I should have waited until they were grown up a bit more…?'* (Becky, Int2)

She tussled with putting her self-actualisation before her children's needs, although she did wonder if women with families risked waiting too long to return to study because of societal expectations:

> *I think as a woman and especially later on in life, the majority of people do have families and it isn't the priority to re-educate or to retrain. … It's the safe and sensible thing to do, to keep working rather than go off and study. … And I just wonder, as a woman – later on, if you pass the kind of time where you're supposed to study … – you go to school and then*

> *you should study in that kind of chronological time – if it's a thing that life gets in the way?* (Becky, Int2)

Women are used to their biological clocks ticking; Becky's comment conveys a sense of an educational clock running down the time beyond which she risked disapproval for putting herself before her children's needs. Cora too felt mothers might think returning to study as a mother of young children would be unacceptable - *'I can't do a degree when I've got children.'* (Cora, Int2) - but mothers of older children may find it no easier to study than those with younger ones, as Darby explained:

> *I think this stage of being a parent – sort of teens and late teens – you don't realise [laughs], they almost need you more. I mean you are obviously around them when they are tiny, but when they are older, you're their advocate, you're so important.* (Darby, Int1)

Her mothering changed as her children got older but the space it took up in her life did not seem to diminish, even if she might risk less disapproval from others when taking on additional roles. A long gap before returning to study might also affect women's confidence negatively, as Cora pointed out:

> *Generally, for women learners, I think, especially if you've not done it for a long time, that you don't have the confidence to go and do it again when – especially if you have had children. … I don't know if I'd have left it five, ten years – if I would have been quite as confident to go back into it.* (Cora, Int1)

Overall, the findings indicate there is no perfect time for women students, particularly mothers, to return to HE. While students going straight from school into HE can feel they are continuing along the expected path, mothers returning to study after a break may find they are fighting against others' expectations –

and their own – about roles and responsibilities when they take the less travelled-by path back to study.

The next section explores participants' experiences of learning as part of a community of practice, another fundamental element of heutagogy.

Super-ordinate theme: Landscapes of learning - travelling together

The landscapes of learning encompassed physical and virtual spaces; this section investigates how participants traversed them in relation to their tutors, their peers and others outside the course.

Sub-ordinate theme: Learning as part of Worcester and NCT

Participants had learning relationships with both University of Worcester and NCT. Their decisions to join the course provided by the NCT-Worcester partnership were affected by different aspects, including their perceptions of the quality of teaching and learning and also the value of the qualifications awarded. One questionnaire respondent related how the perceived quality of the course made fitting it into her complex life worthwhile:

> *I'm so excited to have found a professionally accredited course offered by such a credible organisation that I can study for alongside my current job and family life, but one that interests me wholeheartedly, enhancing my knowledge on topics I'm passionate about. (S-1)*

The interviewees valued University accreditation too; for instance, it reassured Cora the course would therefore '*be done properly*' and also helped justify her decision to change career: '*if it's a degree, then it must be worth it.*' (Cora, Int2). Questionnaire respondents tended to emphasize their relationships with NCT more than with Worcester; most seemed positive about joining NCT at the

beginning, becoming *'part of something special' (S-1)*. Some S-2 respondents, however, reported feeling unsettled by organisational changes which prompted feelings of disengagement and anxiety.

Two interviewees at the first timepoint also referred to their relationship with NCT but were more concerned about not having had experience of accessing NCT services as parents or as volunteers. Cora wondered if this meant she had *'less knowledge'* about NCT than other students, while Darby felt her perspective and motivations as a newcomer were different to peers who had been '*members for years and years'*. Overall, being part of NCT and of Worcester were complicated relationships for some participants. The Covid-19 pandemic triggered further changes in the way NCT operates as a charity and an education provider, undoubtedly entailing added complexity.

Sub-ordinate theme: The physically and virtually located university

The NCT course was delivered through blended learning, with a mixture of regional contact days and self-regulated independent study; students were only physically on campus for a two-day induction event as they started their first year. Participants seemed to value this event highly. For example, Freya found being on campus enthused her about being a student again:

> *I did enjoy when I had to go to Worcester – although it is bit of a schlep from here and you think, 'Argh, it's in the middle of nowhere!' – actually being on the campus, I found really exciting again. Universities are exciting places; people are learning things and I always feel there's lots of hope and excitement about what someone's future might be and what they might do and what they might learn.* (Freya, Int2)

Her repetition of 'exciting/excitement' underlines her sense of eager anticipation at learning again. However, her motivation dropped over her second year for various reasons; perhaps returning to campus might have reinvigorated her.

Becky confidently traversed the physical and virtual spaces of the university, valuing her ability to access resources far more easily than in her previous university experience:

> *I think that is what has made it far easier for me this year to study, because I can be in the library, sitting on my couch at home – I don't need to be physically in it.* (Becky, Int1)

The university library came to her home via her smartphone. Like others, Becky still valued escaping domesticity and travelling to contact days, however:

> *I love getting on the train in the morning [laughs] – no one else! I love coming and having adult conversations and interesting, intellectual conversations with other people.* (Becky, Int1)

In-person interaction with peers and tutors could stimulate learning through discussions in a way that might be hard to replicate online, especially for students like Darby, who often felt uncomfortable in virtual spaces, or Arwen, who preferred talking to people face-to-face. Building relationships with tutors and peers was perhaps easier in person. Participants' engagement in a shared community of learning is explored in more depth in the next section.

Sub-ordinate theme: Being part of a learning community - learning with tutors

Module tutors facilitated learning through study days for different topics; core tutors consolidated learning in regular tutorial days with small groups, providing academic and pastoral support. S-1 respondents felt very strongly their tutors were supportive (Figure 36, p.255); 93% (n=39) agreed this was almost always true and the remaining 7% (n=3) said often true. Many had *'confidence in the tutors and their skills'* and felt *'well supported'*. Some S-2 respondents were less sure, however; 17% (n=4) said it was only sometimes true tutors wanted them to do

well. It is possible these participants found some tutors less likeable or effective than others, or had perhaps found assessments more difficult than expected and were disappointed with lower than hoped-for grades. The remainder felt it was often (n=5, 22%) or almost always true (n=14, 61%) that tutors supported them in their aspirations, however.

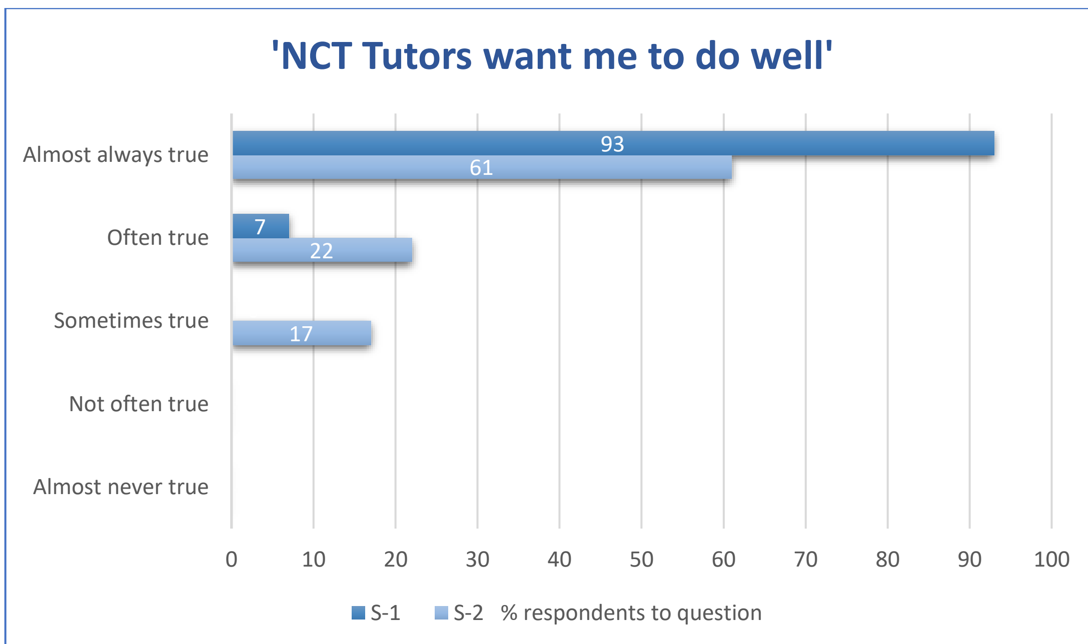


Figure 36: Respondents' views on NCT tutors want them to do well (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q16z and S-2 Q15z

Interviewees reported a range of views on tutors, which are explored now.

Varying levels of pastoral and academic support

Esme found her tutors *'very, very helpful, particularly the postnatal ones'* and *'all very informed'* (Esme, Int2), while Cora appreciated the opportunity to return to her first-year tutor to practise activities. Becky was effusive in her praise for her tutors and valued them highly:

> *We found all the tutors so inspirational, so knowledgeable and so wise – it just felt like you were really, really learning from somebody who absolutely knew their stuff, who was so passionate about it, who was up*

to date and who you wanted to learn from, you wanted to hear things about. … And I always came away with my mind blown about something. (Becky, Int2)

This sense of awe could be debilitating, however, as Cora (whose own socioeconomic status was unclear) related, because:

The NCT tutors tend to be quite – and I like it – but quite middle class, quite articulate, quite forthright and I think that does scare some people… it knocks the confidence sometimes of people because they think, 'God, I will never be like her!' (Cora, Int1)

She seemed keen to ally herself with tutors but had noticed others' discomfort (or perhaps her own at times which she was unwilling to acknowledge in the interview). Some participants found tutors inspiring; others found them disconcerting, particularly if there were obvious differences in socio-economic backgrounds. Despite this, the interviewees could appreciate their tutors' flexibility and accessibility, as Esme described:

[We could] email them, talk to them on the phone. They would always make themselves available during tutorial times, if we wanted to spend lunch talking things through, before or after. Yeah, their availability was excellent. (Esme, Int2)

This contrasted positively with her previous learning experiences. Arwen too valued academic support from tutors:

[Tutor A] has been really helpful, she's encouraged me to… to do different things. … I've maybe got stuck on something, and she's passed me a journal and said, 'Why don't you read this journal or something – it would help you?'. And maybe I haven't taken the information in a way that she says that it should be – so she might have read it to say

something and I've read it to say something else and so she has worked with me to explain why I haven't seen what the differences are, and to really answer those questions and that has been really supportive. (Arwen, Int2)

Despite appreciating the tutor working with her individually, it is notable she described how she was seemingly encouraged to bring her understanding closer to her tutor's, rather than a sharing of equally valid views, highlighting an inherent inequality between tutor and student. She also appreciated the pastoral support offered, and particularly how a different tutor tailored learning arrangements to students' needs:

[Tutor B] used to do regular check-ins to see how you're doing and that sort of thing. She would take on areas you said might be improved or to help you. So, if you were doing a practice counselling session – a scenario – and we asked if she could maybe post it the day before so you could read it on the train, rather than – because it was hard to think about it, when you were given it there and then. (Arwen, Int2)

Arwen's account demonstrates how weaving academic and pastoral support made it more effective. Some tutors' support fell short of participants' expectations at times, however. For example, Cora had hoped for more tutor support after her son's birth, although she questioned whether what she had hoped for exceeded the limits of the tutor role:

They treated me as just another student rather than somebody that's come with their new baby. I can see why, but sometimes you think you want someone to be, 'Are you okay?' a little bit. … I wanted someone to check in a bit more, but whether that's their job, I don't know. (Cora, Int2)

In contrast, Arwen's tutor seemed to meet her needs better when her baby was tiny by offering her flexibility in how she participated in study days:

> *[Tutor B]'s been quite nurturing. … So, when I had [Son 2], I was able to do FaceTime as part of the class – just after I had him, because I was feeding constantly – I was able to do FaceTime.* (Arwen, Int2)

It is likely different tutors have different levels of experience and empathy; they might encounter challenges in striking the right balance of academic and pastoral support, as well as the right balance of being inspiring and intimidating. Questions arise about tutors meeting these challenges and managing and meeting students' expectations more effectively.

Barriers to accessing additional support from tutors

Some participants seemed comfortable approaching tutors when they required more academic or pastoral support; however, others could be reluctant, or unsure how to access support. For example, Darby described how she tended to try to work things out for herself:

> *I think I've been fairly independent up until now, but I realise you do have to shout. … And studying as a more mature learner – it can be quite difficult to ask for help … because I feel, 'Well, I should know that,' or 'I should be able to do that. Look at all these younger people with more responsibilities, it feels, and they're…'. So, I found it quite difficult to… yeah, admit - or ask for help.* (Darby, Int2)

Darby's parents had brought her up with a strong sense of self-efficacy, so she could perhaps struggle to see herself as someone needing help, or even worthy of help, particularly as an older student. Her use of *'shout'* suggests reluctance to draw attention to herself. As she moved into practice and felt her course plan needed improving, she was unsure whether or how to access assistance:

> *Again, going back to the 'Why not ask for help?' – why, when I got my course plan back and it was okay but not great, did I not go back and say, 'Okay, come on, help me: what can I do to improve this?' … And I think I've gone into teaching feeling that my course plan isn't ideal, but not quite knowing what to do about it and who to ask.* (Darby, Int2)

A sense of disorientation echoes through her accounts of her studying; clearer signposting to sources of support throughout the course (not just at the beginning) might have helped her.

As well as lacking clarity about who to turn to, previous experiences could deter support-seeking. For example, Arwen's memories of being humiliated by schoolteachers contributed to her reluctance to access support, although she tried to work through this:

> *I do want that help, because I recognise that that will help me in the long run to do things a lot quicker or get there a lot quicker than if – I don't want to struggle again as I did before.* (Arwen, Int1)

Her desire to do well on the course prevailed over her discomfort around admitting she needed support. Cora was confident and more conversant than Darby with how and where to access assistance, but also felt *'you have to go and seek it out'* (Cora, Int2) rather than it being readily offered, as this quote demonstrates:

> *I know if I was having a problem, there were people that I could – yes, so it's more – it's there if you want it rather than someone offering it to you. … But then we are adults, aren't we? I don't know, I don't know: should it be on offer?* (Cora, Int2)

She could not decide if the responsibility lying with the students to ask was the right approach, despite their adulthood. Sometimes help that should have been forthcoming seemed lacking, such as in Arwen's case:

> *I was grateful for the computer [supplied by University of Worcester because of her dyslexia] because I would never have been able to do the course otherwise. But with regards to learning support, that was never sorted … it was left to me to pick up. When I chased it up about a year and a half into the course … I couldn't, because I had so much on.*
> (Arwen, Int2)

Complications in her home life made it too difficult to pursue learning support.

While interviewees were aware support was available to help them in their learning, it needed to be asked for. Some faced barriers in accessing it, including: previous negative experiences, a feeling they should not need help or heavy lifeloads. These difficulties mirror findings in other studies, such as Marandet and Wainwright (2010). Such barriers need to be addressed if students are to make the most of learning experiences. While relationships with tutors were important, peer relationships were often reported as crucial to their learning journeys; these are examined next.

Sub-ordinate theme: Being part of a learning community - learning with peers

Participants often learned with and from each other, as well as by themselves. Three-quarters of S-1 respondents (n=31, 74%) said it was often or almost always true they enjoyed learning together (Figure 37, p.261). A slightly higher proportion of S-2 respondents agreed (n=19, 82%) but were even more likely to say it was almost always true (n=12, 52%) than often true ((n=7, 30%), indicating an increasing level of enjoyment over the course (although numbers are small).

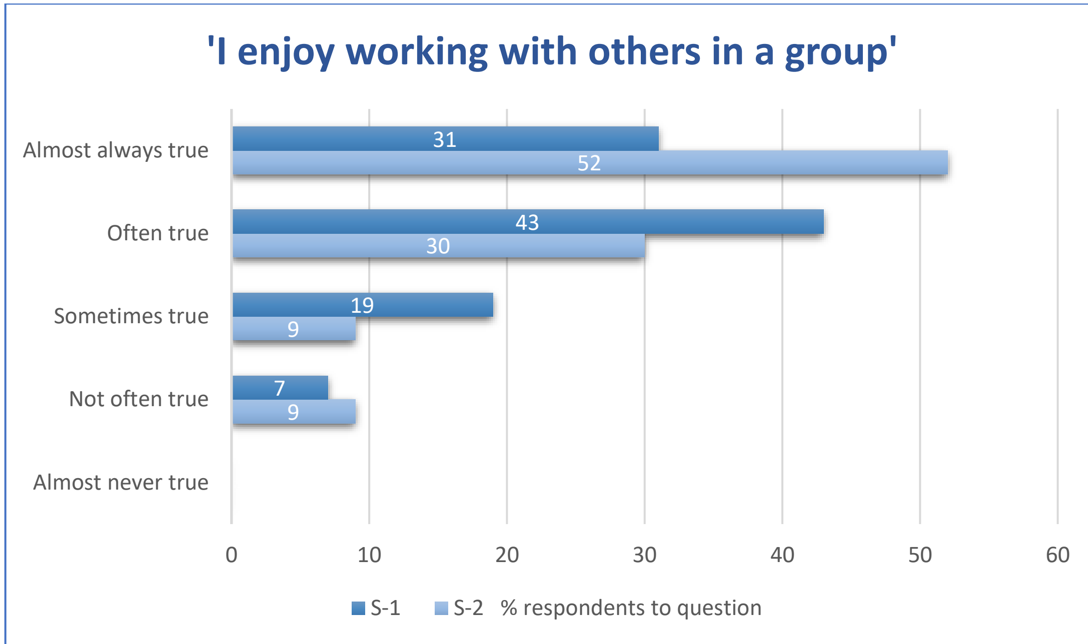


Figure 37: Respondents' views on enjoying working in groups (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q16d and S-2 Q15d

When asked how studying on the course affected them working with others (Figure 38, p.262), all S-2 respondents answered very or fairly positively (n=23, 100%). It is likely they had developed relevant skills and attitudes that would facilitate group-working, such as active listening and empathy, as well as becoming more familiar with each other.

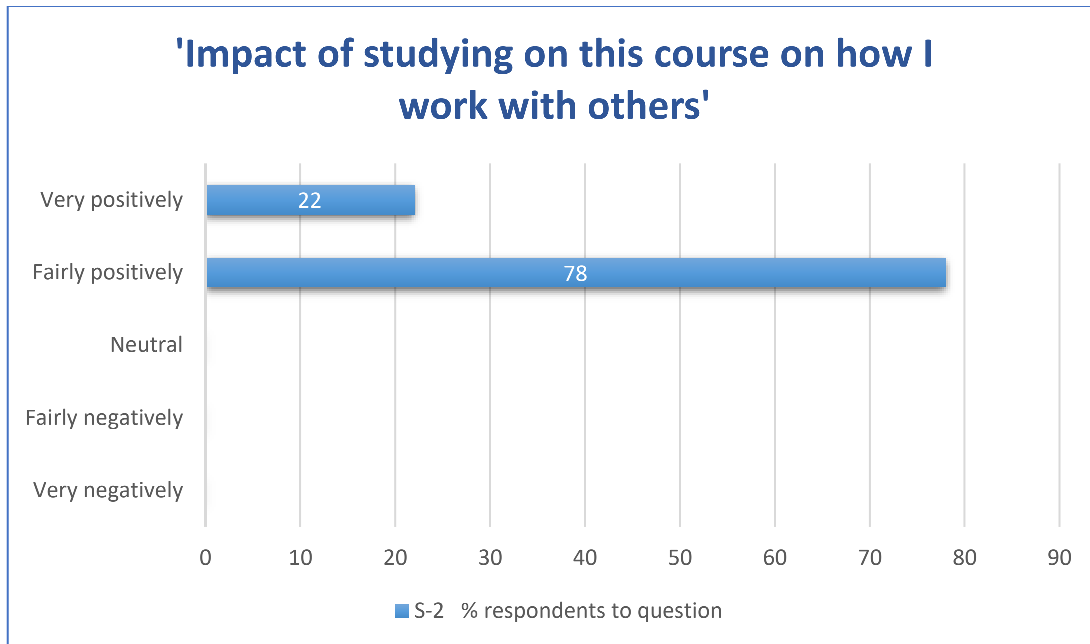


Figure 38: Respondents' views on the impact of studying on working with others (Survey 2) - percentages of responses to S-2 Q23k

The interviewees often reported enjoying *'engaging with others…and being part of something bigger in my tutorial groups'* as Esme described (Int1), even though she had previously tended to be a more *'individual learner'*. She was perhaps *'willing and able to make those links'* because of a conducive learning environment and being among empathetic people, supporting her group participation. A year later she appeared even more positive, describing the benefits of opening herself up to learning with others and how the course design facilitated that:

> *I really benefited from the feedback and the input and the support and encouragement from the other women in this course and I – it's made me think differently about – I don't learn in a silo anymore. I really enjoyed that picking apart and pulling apart and hearing the perspectives – so that was probably the best part about this particular degree and the way it was set up, I think: it really encouraged the dialogue and that bonding.* (Esme, Int2)

In contrast, however, Darby described her reluctance to join in wholeheartedly at times, feeling shy compared to others:

> *I am somebody that tends to hold back and doesn't – I am not the one who wants to speak all the time. And it really affects me who I work with as well. And I know that is a really important part: working in small groups and doing things. And I think there is more of that to come in Level 5, so a slight amount of trepidation of who you're going to get to work with, and if you're going to have a similar type of approach.* (Darby, Int1)

Where Esme had noticed a '*real sense of cohesion'* in her groups (Esme, Int2), Darby was unsettled by groups where students demonstrated '*a variety of approaches'* to learning, although she acknowledged adults' diverse life experiences influenced them in different ways and was to be expected on reflection: *'That's normal, isn't it, when you're doing adult education really - in later life?'* (Darby, Int1). Chapter 9 (p.337) returns to the possible benefits to Darby and her peers of a more flexible course design aiming to meet a diversity of learners' needs, for example by using a framework such as Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2021). Other interviewees noticed the wide range of people too. Cora, who had *'never been in a learning situation with such a variety of people'* (Int1), was fascinated by the creativity of her peers, while Freya was interested in their diverse motivations:

> *Everybody had a different background or reason for being there … and then other people you're like, 'Oh, yeah, you're like me so we will be friends.'* (Freya, Int1)

Freya particularly valued *'like-minded'* people (Int1), identifying them as potential friends. Developing friendships was important for only around half (n=23, 55%; Q22d) of S-1 respondents but being part of a group of similar learners was still

important. One looked forward to studying with women who *'shared her passion'*; another said, '*being in a strong supportive group makes me feel very excited and eager to learn.'* (S-1). However, a much larger proportion of S-2 respondents said they had enjoyed making friends during the course (Figure 31, p.228). One appreciated her tutorial group for awakening unanticipated enthusiasm for learning, and echoed Freya: *'It's so great to find like-minded people. They motivate you and create a passion you didn't even know existed.'* (S-2).

While some participants focussed on finding rewarding relationships with other students who were similar to them, some participants reported developing deep and enduring friendships with students who were very different to them. One was:

> *... surprised by how much I have bonded with the students in my group – to come from such different walks of life, different ages, family situations, yet we have formed a friendship that will go beyond this course. (S-2)*

Making friends was an important part of journeying together and overcoming obstacles, as Arwen expressed: *'the colleagues I have on the course, obviously they are quite good friends now and we have been through quite a lot together.'* (Arwen, Int2). Making enough friends did not happen for everyone, however. Darby found the lack of people on the same wavelength in her locality meant it had been *'a bit of a lonely journey really, if I'm honest'* (Darby, Int2). It is possible facilitating more explicit exploration of the range of motivations and attitudes to studying, as well as the variety in backgrounds, might have helped participants identify benefits of working with peers who were not necessarily 'like-minded'.

While many welcomed working together in groups with new friends, time for independent study was also appreciated (Figure 39, p.265), particularly by S-1

respondents. Over half said the statement 'I prefer to go away and think about things on my own' was almost always or often true (n=21, 51%).

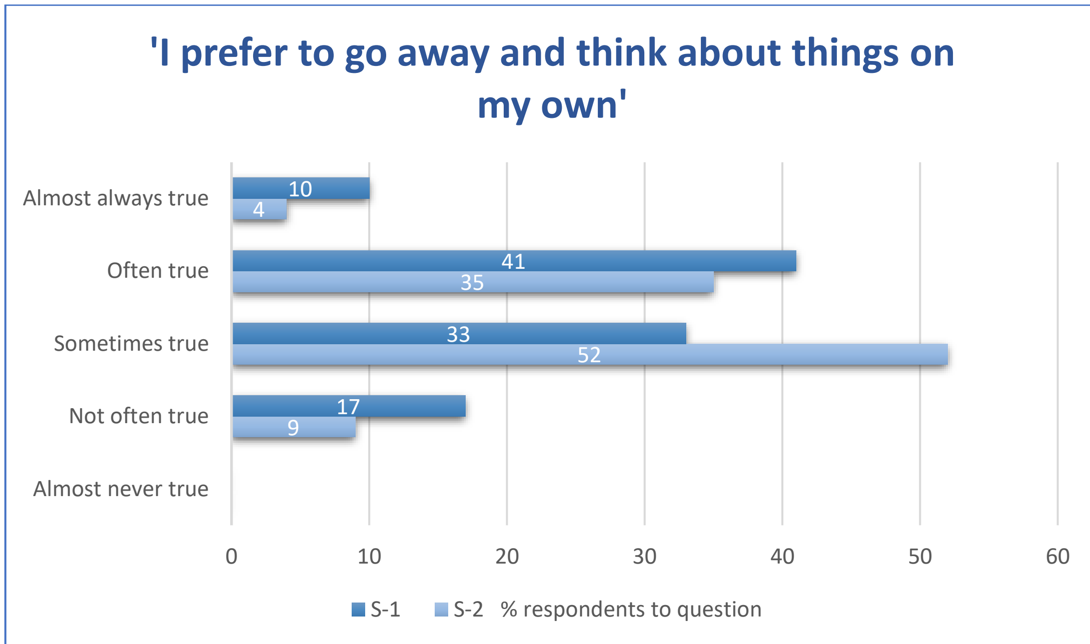


Figure 39: Respondents' views on preference for learning alone (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q16l and S-2 Q15l

However, just two-fifths of S-2 respondents agreed (n=9, 39%), and around half said it was sometime true ((n=12, 52%), suggesting they had adjusted to collaborative working at least part of the time, although working alone can of course be an important element of blended learning courses. A student explained the dilemma for those less comfortable in larger groups:

> *I prefer to study on my own and am not at my finest with larger groups which I can find daunting. However, I enjoy the experience and new insights being in a group offers, including the sharing of information and wisdom from others. (S-2)*

Adult learners with autism spectrum conditions can find social interaction challenging (Cassidy *et al,* 2016), which may help to explain Arwen's initial preference for studying on her own (she disclosed a diagnosis of dyspraxia). Her

experiences provide an example of how some participants moved from being sole learners to ones who benefited from joint working as they developed relationships with each other. In the first interview, she stated her preference for tackling assignments on her own, perhaps concerned about plagiarism as well as feeling compelled to take responsibility for her work, in addition to any personal preferences linked to dyspraxia:

> *Once I have seen someone else's work, there is a real 'Oh, they have done it this way – they have done it much better than me!'. And you start taking their work and putting it into yours. I realised that was how it was making me feel, so I only read two paragraphs of someone else's work and put it to the side and did my own… because then that is not your work then, really, is it?* (Arwen, Int1)

Her use of the second person indicates the new academic conventions she was trying to learn and abide by. By the second interview, though, she seemed increasingly comfortable accepting support from peers who were now more than co-workers:

> *My colleagues, or my course friends [laughs], they would – so in the second year we all pulled together, and we were able to go round and talk to each other about certain activities we were doing and stuff, and how we could make them better – make suggestions.* (Arwen, Int2)

There are echoes of the camaraderie Freya mentioned earlier; a sense of female musketeers united as they studied, learning from each other, as well as from tutors. However, some interviewees found certain aspects of working together problematic sometimes, such as when Darby felt group members showed varying levels of commitment to preparing for study days:

> *I think to get a lot out of a study day, everyone has to come really well prepared and be prepared for the bit they're going to do, which generally*

> *happened. But also, everybody else having read up about it so there could be more challenge and more – it didn't always feel like there was that going on.* (Darby, Int2)

This lack of preparation by peers affected Darby's learning experience; it is possible, of course, students with heavy lifeloads were unable rather than unwilling to dedicate time to doing more preparatory work.

Another issue was group members not behaving professionally. For example, Cora found it '*really difficult when people just want to talk about themselves all the time – overshare'* (Cora, Int2). NCT tutors usually aim to provide a supportive, non-judgemental learning environment (in my experience), but perhaps some students could feel too relaxed. By the second interview, however, Cora was able to take positive aspects from frustrating behaviour by relating it to her practice:

> *I found that difficult, dealing with [a student who wants to challenge everything] but actually, it's probably – when you're facilitating to parents – I'm speaking about the woman that's on my new [Antenatal] course, she was quite difficult, it's probably quite similar so, in a way, it might be good training for me.* (Cora, Int2)

As she started facilitating antenatal courses, she could identify similarities between peers in her tutor group and parents she was working with. Darby also tried to use sub-optimal learning experiences to inform her practice, such as when she felt her group was not being handled effectively:

> *So then being a learner in a group – if, on occasion, that hasn't been managed, necessarily – it's been helpful to experience it in a group, because it makes it more real for you, actually, what that feels like then if you are part of a group. And so that is something that I've been particularly aware of when I have been observing: how does the antenatal teacher's management of a group affect how other people feel*

comfortable or whatever? So that's – that's been really interesting.
(Darby, Int1)

Participants had different experiences of working together and individually, and their preferences could change over time. Some found their groups less than ideal for a range of reasons but could still potentially take useful meta-learning about being part of a group forward into their own practice. The next section examines in more detail how participants reported working with each other.

Sub-ordinate theme: Strategies for studying with peers

The questionnaires asked about specific strategies for working with others (Table 17, p.269; this includes some of the strategies already explored in Chapter 5). The strategies are discussed under the categories of *Meeting up with other students in person or online to support learning*, and *Other people supporting learning*.

Strategies for working with others	S-1 Intending to use on course			S-2 Did use	S-2 Will use in future
	Used before	Not used before	Total		
Talking to other students via apps such as WhatsApp	46% 18	49% 19	95% 37	91 % 21	70% 16
Discussing topics with friends/family	56% 22	21% 8	77% 30	78% 18	57% 13
Discussing topics with my partner	59% 23	13% 5	72% 28	57% 13	44% 10
Meeting up in person with other students to discuss topics	21% 8	29% 11	50% 19	17% 4	26% 6
Attending relevant conferences/events outside the course	26% 10	18% 7	44% 17	48% 11	78% 18

Table 17: Respondents' intended and actual strategies for learning with others – frequency and percentages of responses to S-1 Q12, Q14 and S-2 Q11, Q13

Meeting up with other students in person or online to support learning

Half of S-1 respondents (n=19, 50%) intended to meet up outside contact days to *'have productive, meaningful discussion'* and to support each other in their learning, as this comment illustrates:

> *I plan to meet up with the other students as I feel they have helpful knowledge and insight, and I may be able to help them too. We may be able to give each other a second perspective or even help each other to proofread our work. (S-1)*

However, at the second timepoint, fewer than a fifth of S-2 respondents (n=4, 17%) reported having met up with their peers. Several said geographical distance had been a barrier, although it was presumably not the only one as more said they planned to meet up in future (n=6, 26%); lack of time was probably more critical while studying.

A large majority of S-1 respondents (n=37, 95%) reported they were intending to talk to their peers online to *'stay in touch and discuss the course',* for example, even though this was a new learning strategy for about half of them. Some stated specifically they would have preferred talking face-to-face but geographical distance prevented this – '*I would love to meet up with students in person, but I do not live close to any*.' *(S-1)* – so social media was useful in overcoming this barrier. Another indicated her peers were confident supporting each other online, asking each other questions first in their Facebook group before approaching their tutor if necessary:

> *We help support each other when there is something we cannot quite get our heads around. If none of us are able to reach a concrete solution we will then just say we will contact the tutor to shed some light on the subject. (S-1)*

It is unclear whether they preferred to pool resources before contacting their tutors, or whether they found it difficult to ask tutors for help for reasons discussed previously (p.258).

Most S-2 respondents said they discussed topics online with each other (n=21, 91%). The proportion was nearly the same as S-1 respondents' stated intentions (n=37, 95%); this respondent implies her group continued to be a useful support for learning:

> *Taking to my peers on WhatsApp: when I don't understand something or need clarification one of my friends will normally answer my question or a few of us will discuss it. (S-2)*

As well as discussing topics, several mentioned sharing resources through Facebook groups: '*I'm finding these useful for sharing information with others and learning from things they have discovered.' (S-1).* Smaller individual discoveries could be combined into one large, shared repository of knowledge. Interviewees shared resources similarly, as Arwen related:

> *On the WhatsApp group that is one thing that we do: we do share papers; we do share work. So, if we have done a particular topic but some people have got different aspects of that topic – I have collected a lot of general papers along the way I find interesting – I will forward them on to them, they will forward ones on to me.* (Arwen, Int1)

Even though she was still at the stage of preferring to work more on her own at this timepoint, sharing reading material was doubtless a way of benefitting from and feeling part of a group. In addition, respondents found WhatsApp and Facebook groups *'helpful and supportive'* because they could '*talk to each other about anything that is worrying us or we are unsure about*' (S-1), and they were '*great to generally motivate each other' (S-2).*

Participants could share information and ideas by co-operating online, making their learning more effective and widening their joint pool of knowledge and understanding, and they could motivate and encourage each other. It is notable respondents said that they were setting up their own groups, which requires a certain level of technical ability and confidence; groups without willing and able volunteers might have missed out, so extra support in this might have been beneficial.

Whether online or in person, relationships participants built with each other were one of the most effective sources of support for many, especially for those in a tightknit group, like Becky. When asked about who had supported her learning, she immediately identified her peers as playing the most important role, especially as they moved into practice:

> *Definitely all my fellow students… even though we're quite far spread-out, we're always messaging each other. Even through sessions, now we've started – we're all now facilitating courses – and we're saying, 'Somebody has asked this question, quickly, what's the answer?' [Laughs] And they answer it. So – definitely – them first and foremost over even close family and everything. … They have been absolutely brilliant.* (Becky, Int2)

Esme too described how she valued the support and motivation from her tutorial group:

> *The women I was learning with, they were all very supportive as well and helped me get through – particularly when a couple of us had failed, we were really low, and I think they really helped to bring us around and see we could do it and not give up.* (Esme, Int2)

The group's support encouraged her to retake a module and played a pivotal role in her decision to persevere on the course. The interviewees who had new babies found the support from their peers particularly crucial. Becky took her baby son to contact days and reported how she appreciated peer support at this particularly challenging time: *'The girls on the course with me were fab, because they took lots of notes for me.'* (Becky, Int2). Cora similarly found her peers helped her and other students who had also had new babies:

> *I was quite lucky – there were three of us who'd had babies, so we had each other. I think I would've found it more difficult if I'd have been the*

only one with a baby. So, yeah, we had each other to talk to so that was – that was helpful and all the other people – all the other students – were really – they would help me if I needed. (Cora, Int2)

When participants were in effectively self-supporting groups, they appreciated the mutual encouragement and motivation. The experiences of some participants highlight peer-to-peer support may benefit from extra facilitation by course tutors.

Sub-ordinate theme: Strategies for studying - people outside the course

Another learning strategy in Table 17 (p.269) involved discussing topics with people outside the course. As stated in Chapter 5 (p.188), nearly three-quarters of S-1 respondents (n=28; 72%) indicated they planned to discuss their studies with their partners, and a similar proportion with friends and family (n=30, 77%). S-2 respondents, however, reported having discussed topics with partners much less; only around half reported having done this (n=13, 57%), and even fewer intended to in future (n=10, 44%). They were more likely to talk things over with friends and family than partners. The benefits of discussing their studies with others included gaining different perspectives on topics – '*I get a different point of view I may not have thought about.' (S-1)* – and encouragement – '*It motivates me to share what I am doing with people.' (S-1).* One respondent found it helped her to clarify gaps in her understanding:

I find discussing topics with my partner, friends or family members allows me to process the information to gain a greater understanding of what I might need to work on more if it does not come across clearly to the other person. (S-1)

Interviewees also varied in the support they gained from friends and family for their learning. Esme described valuing having a full range of support beyond that she got from her peers, including a rare reference to a partner:

So, [Partner] supported me, I think, emotionally and – practically and financially – and just that encouragement as well, so – because I can be one of my harshest critics, but he helps me to keep it on the level but then also he helps me to see some of the good stuff I'm doing. My mum has been an incredible source of support: she would proofread; she would just help me chew things through; I could bounce ideas off her – she may not know what I was talking about, but she was always wanting to learn. That helped me to – yeah, put things into perspective. My employer was supportive in terms of financial support towards the course, and in giving me time off as well, the first-time round, when I was returning to work. My friends, putting up with me not being around to do things [laughs]. (Esme, Int2)

Others lacked access to such support networks, which mirrors findings from other studies about differing levels of support (see, for example, Ashton and Elliott, 2007a; Ward, 2009). While Darby praised her husband for his support and patience, she found her mother seemed indifferent – '*I think she probably thinks I should just be working.'* (Darby, Int2*)* – and her friends seemed not to comprehend her motivation for studying:

We tend to talk about other things, yeah, rather than – usually about our kids, rather than - … I think my friends think I'm a bit mad [laughs]. Yeah, perhaps people don't quite understand. (Darby, Int2)

Cora found her husband did not necessarily understand her studying commitments either:

But what I did find a bit difficult was he wouldn't suggest to me, 'Oh, why don't you go and… [do some study]?'. I would always have to say, 'I need to get something done.' So that's it, but I don't think it was because he didn't want me to do it, I think it just didn't come to – and as he said

> *to me, 'I can't read your mind - just tell me what you want to do.'* (Cora, Int2)

She felt he put the onus on her to explain and request time off from her usual responsibilities. She did value him proofreading her assignments, saying he was *'always interested – to an extent',* which hints at limits to his support. Her mother however, tended to confine her support to childcare and was not interested in the course, which disappointed Cora. Becky too seemed to feel let down the attitudes towards her studying shown by both her mother and her husband, as mentioned previously:

> *I just feel with the pair of them, it's just not their priority. So, they will absolutely help when they can but if they have got more important things then that takes over. It's not they weren't supportive, just maybe it wasn't the most important thing that I get through uni.* (Becky, Int2)

The interviewees' mothers did not seem to provide the level of support found in other studies (see, for example, Plageman and Sabina, 2010). Becky wondered if her mother and partner lacked understanding of what she had taken on and how much the course meant to her: '*It wasn't as important or maybe even seen as a real thing.'* (Becky, Int1). She questioned whether the course being delivered through blended learning – with only occasional contact days out of the home – affected how friends and families' perceptions of her. She wondered if they did not consider her a bona fide student*: 'I wasn't viewed as a full-time student: I was a mum, I was a mum who was dabbling in studying.'* (Becky, Int2). It is also possible participants' friends and families were less familiar with what a degree entailed because they had no experience of university themselves; participation in HE can vary widely according to a range of personal and social factors, including socio-economic status, ethnicity and geographical area (Wiseman *et al*, 2017).

In contrast, Becky felt her peers did understand because they were '*all in the same boat'* (Becky, Int2*)*. She was travelling together with her peers on their learning expedition, facing similar challenges, the only ones to fully understand each other. Just as tutors were sometimes perceived to lack understanding and empathy of what was happening for participants at home – such as when they had just given birth – partners, friends and family seemed not to understand what was going on for participants in the nebulous university space. Support from both sides could therefore be less than participants might have appreciated; this lack of understanding is discussed further in Chapter 8 (p.319). When participants lacked support and understanding from peers as well as their social circles, it is not surprising they might describe their journeys as *'lonely',* as Darby did. Such students often have to draw on higher levels of motivation and inner resources than others (Jenny Mercer, 2007), increasing the strain studying represents on a personal level (Quimby and O'Brien, 2006).

This section has shown participants used a range of co-operative strategies to support their learning. Contact with peers, in person and even more online, was an important source of encouragement and knowledge-sharing. Some had better support both on and outwith the course than others, meaning they tended to have more positive learning experiences. As they approached the end of their second year of the course, participants were looking into the future, which is the focus of the next section.

Super-ordinate theme: Continuing the learning journey

Most students on this vocational course planned to work as NCT practitioners. Some full-time questionnaire respondents were nearly finishing Level 5 at the second survey timepoint and preparing to move into practice. By the second interview, half of the interviewees had just moved into practice; Becky, Cora and Darby were all facilitating antenatal courses. Esme had abandoned her plans to work for NCT as she was emigrating; Arwen had put hers on hold for a while.

Freya, who was studying part-time, had just finished the second year of Level 4, and had not decided whether to continue onto Level 5.

Sub-ordinate theme: Moving forward into practice with mixed emotions

S-2 respondents reported experiencing a range of feelings as they contemplated moving on to their next stages. As Figure 31 (p.228) in Chapter 6 showed, only about a third claimed they were feeling 'confident' (n= 8, 35%), and about half were 'excited' or 'proud' (both n=11, 48%). Respondents said it was '*daunting*' thinking about putting what they had learnt into practice and '*doing this in the real world*'. They could feel *'a mixture of excitement and nerves about [their] abilities and facilitation to parents in real life'* and were worried about preparing teaching resources in time. Hearing parents were booking onto courses could be motivating: '*I want to believe I can make a difference for them.'* Some were raring to go, like the one who said she was *'just "over it" and ready to get out there and actually put into practice all the things I have spent 2 years analysing in detail'*.

Interviewees at the second interview timepoint were experiencing a similar range of emotions as they contemplated the next stage of their journeys. Preparation of teaching aids and activities was a concern; they also identified the importance of support, because moving into practice was progressing into unfamiliar territory. Darby found she was '*just feeling a little bit wobbly at the moment because it's just starting… and I can see how much work there is still to do'* (Darby, Int2). Like the questionnaire respondent above, she was feeling overwhelmed and unsteady as she tried to complete her preparation. Her student journey had been *'lonely';* moving into practice felt similar. Despite making efforts to join a network, she lacked local support from existing practitioners, and felt she had no one to borrow teaching equipment from *'to get started'* or to share journeys:

> *Some practitioners have a really close group of practitioners locally… around them and they all kind of hold each other and you know, they*

might say, 'Oh, somebody else has qualified, let's all go out together!' – we haven't really got that here. (Darby, Int2)

In contrast, Cora felt she was fortunate in having a readymade network of local practitioners at different stages she could access easily:

I've got another practitioner that lives really close, so I can discuss things with her, and she is a lot more experienced so that's... and I've also got another newly qualified who is going to be in the next village so... ... I see one on the school run every day, so I could stop and ask anything if I needed to. (Cora, Int2)

Becky did not mention existing practitioners but had close supportive relationships with her peers. She seemed much more confident moving into practice than some others did:

I've been working for a whole month [laughs] – but in that month, I feel like I'm this independent other person now. ... And I'm having adult conversations with people. And I'm the - not the 'expert', but I'm the person who is facilitating, the person who is leading things. So, I've got a role again, does that make sense? So that's given me that. I feel great, I feel really confident. (Becky, Int2)

While some participants were reluctant to fledge into practice, Becky seemed to be swooping and soaring in her new role, buoyed up by the support of her fellow students. Arwen was looking forward to facilitating courses in future and was trying to be philosophical about the delay:

It's quite sad not to have the journey my colleagues have had. ... [But] the type of learner I am – the way I learn and do things – having time to sit back and think about what I'm actually doing and how I'm doing it, might not be a bad thing. So – so, I'm trying to use it to give myself a

positive and quite a strong foundation to start from when I return back to the UK as a practitioner. (Arwen, Int2)

Taking time to underpin her learning would perhaps help her to feel less *'wobbly'* once she was eventually working with parents.

Participants in areas with a supportive network of practitioners, or with supportive peers, were likely to feel held by a community of practice. Less confident students in less welcoming areas – or ones where they were on their own – and those without the camaraderie of peer relationships could miss out on vital support as they started to out as practitioners. Strategies might need to be developed and implemented to help new practitioners identify support requirements and find ways of meeting them. As part of the transition into practice, participants seemed to find it helpful to develop a deeper understanding of what practice entailed; this is looked at in more detail next.

As students on a vocational course, participants needed to consider the sort of practitioners they were going to be in the *'real world'* (S-2), and how they would put theory into practice. As Cora started facilitating courses, she was surprised her learning focus shifted from theory, which she had always enjoyed more, to the practical implications for her work and a growing sense of impatience:

I think, 'Can we just get on with it, the practical side of it?'. I'm thinking – because I have the two [children] and the Antenatal pathway and I'm teaching – I think, 'Well, that's very nice, but I need to know how I'm going to be facilitating … to women.' (Cora, Int2)

For Darby, moving into practice entailed revisiting all she had learnt, viewing everything with a new perspective:

It's two years of learning, and then it's kind of untangling everything. I feel like I need to go back over everything in a way, really, and read every

> *essay, read every bit of feedback and look at the – even things like I was looking through the logbook the other day and thinking, 'Oh yeah, I see why that was the learning outcome for this.'* (Darby, Int2)

It seemed everything only made sense once she was actually using what she had learnt. As well as creating her stock of teaching activities – what she would *do* – Darby pondered how she would *be* as an authentic facilitator, and emphasised the importance of having *'a really cohesive idea of how you are going to be as an antenatal practitioner: what is your core?'* (Darby, Int2). She felt she was only at the beginning of this journey, perhaps contributing to her feelings of instability, although she described how her understanding had increased once she was facilitating:

> *I feel like I know what it is about now. But it took until doing that – despite having observed other people teaching – until you're sitting there in the hot seat yourself [laughs], nervously sticking things up, waiting for people to arrive, and then finding that the caretaker has hidden your cushions or whatever, and you are having to look for your coffee… So, until it becomes real, it's… it's all academic.* (Darby, Int2)

Experiences of facilitating a group therefore helped her understand different dimensions of being a facilitator in practice. Another factor adding to her disorientation seemed to be a growing realisation she would not be the source of all knowledge, despite her previous experience of working in a related field. She described needing to become *'much more comfortable with that – with not knowing the answer'* (Darby, Int2). She was becoming more aware of how she might facilitate parents' learning by exploring ideas afresh with each new group, instead of having a fixed idea of where they should end up.

Cora too was coming to terms with this concept of travelling alongside parents rather than having a specific destination in mind:

> *I know what I want the answer to be … I'm looking for that answer, whereas I need to … have less of an agenda and let them talk about things. … I think when you're nervous, you tend to rush through things.* (Cora, Int2)

She was confident she would improve with time as she became less anxious, which was perhaps a feature of her being part of a local network of supportive practitioners. Moving from hypothesis to reality could be unsettling, sometimes challenging participants' views of what being a practitioner might involve and requiring them to develop their individual paths into practice. More explicit exploration of this process as part of learning on the course might help students negotiate it better; ensuring strong links with practitioners already working could be beneficial.

Observing peers and qualified practitioners in the field also helped participants develop their understanding of practice (Figure 40, p.282). Over four-fifths of S-1 and S-2 respondents agreed they learnt well by observing others (n=35, 84%, S-1; n=20, 87%, S-2) although S-2 respondents were more likely to say often true (n= 15, 65%) rather than almost always true (n= 5, 22%).

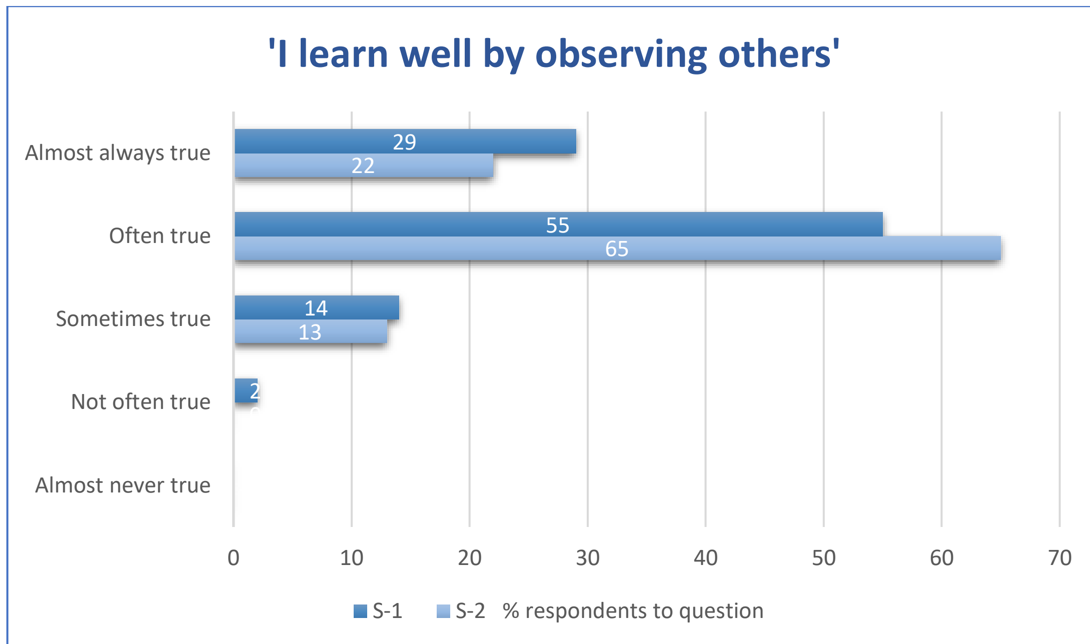


Figure 40: Respondents' views on learning by observing others (Surveys 1 and 2) - percentages of responses to S-1 Q16s and S-2 Q15s

This could be a natural variation since the numbers are small, or it could indicate a growing realisation that observing others is less a case of copying ideas but rather adapting them and incorporating them into each practitioner's own unique approach to facilitating, as one respondent who was planning to continue observations as part of her ongoing learning described:

> *I want to learn skills from other practitioners as the more I see, the more I learn and develop and build up the own personal skills I feel sit well with my strengths. (S-2)*

Participants demonstrated an understanding they were still on a learning journey, so their intentions around being lifelong learners – another key element of heutagogy – are the subject of the next section.

Sub-ordinate theme: Lifelong learning - benefits and barriers

Many S-2 respondents seemed determined to continue incorporating learning into their lives in some form, whatever their plans around working for NCT. They thought *'learning should never stop'* because '*life would be boring otherwise*'. Some planned to continue formal education with NCT at Level 6, although some were unsure whether future study could be accommodated because of *'changes in the NCT education system.'* Others wanted to wait: '*I would like to practise for a year or so, and then I would like to review and see what else I can do to further my study.'* While some planned higher-level study long-term – '*I hope to become involved in research in the future and would consider a PhD later on if the appropriate opportunity arose.'* – other respondents were happy to cease structured learning, however, with one stating bluntly: '*If I never have to write an essay again it will be too soon.'*

The interviewees indicated they wanted to continue studying, but also identified barriers including limits to support and financial implications. Esme felt her partner wanted her to stop studying, at least temporarily:

> *I do want to do more study but, at the moment, I think [partner] is going to leave me if I do anything else [laughs], so we're going to put it on hold for a little while. … He's going to kill me if I say I'm going to go back and study [laughs], but I would like… I want to do a counselling degree.* (Esme, Int2)

While she laughed at her comment, and had said previously her partner had been supportive, she seemed to feel he was limiting her ambitions and even her existence, at least for the time being. She intended to continue learning informally, however, despite not going into practice, because of her interest in the subject and because she was an habitual learner: *'I suppose it's just in my life all the time.'* (Esme, Int2). Becky too was determined to continue because, as she

said, '*I love study, I've definitely not finished. I don't want to stop there.'* (Becky, Int2). She thought some people might think she was *'sad'*, but she wanted to finish the degree and had decided it was *'doable'* in terms of cost and childcare:

> *I like having a deadline, and I like having something to work along to, and I like knowing when I'm going to learn something new that I don't know, and somebody else is going to tell me about that and – I like all that. And I like going somewhere to do that.* (Becky, Int2)

Moving out of the domestic sphere to go somewhere else to study seemed important to her. Cora too thought she would miss studying, and it would be *'a bit weird not having to write essays'* (Cora, Int2). She had contemplated moving onto Level 6 but while her husband was '*always very supportive',* she could not '*justify going to Worcester and spending £6000,'* so was considering topping up at a local university in future. She was also reluctant to rely on her mother for childcare help if she had another baby – '*She's getting older… I couldn't give her three children to look after, two is her limit.'* Asking her mother for extra childcare made her feel uncomfortable, which links to the idea of studying as indulgence. Freya meanwhile was unsure about moving to Level 5: *'I've lost my drive and momentum a little, and I need to consider the financial implications for my family of continuing.'* (Freya, Int2).

Contemplating the end of studying, permanently or temporarily, could entail changes in how participants perceived themselves. For example, Cora wondered whether she would stop thinking of herself as a learner once studying finished, but then realised she would still need to update her knowledge:

> *I'll probably be alright for the first few years, because everything I've learned is pretty up to date, so I think it's probably more thinking in five years' time down the line, whether you're – maybe I need to think of being a continuing student rather than I just stop.* (Cora, Int2)

Her view of herself as a student was being superimposed by that of being a learning practitioner, another layer in her identity palimpsest.

While many participants indicated learning and particularly formal learning were an important part of their lives, some faced barriers around less-than-fully-supportive partners, childcare and cost preventing them continuing as they would have wished; this is returned to in Chapter 8. Those moving into practice facilitating groups of parents often considered learning an important part of evolving as a practitioner and of developing their capability to continue meeting parents' needs; this is the focus of the next section.

Sub-ordinate theme: Becoming a learning practitioner

S-2 respondents referred to continuing '*to learn beyond the degree'* in a range of spaces such as participating in online courses and study days post-qualification but also as part of practice, as one identified:

> *There is obviously a formal CPD element to being a practitioner but outside of that we learn informally all the time (titbits, learning from peers, learning from parents, learning from experience etc.). (S-2)*

S-2 respondents often reported an awareness of their responsibility for *'keeping up-to-date with theory and research'* so they could *'provide up-to-date, relevant, evidence-based information to the parents [they] come into contact with',* and felt they would *'always be learning as things change and develop'*. This respondent's comment about needing to continue learning as part of her contract with parents attending her courses was typical:

> *My learning journey will never end, so anything I can do to keep enhancing the knowledge and skills I have will benefit not only myself but those I work with. (S-2)*

Interviewees also acknowledged the importance of continuing development after qualifying. Darby anticipated her first steps into practice being a time of accelerated consolidation of her learning: '*I think the learning is definitely ongoing. I feel like a lot of it is going to happen in the next six months, year.*' (Darby, Int2). Interviewees envisaged attending continuous professional development events provided by NCT, but some were worried about additional costs beyond the minimum offered. Darby said she would be '*doing as much as I can afford*' (Darby, Int2). Becky did not want to be limited by minimum requirements of two days a year: '*I want to do way more than that! I want to go to things and go to conferences.*' (Becky, Int2).

S-2 respondents also planned to move into a wider community of practice, helping to '*broaden [their] knowledge and horizons*' by attending events run by external organisations. While just under half S-1 respondents reported going to conferences and study days outside NCT during the course (Table 17, p.269: n=17, 44%), over three-quarters of S-2 respondents (n=18, 78%) planned to attend events in future. This intention to build networks and strengthen knowledge levels was typical:

> *I think it's really beneficial to attend conferences and events aimed at birth workers, but also those with a different demographic. I enjoy listening to people talk and having the chance myself to be among like-minded people and experiencing different perspectives. (S-2)*

Respondents asserted attending outside events '*validated learning*' and '*really inspired and motivated*' them (S-2). Such events could also offer alternative sources of support and inspiration when participants were no longer attending tutorials, as this respondent explained:

> *I think it will be really important to have these sorts of events to look forward to, to be challenged and stimulated, and I imagine, to maintain*

motivation sometimes, as it will be a big change, after studying full-time for two years, to not be meeting peers on a regular basis. (S-2)

Sometimes there was a lack of provision within reasonable travelling distance, however, as Becky found when trying to identify suitable events in Scotland: *'There are so few opportunities up here and that's quite hard at the moment.'* (Becky, Int2). Cost too could be a barrier, as this respondent stated bluntly: *'I can't afford to go to conferences'* (S-2). It is possible, however, the Covid-19 pandemic-induced move to delivering such events online will be sustained and provide more equitable access, enabling students' participation in valuable opportunities to engage with a wider community of practice.

A crucial aspect of practitioner development involves reflecting on practice (another key aspect of heutagogy); as one S-2 respondent declared: *'A lot of the learning will come from evaluating my sessions.'* Arwen described how a continuous spiral of reflecting on action (Schön, 1983, 1987) to improve her skills was important right from the start:

> *There will be a lot of reflection. So as soon as I deliver my first session, there will be going back to the session plan to actually see what worked, what didn't work, what do I need to change, how do I need to change that?* (Arwen, Int2)

Darby accepted some sessions might fall short of her expectations, but she would need to *'feel the fear and just do it'* (Darby, Int2). Like Arwen, she planned to use each nerve-wracking situation as a learning opportunity:

> *I think if you reflect after every session and you think, 'Why might that have felt awkward?' then you can maybe find a better way of doing it the next time. So, it's about not dwelling on things too much and moving on and I need to get better at that, and have a thicker skin.* (Darby, Int2)

This process might test her sense of herself as a potentially effective practitioner, adding to the feelings of instability she identified previously; nevertheless, she seemed determined to persevere.

The sometimes-troublesome transition into practice could be eased by support from other students and qualified practitioners. One S-2 respondent appreciated being able to share suggestions for facilitating '*especially when just starting out*'. Some groups provided a high level of mutual emotional support and encouragement, as Esme wistfully noted when her fellow peers started facilitating:

> *Seeing it now, with everybody going through it and doing their first courses – that support they provide to one another is incredible, and I don't think I've seen it anywhere else.* (Esme, Int2)

Cora regarded support from her peers as more important than her husband's, because peers shared similar experiences and understood better how she felt:

> *Sometimes when you go and teach and you've got a difficult person… I come home and say to [Husband] about it but he has difficult clients all the time, so he is not as sympathetic. I think actually just having somebody else who – who doesn't think it's trivial. … Somebody who is actually doing it can be a bit more, 'Oh yeah, that must've been really horrible!'* (Cora, Int2)

Even Darby, who reported less face-to-face support available locally, appreciated a certain level of online support when starting her first course:

> *I think I'll probably start with – certainly with the WhatsApp group within our course group – definitely, and then as I say, other ANTS [Antenatal teachers] I know - I say, 'How are you doing this?' and we all exchange files.* (Darby, Int2)

Many participants seemed to have a strong sense of themselves as lifelong learners and learning practitioners; many were keen to continue formal learning. Even those who were not planning to do so, at least for the time being, were intending to move into a wider community of practice and to continue developing their skills and knowledge, using reflective practice to constantly improve how they might work with parents. This chimes with Blaschke's theory (2012) that adult learners need to develop not just competencies that are currently useful, but also the capability to adapt to a constantly changing and evolving world in practice beyond achieving a qualification. Where available, support had a huge impact on participants' experiences of moving into practice. Peer support in particular seemed to be of the utmost importance, which was different to other research into mature women students such as Webber (2017a) who found mature women students tended to identify partners and children as key sources of support. Participants in this current research appreciated sharing empathy, motivation and resources with their fellow travellers through the often-mysterious terrains of vocational learning and practice.

Chapter summary

This chapter has explored the learning journeys of participants, highlighting how they interacted with communities of learning and practice both in person and online. Returning to study after a break could be considered as going against the normal time to study, potentially disruptive to families and therefore potentially perceived as an indulgence. Participants felt being women, and especially mothers, made their learning experiences different from and often more challenging than men's. The support they gave each other as part of a sisterhood of shared understanding was vital, both during the course and as they moved into practice, a time of potentially increased anxiety. It is notable less mention was made of support from tutors, however. Learning through observing and in groups were important parts of their learning, and the ability to do this in person rather

than online was valued highly. As they approached the end of the course, many participants were considering the changing shape of their engagement with learning and looking to develop new networks. There is a sense of personal development achieved despite the challenges they encountered. The next chapter discusses key elements of these three Findings chapters and examines them in the light of relevant literature.

Chapter 8: Discussion

Introduction

This research has investigated the experiences of mature women students, mostly mothers, and their engagement with heutagogy, an approach to learning which theorizes students developing as self-determined lifelong learners. The study took as its empirical example the NCT Birth and Beyond foundation degree, investigating the cohort of students who joined the course in September 2017. The aim of the research was to increase understanding of mature woman students as self-determined learners, so they might be supported more effectively.

The study utilised a qualitatively focused mixed methods approach. The quantitative strand provided invaluable data to shape the subsequent phases and contextualised understandings gained from interaction with the interviewees. Demographic data helped to describe the sample, highlighting similarities and differences between other settings and other studies, as well as demonstrating the extent to which the interviewees were typical of the rest of the cohort in particular aspects (Chapter 5, p.130). Responses to the questions about attitudes and approaches to learning indicated how participants engaged in aspects of heutagogy, and indicated different levels of engagement at the two survey timepoints. The interviewees provided a wealth of data through sharing their stories and experiences and the qualitative strand formed the deeper focus of this study, providing thick description and an interpretative analysis of the individual learning experiences of the six interviewees as they travelled on their learning journeys. The combination of both the frogs' qualitative view and the quantitative birds' view mentioned in the Methodology chapter therefore provided deep and wide insights into the experiences of mature women students on the NCT course and their engagement with heutagogy.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 presented the results from the data collection using a framework of three horizons: participants' attitudes and approaches to learning, how they incorporated learning into their complex lives, and how they navigated landscapes of learning. In this chapter, I summarise and discuss the main findings and position them in relation to the research questions and existing literature. Finally, I discuss how stakeholders understand participants' experiences of being mature women students.

The research questions guiding this study which will be addressed in this chapter were as follows:

1. How do mature women returners to study on a vocational foundation degree engage in self-determined learning, also known as heutagogy?
2. What facilitates and what impedes this engagement?
3. What effect do participants' lives and relationships have on how they study and become self-determined learners?
4. How do participants' attitudes and approaches to learning develop and what are the potential implications for their future practice after they qualify?

The first two questions are considered together as they are interconnected in terms of findings and analysis, because they consider participants' engagement with heutagogy and mediating factors; separate consideration would risk fragmentation and repetition.

Research questions 1 and 2

- **How do mature women returners to study on a vocational foundation degree engage in self-determined learning, also known as heutagogy?**
- **What facilitates and what impedes this engagement?**

The findings reveal a group of dedicated women students who were usually increasingly reflective and thoughtful, and whose learning experiences were different to those of 'traditional' school-leaver undergraduates. Here I map participants' attitudes and approaches to learning against different aspects of heutagogy, drawing on the findings from questionnaire respondents and interviewees, and discuss how their engagement with self-determined learning was helped or hindered.

Highly motivated learners

While research participants were often motivated by achieving a qualification to move into a new career, other factors were often just as or indeed more important, as the findings presented as part of the themes of *More than getting a qualification* (p.137), *Wanting to do well* (p.139) and *Enjoying learning* (p.146) in Chapter 5 indicated. Participants often enjoyed learning for its own sake, but many also valued external validation through achieving high grades for their assignments. Other research has shown how returning to studying after a break can affect confidence (for example, Buckingham *et al*, 2005, in their study of training experiences of London women with dependent children). It is therefore unsurprising that participants in this study often craved reassurance they were capable of achieving the high standards they had set themselves. Many enjoyed the time and space to engage in something outside the domestic sphere as a personal challenge, which is similar to Leonard's (1994) findings, in her examination of Belfast mature women on a sociology degree. Some participants in the present research were driven to study at least partly because motherhood did not offer the external validation they sought, as Pascall and Cox's study (1993) of English mature women undergraduates also found. Participants in the current research, however, did not seem to be looking to escape domesticity completely. One explanation for this difference might be differences in expectations around how women today combine their domestic and public spheres compared to three

decades ago, which was the earliest literature explored for this research. Studying on the course offered participants an opportunity to prove their worth by attaining higher grades than necessary to gain the qualification, as well as the chance to stretch themselves outside their mothering roles, doing something for themselves rather than meeting the needs of others. They did not mention being motivated by being role models for their children, however, unlike some other research such as Callender's study (2018) of part-time undergraduate student parents on low incomes. Differences in class and previous education experiences may partly explain this finding.

Keen to take responsibility for their own learning, high level of self-efficacy beliefs

Although the course curriculum, timetable and assessments were fixed – an explicit heutagogical approach would have empowered students to decide what to include in a flexible curriculum (Hase and Kenyon, 2001; Agonács, and Matos, 2019) - participants in this study did have flexibility around how they directed their own learning outside study days. As the themes of *Taking responsibility* (p.154) and *Confidence around learning* (p.162) in Chapter 5 revealed, participants usually demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility for their learning, and their self-efficacy beliefs seemed high. Both characteristics are prerequisites for identifying learning needs as well as the suitable resources and strategies to meet those needs (Knowles *et al*, 2020). Hase and Kenyon (2013) maintain that students who actively direct their own learning are more satisfied, and this view is supported by the high levels of enjoyment reported in the present study. Participants spoke very positively about learning new information and new skills, and about discussing their feelings (as long as tutors facilitated this in a supportive space). These findings suggest many participants had the necessary attitudes and capabilities for directing their own learning, which are prerequisites for heutagogical learning (Tsai, 2018). Their maturity and life experience afforded them additional benefits, enabling many to develop focussed learning strategies

to make best use of the limited time available to them because of their complex lifeloads (discussed in more detail later).

Most participants developed confidence as self-regulated learners over the period of the course, although appropriate scaffolding from tutors was appreciated and seen as important. Some found accessing additional individual support challenging at times, however. For example, they reported being unsure sometimes about the extent of tutor roles or the availability of university support, and therefore what they were entitled to ask for. This reinforced other research such as Marandet and Wainwright's (2010) study of UK university students with dependent children: they noted participants' perceptions of support needs as personal deficits which they argued were 'in line with the neo-liberal ethos of risk and responsibility' (p.801), downgrading the duty of HE institutions to provide for a wide range of experiences and learning requirements. Some participants in the present study felt mature learners ought to be able to study without additional support, so were embarrassed to ask, even at particularly challenging points of the course; others were not clear who to contact (Chapter 7, p.254). This research highlights even mature students with previous HE experience may require extra support at times, particularly if their lifeload and circumstances change. Clearer signage from tutors and the wider university would be one way of addressing this uncertainty.

Increased levels of metacognition through reflective practice and double-loop learning

Almost all participants reported the course had helped them develop awareness of how they learnt, as shown by the theme *Constructing and reconstructing how they learn* (Chapter 5, p.160). Reflective practice is generally accepted as fundamental to students making sense of their experiences and themselves as learners (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985; Schön, 1983, 1987; Jasper, 2013). Participants recognised reflective practice contributed to their metacognition,

even though it was a new technique for many, and they often approached it cautiously at first. Most questionnaire respondents at the beginning of the course intended to use various reflective strategies, but at the second survey point, reported usage of these strategies was lower than planned (Table 17, Chapter 7, p.269). The reason for the disconnect between intention to use other reflective strategies and what participants did is unclear, although time pressures were a likely factor. Another explanation is participants may have developed a reflective attitude, including Dewey's (1933) learning requirements of open mindedness, wholeheartedness and responsibility. Becoming increasingly reflective could have resulted in specific strategies becoming less important to them. It is arguable that, as mothers used to meeting a variety of needs within their families, they were already used to seeing situations from different perspectives, a fundamental aspect of becoming a critically reflective practitioner (Brookfield, 2017).

Participants reported studying on the course had increased their critical thinking skills, which in turn transformed the way they engaged with the world (Chapter 6, p.231). As Barnett (2007) has argued, HE students need to be able to engage critically and authentically both with new concepts and also with themselves as learners. Committing to a more thoughtful, reflective and critical approach helped practitioners develop their practice of double-loop learning, a key aspect of heutagogy (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Blaschke, 2012). They were able to bring their personal, social and political assumptions to the surface and challenge them for their relevance in the light of new knowledge and understanding and the changing contexts of their future practice. This emphasises how learning was very often transformative for participants (Mezirow, 1978, 2000).

Discussing topics with others facilitated participants' exploration of what new learning meant for them and their future practice, and encouraged them to question more deeply. Participants often discussed topics with friends or family during the course (Chapter 5, p.188) to help make sense of their learning (this was

reported by about three-quarters of the groups at both survey timepoints). In contrast, about three-quarters of S-1 respondents intended to discuss topics with their partners but this was the case for only just over half the sample by the second survey timepoint. This decline might be connected to partners' lack of interest in course topics (interviewees talked about the degree being seen as '*womanly*') or a wider lack of support; instead, most participants discussed their learning with other students, mostly online rather than face-to-face. This emphasises further the importance of peer support for these participants, a topic returned to later.

Research participants often developed an increased understanding of themselves as learners as part of their evolving learner identities. It is claimed 'traditional' students require development of a positive learner identity to study successfully in HE (Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012; MacFarlane, 2018). Many participants in the current research had already formed an idea of themselves as adult learners during previous HE experiences and were often surprised when they needed to adapt these identities to include their additional roles and responsibilities, as well as their broader life experiences. They needed to reinvent themselves as student mothers rather than students, a process some reported as unsettling. This reinvention may have been even harder for those participants who were less likely to discuss their learning with their partners. Mature women student mothers who share their emerging student identities with partners and families often find studying easier than those who do not, as Brooks (2012) showed in her study of student parents in the UK and Denmark. Some participants in the present study kept their other roles separate from their student identities, while others overlapped them to a lesser or greater extent. Webber (2017a, building on Edwards' work, 1993) argued mature women students can be grouped according to their preferences as 'connectors', 'separators' or 'mixers' of their different roles. Some current research participants were not always able to manage their lives according to these personal preferences, such as when childcare options were

limited, or partners and families were uninterested; the ability to share support with peers was particularly important in these situations. The course focus of learning how to support new mothers and fathers may have contributed to participants' reflexivity, drawing out comparisons between what they were learning and their own situations with young children, and helping them to support their peers.

Some engagement in nonlinear learning

Although the course curriculum was rigid in terms of timetable and the modules covered, a recurring refrain from participants was finding themselves *wandering down rabbit holes* in their independent study (Chapter 5, p.183). Some saw this as a frustrating waste of precious time; others enjoyed and valued exploring unfamiliar ideas, even if they were not necessarily immediately relevant to assignments. A course using a fully heutagogical approach supports student choice around which paths to learning they take (Blaschke and Hase, 2016), which in turn gives rise to the idea of learning as 'wandering' (Glassner and Back, 2020). This wandering could be argued to be particularly useful as a way of developing their capacity to continue to learn once they had completed the course. However, only some participants were comfortable with wandering and reflecting on new concepts, examining them in relation to their existing knowledge and their future practice. This hints at different levels of confidence and 'heutagogy-readiness' in the cohort. Tutors could offer suitable scaffolding and help to clarify what effective self-determined learning looks and feels like.

Varying levels of effective engagement in online learning

Online learning and social media usage for learning were growing even before the Covid-19 pandemic-induced acceleration to global online engagement (Blaschke, 2014; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). It is unclear to what extent this trend will persist in future, although preliminary studies suggest blended learning

approaches combining virtual and face-to-face teaching are likely to become more prevalent in post-pandemic universities (see for example, Eringfeld, 2021). This research has indicated the importance of the informal use of online and social media strategies for self-regulated learning (Chapter 5, p.172). It did not explore formal online learning such as that enabled through virtual learning environments, video conference calls and so on, as this made up only a small part of the course (as the research was carried out before the Covid-19 pandemic pivot to online learning only).

Most questionnaire respondents reported high levels of confidence in using online resources and the internet for learning when they embarked on the course; confidence had grown even higher by the second survey timepoint (Chapter 5, p.168). However, recent research shows digital skills and access vary widely in the UK (ONS, 2020a; Lloyds Bank, 2020) and even in this small sample, there were different levels of engagement with online learning strategies. Many respondents' reported usage of strategies such as watching YouTube videos, reading blogs or following discussions on Twitter were much lower at the second survey timepoint than intended at the first timepoint (Chapter 5, p.172). It is unclear to what extent lack of digital access and skills were barriers or whether the specific strategies respondents were questioned about turned out less useful than expected, although Blaschke (2013) has highlighted how digital technologies can effectively support double-loop learning (that is, learning which includes reflection on how new knowledge interacts with the learner's values and beliefs) through exposure to different viewpoints and information, as well as group problem-solving. It is possible participants were of a generation that missed out on learning to use digital tools as part of school or earlier university experiences. In addition, time out of the workplace for maternity leave may have mitigated against participants keeping their digital skills up to date. The perceived toxicity of online spaces, particularly for women, may also have been a barrier (Hern, 2021).

Participants who were digitally skilled and confident online seemed to have very different – and often more rewarding - learning experiences from others who were less experienced in using technology for learning and negotiating learning in a range of online spaces. This research suggests some mature women students face specific digital access and capability issues which are not yet well understood.

Importance of socially connected learning

The interviewees provided a notable finding about social aspects of learning together: studying with supportive peers was a vital element of their learning when it worked well, as it did for most (Chapter 7, p.260). In contrast, studying could be a 'lonely journey' for those who did not locate sources of peer support. This confirms previous research into students on online courses, such as O'Shea, Stone and Delahunty's exploration of undergraduate and postgraduate students in Australia (2015), and a case study of online undergraduates in Dublin by Farrell and Brunton (2020). The finding diverges from Youde's study (2020) of part-time mature adult learners (men and women) undertaking vocational courses using a blended learning approach, which found peer collaboration and support were not valued highly. Youde's research focussed mostly on tutors' perspectives, however, whereas the current research is student-centred. In addition, he was exploring how students supported each other during formal online learning, rather than in the times and spaces between formal face-to-face learning events, which was the present study's focus.

Sex and gender roles seemed pivotal for participants in the current study because they had a shared understanding of the specific challenges of being mature student mothers, so could provide appropriate support to each other. For example, peers took notes for participants with new babies, or offered encouragement over conflicts of study and family priorities, or shared resources and answered each other's questions, sometimes as a first resort before

approaching tutors. It is likely the course's focus on learning to provide support to new parents would have heightened participants' awareness of their own needs as mothers.

A community of practice is defined as people sharing similar values and learning in a common domain (Wenger, 1998). Only about half the questionnaire respondents stated they were looking forward to making friends as they started the course (although later in the course their responses show many appreciated forming deep and enduring friendships as they journeyed through the course). However, while some questionnaire respondents noted learning with students with a variety of perspectives and experiences helped widen their horizons, participants often underlined the importance of finding 'like-minded' peers to make their learning enjoyable and effective (Chapter 7, p.260). They seemed keen to find subgroups of these like-minded peers within the broader community of practice, ones who shared more closely aligned attitudes and approaches to study. The interviewees revealed they appeared to perceive 'friends' and 'like-minded peers' differently, suggesting the latter category shared the same passion for the subject and could offer constructive feedback, encouragement and motivation. There seems to be little research into the benefits of like-minded peers for students, particularly mature women students, although Wright (2011) noted participants in her research into mature women studying childcare in the UK occasionally formed supportive learning pairs or sub-groups. In addition, Frith and Wilson found in their study (2014) of mature part-time students at a UK university that participants who managed to find peers on their wavelength reported positive effects on academic confidence and achievement, which helps make sense of Darby's disappointment at a lack of supportive peers. This was particularly important in her situation, as older mature students can have lower levels of self-confidence than younger mature students, according to Pearce (2017) in his study of students aged 40+ at an established UK university.

The interviewees suggested the support and camaraderie they experienced on this course were unique, which hints mature students on all-women courses work together in different ways to 'traditional' students on mixed courses. Although there is little current research in this area, no doubt due to a low occurrence of such courses, Deutsch and Schmertz's (2011) participants in the US also valued being part of a supportive community of women.

Some participants quickly and easily formed online peer groups using WhatsApp and Facebook. However, this was not the case for all participants which could be a disappointment, especially when they were geographically distant from their peers, making meeting up in person difficult. In a case study of six Canadian women enrolled on an online course, Phirangee and Malec (2017) found how differences in student identities and social presence online could result in participants feeling excluded and othered; they emphasised the importance of tutors encouraging student interactions to minimise disconnection and isolation. Participants in the present research might have benefitted from more explicit tutor support for peer interaction. Another potential barrier to working effectively with each other could have been digital access and skills issues. Finally, the small size of tutorial groups may have limited opportunities for finding peers with compatible attitudes and approaches across the broader group of students taking the course. Aiding students to develop self-supporting groups beyond their tutorial groups, both in person and online, could therefore be beneficial.

Research question summary

Participants often had high levels of engagement with key aspects of heutagogy: they became more motivated, self-regulated and critically aware as reflective learners able to build on their previous experiences and with a growing understanding of how they learnt effectively. However, their use of online and social media learning strategies was lower towards the end of the course than

they had anticipated when they started, despite reporting high confidence levels. Different levels of digital skills and access could have been a barrier, but other factors may have had an impact too. More research is needed around how mature women students negotiate learning in virtual spaces.

Working with subgroups of like-minded peers as part of a learning community was one of the most important factors for many, providing them with support, motivation and encouragement as well as the opportunity to share resources and discuss and make meaning of their learning.

Scaffolding from tutors was important, especially for those who were less comfortable with self-regulated learning, although accessing additional support could be problematic for some. Participants who were less 'heutagogy-ready' might have benefitted from more explicitly focussed support for self-determined learning, particularly in how to incorporate it into their lives as mature women and mothers. Developing a new identity of student mother could be challenging, again requiring support. The specific interactions between participants' complex lifeloads and their studies are considered next.

Research question 3:

- **What effect do participants' lives and relationships have on how they study and become self-determined learners?**

This research question aimed to explore how participants' lives and relationships affected their learning; however, the findings also showed the reverse, how studying affected their lives deeply as well. I now discuss this interconnected dynamic and key issues including sex and gender; mothering and reproductive labour; temporal-spatial challenges; and the interplay between participants' studying and relationships.

Participants in this research had complex lifeloads compared to many typical school leaver students, with a range of roles and responsibilities inside and outside the home. Juggling this lifeload was the most challenging aspect for many throughout the course, which resonates with other studies of mature women students over the last three decades (the extent of my review of the literature). These include Edwards' case study of undergraduates with dependent children at two English universities (1993), Ashton and Elliott's research with a cohort of students on an early childhood teacher education programme in Australia (2007a, 2007b), and Webber's qualitative study of eleven women studying on a foundation degree at an English FE college and their partners (2017a, 2017b). As in those studies, participants in the current research found it difficult to balance competing demands of studying and being mothers and wives or partners, as various themes in Chapter 6 demonstrated. Prioritising their studies over their families' needs often led to guilt and frustration about being deficient according to socially constructed ideas around being 'good' mothers and household managers for many participants. Giving precedence to family or work, however, could result in troubling concerns about being inferior students, especially for those setting high academic standards for themselves. This confirms other research such as Lynch's (2008), who found graduate student mothers in the US faced similar conflicts. The priorities and motivations of participants in the current study shifted back and forth throughout the course between their studying and their other roles, demonstrating the challenges of integrating studying into their lives, as other studies have also found (see, for example, Stone and O'Shea, 2013, 2019a, 2019b; O'Shea, 2015; Webber, 2015, 2017a, 2017b).

Continuing inequality in gender roles

A notable finding of the present research is that the ongoing unequal domestic load on mature women students - particularly mothers of young children - has seemingly not improved since studies from the 1990s and earlier (such as Pascall

and Cox, 1993, and Leonard, 1994, both previously mentioned). Many participants in the current research seemingly maintained overall responsibility for managing the family and the house throughout their studying. This aligns with the continuing inequality in men and women's contributions to domestic labour split along gender lines observed in other studies of households outside academia, such as Christopher (2020) who studied twenty-five working couples with children in the UK. Webber (cited earlier, 2017a, 2017b) described the advantages of family support for participants in her research, theorising this through the lens of family capital, where the key dimensions of emotions and time are offered to students in pursuit of a goal to benefit the whole family. However, while some participants in the present research reported receiving some support from family members, especially with childcare, it was striking many participants did not mention support specifically from partners at all. This echoes Callender *et al*'s mixed methods study (2014) of UK student mothers on a part-time undergraduate degree delivered in Children's Centres (although their participants were socially disadvantaged and on low incomes, in contrast to the current study). One possible explanation is participants had low expectations of extra practical support beyond that usually provided by their partners, as Wright (2011) found in her study of mature women students studying childcare in the UK. For example, one of the questionnaire respondents (S-2) said her house had '*gone to wrack and ruin'* despite having an *'amazingly supportive'* partner, which could suggest he was supporting her emotionally rather than taking on more practical tasks as well. Additionally, some participants noted their partners lacked awareness of the support required so relied on being guided. For example, Cora's husband suggested she should tell him explicitly what support she needed, as he could not read her mind (Chapter 7, p.274).

Many sociological studies have revealed lack of equity around domestic labour across the spectrum of class and income levels, despite dramatic increases in female participation in the labour force over past decades. Domestic labour

includes not just household tasks but also the planning and emotional labour involved in family life, leaving mothers overworked and undervalued, as a recent study of American mothers found (DeGroot and Vik, 2020). In their qualitative study of mature Australian students who were first in family to attend university, Stone and O'Shea (2013) claimed families observing traditional gender roles often have lower levels of education and lower status employment, but participants in this current research did not match this description. While some participants were surprised by the extent to which their overall lifeloads increased, they often accepted their situations and did not seem to challenge their partners' lack of support. This contradicts Webber's suggestion that studying on a foundation degree initiates a transformation of familial roles (2017a, 2017b).

It is possible the gender balance within the relationship for my sample had been long established and was therefore almost indiscernible, as Moss found in her study (2004) of two cohorts of women students at a community college in England. Another possible explanation is modern men often claim to value sharing reproductive labour (caregiving and domestic work, as opposed to 'productive' or paid labour outside the home) but fail to put ideals into practice (see Schulte's recent mixed methods study of American men and caregiving, 2021). Moss (2004) found the additional burden of studying exposed imbalances in participants' relationships along gender lines, whereas participants in the present study did not report this. One possible explanation is they were similar in outlook to the US different-sex self-professed egalitarian couples studied by Daminger (2020) in framing their unequal labour contributions as relating to work commitments or personality differences, rather than viewing their own household through the lens of traditional gender roles. They had perhaps developed a 'de-gendered' understanding of their family situations to explain the contradictions between their views on equality and their unequal practices. This un-naming of structural inequality, reframing it from the political to the personal, could be argued to chime with second-wave feminist Betty Friedan's

‘problem that has no name’ which she identified as the cause of 1960’s middle class white women’s domestic dissatisfaction (Friedan, 1963, p9). Participants would doubtless have found it difficult to negotiate change around a nebulous concept.

Some participants in the present research highlighted differences in expectations around men and women with families returning to study. They felt men would be able to undertake study easily as part of their work lives, rather than having to balance it with family time, which is borne out by other research. For example, studying is often seen as more important for men than women (Brooks, 2012) so they find it easier to establish time and space to study without interruption or feeling pressured to meet familial responsibilities (see Smith’s comparative study of English men and women studying for a part-time foundation degree, 2017). They might not even consider the possible effects of studying on their domestic and family roles, as a study of mature men HE student in the UK and Australia found (Laming, Morris and Martin-Lynch, 2019). This is in stark contrast to the guilt and concern experienced by participants in the current study when trying to juggle their studies with their other commitments.

Difficulty finding time and space to study

Participants often found it challenging to find time for study in their busy lives, particularly those with younger children and even more so if they worked outside the home, as the theme *Squeezing study into slivers of time and space* demonstrated (Chapter 6, p.200). This finding aligns with many other studies such as Reay, Ball and David (2002) in their exploration of mature access course students at a UK FE college, and Moreau and Kerner (2015) who investigated UK student parents, as well as others (see, for example, Ashton and Elliott, 2007a, 2007b; Stone and O’Shea, 2013). Some participants in the present study were able to use digital skills to multitask, such as accessing journals on their smartphones while their children played. Others waited until their children were in bed,

sacrificing their own leisure time and sleep; this differs from Wright's case study of mature women childcare students at a UK FE college (2011), who mostly reported studying only during the day. However, most of her sample were working part-time and had childcare arranged for days they were not working but studying, whereas many participants in the present research were not in paid work.

Finding space for studying was another challenge for participants in my study (Chapter 6, p.201). Other research has often explored space for study in relation to the university campus, which has historically been seen as male and therefore a place where women students can feel marginalised, especially if they have children (see for example, Quinn, 2003, cited earlier). Participants in the current research were studying on an all-women course and most did not go onto campus after the induction event, so space for independent study in the home was far more important than for students who are able to study in university libraries or designated study areas on campus. Few other researchers have investigated this specifically, although a notable exception is Kahu *et al's* (2014,) exploration of how mature students on a distance course use trial and error to find 'the ideal spatial and temporal conditions for engagement' with their studies p.535. As in their findings, participants in the current research often experienced a lack of dedicated space for studying. They had to repurpose other places to study, clearing their kitchen tables before they could spread their books and laptops out, underlining how their studies came second to feeding their families, and mirroring the conflict between their studying and mothering roles. Their desks were transitory spaces that had to be reconstructed afresh at the beginning of each study session. Even the few who reported having rooms of their own away from the rest of their households often found their domestic responsibilities prevented them from leaving the heart of the family to study separately.

Many participants valued the ability to access the university library online, blurring geographical boundaries between the university and the home. They also often appreciated the study days in regional venues as nurturing spaces for learning conversations in person as part of a transformational journey, which could be in surprising contrast to the traditional campus-based experience they remembered from their first degrees.

Challenges regarding finding time and space to study were linked with levels of emotional and practical support from partners, family members and friends, as discussed previously. The amount of support on offer could affect participants' engagement with their studies. Unlike participants in other studies, such as Plageman and Sabina's (2010) survey of US mature women students, some interviewees did not seem to gain much support from their mothers, which could come as a surprise (for Becky, for example). It is possible some partners and family members were unwilling to take over some of the domestic burden or perhaps did not understand participants' studying commitments. A lack of understanding could be linked to a divergence between perceptions of 'traditional' students who are often on campus and participants' situations, where they mostly studied independently at home. This discrepancy could be exacerbated for part-time students because their study days were more spread out than for the full-time students. Other studies have pointed out how part-time students can feel less like 'proper' students compared to full-timers (see, for example, Frith and Wilson, 2014) but in this current study it was perhaps such perceptions of friends, families and partners rather than of participants themselves that were problematic. Lack of sufficient emotional support from their existing social networks was no doubt one of the reasons why support from peers was so highly valued by many participants (and mourned when it was not available, as in Darby's situation).

Unpredictable lives

The unpredictability of the daily practice of mothers' lives (Chapter 6, p.200) was an important factor affecting participants and one which is rarely if ever discussed in other studies. Carving out regular time and space for study was challenging for many, and particularly for those who had new babies during the course. Many participants found they could not rely on having regular long stretches of uninterrupted time to focus on their studying, because they felt they had to be ready to meet their families' needs, often at a moment's notice. Some had arranged informal or formal childcare, but this could fall through, or their children might become ill unexpectedly, which was often participants' responsibility to deal with. This reinforces other research about the difficulties of finding affordable flexible and reliable childcare (see, for example, Lynch, 2008; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010, both cited previously). Some participants also reported concerns about their own parents starting to need more support which indicated they were taking on another new and unfamiliar role, holding similarities to the process of becoming new mothers, perhaps. Daily uncertainty could be compounded by longer term challenges too. The theme *Shifting sands of family life* (Chapter 6, p.215) demonstrated that participants faced major life changes, whether planned or unplanned – house moves, partners being made redundant and baby loss, for example - adding even greater uncertainty and stress to their already complicated lifeloads. This aspect of mature women students' lives is likely to be different to most 'traditional' school leaver students' situations.

Participants could therefore find planning independent study and assignments challenging, and lacked flexibility to deal with unexpected additional study commitments, such as extra reading or retaking assignments. The rigid timetable of the course did not always match the ebb and flow of family life; the approach of non-negotiable deadlines could therefore cause stress. However, these

compelled some participants to prioritise their assignments over other aspects of their lifeloads, or could be used to negotiate extra time or support from families and partners.

Impact of studying on participants, their families and their relationships

Participants identified a range of positive and negative effects of studying, explored in depth in Chapter 6 (p.218). As other studies have found (for example, Moss, 2004, and Stone and O'Shea, 2013, previously mentioned), mature women students with children are particularly likely to forfeit leisure time and income to study (Chapter 6, p.241). Some participants in the present research reported making significant sacrifices to study, such as giving up higher-paying, higher-status jobs to give themselves enough time, or making major changes such as selling their houses to release funds to pay course fees and associated costs such as childcare and travel (which were an issue reported by many). This financial and emotional investment and the attendant pressures to persevere and succeed were seen in other studies too (see, for example, Griffiths, 2002, in her comparative study of mature UK student mothers in initial teacher education). Participants frequently highlighted a reduction in social or leisure time, although time to engage in interesting conversations with peers and tutors outside the home was valued highly. Time away offered an opportunity to focus on being adults learning for themselves, rather than being mothers or partners or employees, although some found it difficult to escape completely from thinking about their domestic responsibilities. Unlike some other studies which found university space to be either one of risk for women students (Mackinnon, Elgqvist-Saltzman and Prentice, 1998) or a safe space providing refuge from danger (Quinn, 2003), the present study found participants often framed their study days as respite from domesticity and children, a space to engage *in 'adult conversations and interesting conversations with other people'* (Becky, Int1).

Perhaps this was also a chance to reconnect with their former selves before they became mothers.

Studying could have an array of impacts on participants' relationships with their partners paralleling the range found in previous research. For example, Edwards (1993, cited previously) claimed women in HE who gain self-esteem and higher levels of confidence can risk relationship failure if partners feel threatened by these changes, while Webber (2015) found evidence of more positive effects on mature women students' relationships with their partners. Some participants in the current research reported an improvement in their communication with their partners, while others reported coming close to or actually experiencing relationship breakdown (Chapter 6, p.238).

Wider familial relationships could be affected by participants' studying in different ways, too, which is a finding shared in other research (for example, Brooks, 2012, cited previously). Over half of the questionnaire respondents said studying on the course had positively affected how they engaged with their family; however, just under a fifth reported a negative effect. The interviewees had mixed feelings, often bargaining with themselves about balancing their drive to study with their family's immediate needs, as demonstrated in the theme *A less available mother?* (Chapter 6, p.218). The enjoyment of the course described by many could contribute to guilt about prioritising themselves above their families' needs. Many participants reported becoming more confident learners, however, and were positive about their developing critical engagement with the topics they were learning about and the world beyond (Chapter 6, p.227). This personal change and development links to Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978, 2000) and demonstrates their developing capability to continue learning and adapting to the constantly changing contexts of their future practice, which is a key element of heutagogy (Blaschke, 2012).

Research question summary

The research indicates participants' attitudes and approaches to self-determined learning were profoundly shaped by their extensive lifeloads, the range of their other roles and responsibilities, and their previous learning experiences, in different ways to other students (particularly younger childfree students and student fathers). The integration of a studying role into participants' lifeloads could cause additional stress and guilt, straining some relationships with partners and families, although others were strengthened, for example by better-developed communication skills. The negotiation of both time and space continued to be critical for participants, and high levels of uncertainty in their lives – daily and also longer-term - constituted a major challenge for many, which is a finding not noted by other researchers. However, most participants appreciated the opportunities studying afforded them to learn and develop as individuals, rather than in relation to their children or their partners. Studying often provided opportunities for personal change and growth, altering participants' perceptions of and engagement with the world.

Research question 4:

- **How do participants' attitudes and approaches to learning develop and what are the potential implications for their future practice after they qualify?**

This section highlights notable differences between the findings at the four timepoints and draws in particular on the second set of interviews, which took place just as some participants were starting out as NCT practitioners. Their transition to practice is structured in a different way to that of nurses and teachers, however, so it has been challenging to find comparative research, but I have tried to identify relevant aspects where possible.

Development as learners

As they journeyed through the course, participants built on previous experiences and seemed to become more self-aware and critically reflective lifelong learners. They often had to accept limits imposed by their other roles and responsibilities on their learning and find ways to study effectively in the time and space available to them. An increasing understanding of their own learning preferences helped many to study strategically to meet the requirements of assignments, although some looked forward to being able to spend more time wandering down interesting 'rabbit holes' once they had finished. Many also intended to continue with some of the learning strategies they had developed. For example, over three-quarters of the sample planned to read journal articles and dip into set texts, as well as other sources outside the reading list. Less than half planned to use reflective strategies such as making notes on their reading or making mind maps, however (Chapter 5, p.179). One possible explanation is they associated these strategies specifically with assignments rather than seeing them as useful tools for learning. There could be a case for developing an assessment regime more constructively aligned (Biggs, 2003) with learning outcomes which explicitly frame students' future practice as being constantly adapted in the light of new learning undertaken after qualification. In addition, it could be argued that assignments should be designed to be more authentic (Villarroel *et al*, 2018) and replicate more closely skills students might use in their practice. A completely heutagogical approach might move towards 'ungrading' (Blum, 2020), which replaces grades with self-assessment of learning, although there might be tensions for vocational courses, where students are required to attain a certain level of skills and knowledge before qualifying and going into practice.

Transition from student to 'learner-practitioner'

Towards the end of the course, some interviewees seemed surprised at the growing realisation they were not fully-formed practitioners but would need to

continue developing their skills and knowledge. They were also coming to terms with how to perform as NCT practitioners, confidently embodying a person-centred approach to supporting new parents and demonstrating a range of professional attributes. Their identity was therefore transitioning from 'student' to 'learner-practitioner' (Chapter 7, p.285), a concept which does not seem to be identified specifically in the literature. This could be a disconcerting process with similarities to the transition to student mother. It involved taking on responsibility for providing a good service to the parents they would be working with, which entailed keeping knowledge current by committing to ongoing learning (in common with many other organisations in the fields of medicine and education, NCT promotes evidence-based practice). Being motivated by professionalism mirrors the lifelong learning many nurses engage in, according to Jarvis (2005), although he noted a paucity of research on self-regulated learning post-qualification, not least due to the difficulty around defining the concept of lifelong learning. In heutagogy, the concept is linked to capability, the ability to adapt to novel situations in a changing world by identifying gaps in competence and suitable resources to fill those gaps (Blaschke and Hase, 2016). A key example (which happened after the data collection for this research and participants had qualified) was the sudden move from facilitating groups of parents face-to-face to online video-conferencing triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. This required an urgent change of teaching approach from the ones NCTPs had developed during their training, involving devising and sharing online teaching resources with other practitioners, as well as ensuring they had the necessary digital skills. Their training would not have prepared them specifically for such a wholesale change in practice, but it could have provided tools for them to adapt to meet the unforeseen challenges of that change.

For many participants, formal learning had become an important part of their lives (Chapter 7, p.283). Data from the four different timepoints of the research show that many participants were even more motivated by achieving high grades

and were more likely to aim for more than a pass towards the end of the course, despite challenges they faced in integrating study into their complex lives. This was somewhat surprising, as it might have been expected that they would have become more intrinsically motivated as their levels of autonomy and competency as self-determined learners increased (Blaschke, 2018); perhaps the need for external validation was more important than predicted by the theory of heutagogy as it is currently formulated. Possible contributory factors to the participants' overall motivation include their increasing enjoyment of studying, their deepening understanding of what helped them to learn effectively, and their growing confidence in their learning, both on and offline.

Most participants were keen to continue learning, both individually and as part of a community of practice that included but also extended beyond their cohort and beyond NCT. As well as planning to participate in study days and learning events offered by NCT and other organisations, many expressed an interest in further formal studying. Some identified barriers, however, including cost and distance; ongoing challenges around being student mothers with a range of responsibilities; and sometimes a lack of enthusiasm from partners. It is possible that partners set a limit to the support they could or would offer in facilitating participants' studying, perhaps seeing it as an indulgence or an inconvenience, which could pose problems for participants who were coming to see themselves as continuous learners. Lack of time was not mentioned as a barrier to future learning, however, which is in contrast to Cordon's (2015) PhD study of qualified oncology nurses in Canada who were engaging in heutagogy to keep their skills and knowledge current. Most nurses were working full-time doing hospital shifts, however, so had a different work-life balance to participants in the current research who would be working part-time as NCTPs, at least at the beginning of their NCT careers, due to limits on how many courses they could facilitate until they became more experienced.

As students on a course that led to supporting parents, most participants were arguably already virtuously motivated, and were therefore ready to frame learning in relation to their future practice in the world. This has echoes of the Aristotelian notion of phronesis, or practical wisdom within an ethical context (see Spence's discussion of the difference between *doing teaching* and *being a teacher*, 2007). It could be argued that making more explicit links during their training to their ongoing learning as well as their future practice could be helpful.

Joining the NCT community of practice on qualification

Although most participants had or developed attributes related to successful independent self-regulated study, learning is widely accepted as a socially mediated process (Scott *et al*, 2014). As participants moved into practice, they were becoming situated as part of the wider NCT community of practice which could offer opportunities in co-creating new knowledge and understanding, as well as developing attitudes and values. In her study of mentoring for NCT practitioners, Evans (2017, p62) identified the concept of 'NCT-ness' which evolved from 'shared values, shared skills and the idea of organisational trust'. Participants in the current research seemed to be starting to develop this 'NCT-ness' as part of their shared learning journeys and their developing professional identities. The latter concept has been the subject of recent literature around midwives, nurses and teachers; developing a professional identity is increasingly framed as an ongoing dynamic process which is shaped by experience and interactions with others in their community of practice (see for example, Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, 2019). This notion can be linked with the 'learner-practitioner' and her development of phronesis as discussed earlier; her ongoing learning includes how to be professional according to shared standards and understandings of good practice.

NCT assists newly-qualified practitioners in the transition process in a range of ways, including the provision of different study days for continuous professional

development and offering group reflective support and mentoring by trained established practitioners (Evans, 2017). However, the current research has indicated that peer support became increasingly significant for participants as they were studying - above that provided by friends, family and partners - and was also invaluable after they qualified. This therefore underlines the importance of tutors' facilitation of structures for peer support towards the end of the course, to enable a successful transition into practice and beyond for all students.

Continuing to learn online

This research has highlighted how participants demonstrated differing levels of digital engagement, despite reported high levels of confidence, which indicates that digital skills and access should not be assumed. Questionnaire data indicated a discrepancy between the intentions to use online strategies for learning at the beginning of the course and the actual usage and future intentions reported by respondents towards the end of the course (Chapter 5, p.172). This was particularly noticeable for approaches such as reading blogs, listening to podcasts on related topics and following discussions on Twitter. Participants who do not engage in these or similar online strategies are likely to miss out on learning opportunities afforded by being part of an informal learning network, as other research suggests. For example, Robinson, Kilgore and Bozkurt (2020), who explored US educators using Twitter to collaborate and learn from each other, found even peripheral participation (lurking or reading instead of joining in with conversations) could be beneficial. It is possible participants in the present study had yet to construct a specific online learner identity, which is often new and different to the other layers in their personal identities, as Moss and Pittaway (2013) suggested in their narrative life-history research with mature women on an online teacher education course in Australia. It is possible, therefore, participants in the current research needed more encouragement and support to engage effectively with online communities of practice in the world outside NCT.

Research question summary

As increasingly confident and critical learners, participants had often developed their attitudes and approaches to learning so that they were ready to continue as self-determined lifelong learners after qualification. However, some were foregoing benefits of participating in online communities of practice, particularly informal networks such as Twitter. The research identified how the transition in learner identity from student to learner-practitioner could benefit from specific support, particularly from peers, but that this did not happen for all participants. This suggests more specific, stronger scaffolding might be beneficial.

Before moving to the final chapter, which offers conclusions and recommendations, I return to the notion of invisibility around mature women learners noted in the literature review (Johnson, Schwartz and Bower, 2000; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Murtagh, 2017, 2019; Kensinger and Minnick, 2018; Stone and O'Shea, 2019b), as this was a noticeable thread in this current study as well.

Who understands mature women returning to study?

When participants embarked on the course, various people or stakeholders were involved: partners, friends and families and sometimes work colleagues; tutors and those involved in developing and providing the course; and participants themselves. Analysis of the data has indicated participants felt these stakeholders had varying levels of awareness and understanding of the implications of the studying process. In the findings Chapters 5, 6 and 7 I explored various aspects of participants' experiences as learners over two years. I have identified that aspects less visible to different stakeholders were as follows:

- **Participants' studying commitments and lived experiences of learning**, including formal learning, independent study and formative and summative assessments as required by the course;

- **Participants' domestic and work roles and responsibilities,** including all their lifeloads apart from their studying;

- **Participants' integrating study into their complex lives** *(*explored under the themes of *Taking on an extra shift, Squeezing study into slivers of time and space, and Shifting sands of family life* in Chapter 6*).* This aspect included the challenges participants faced in juggling their lifeloads;

- **Impact of studying on participants' relationships** (discussed under the themes of *Changes in relationships with partners; Lack of social time in Chapter 6);*

- **Impact of studying on participants** (investigated under the themes *Struggling sometimes, Becoming more critical learners* and *'Doing something for themselves'* in Chapter 6*).*

In the domestic sphere, participants' families, partners and wider social groups might have been affected by the shift of time and focus to studying, and noticed some changes in participants' attitudes, skills and confidence, as well as changes in their relationships. They may have been unaware of the standards required to succeed on the course and may not have realised the extent of participants' studying commitments, however, partly because self-regulated independent learning was often taking place at home in snatched slivers of time and space, rather than on campus or in long stretches of desk-based study, the usual practices of typical school-leaver students. Some might not have grasped the extent and impact of the domestic workload participants were trying to manage alongside their studies (and any work outside the home), particularly because domestic labour can often become almost invisible when it is done efficiently.

Conversely, in the academic sphere, participants perceived that while course designers would have known what the course entailed to meet the standards required of good practitioners, they seemingly had a much lower appreciation of how the complexity of participants' lifeloads outside the course affected their studying, and their particular learning requirements. This links to Marandet and Wainwright's findings (2010) that UK student parents had a specific range of barriers to success in HE not well understood by HEIs. There are of course questions about whether this lack of understanding is merely due to lack of knowledge, or to what extent an unwillingness to explore and tackle structural sexism in the academy plays a role (see Amsler and Motta's exploration of the 'careless culture of the neoliberal university space', 2019, p.10).

Participants in the present research indicated that they felt their course tutors often developed a better idea of participants' lifeloads and learning needs as they got to know them during the course, as long as there was good communication between them. Tutors who did not maintain an open dialogue could give the impression they were less aware of challenges participants might be facing, especially if their lifeloads changed over the period of the course. While course tutors in regular contact with participants would probably have a relatively good understanding of their studying commitments and their actual lived experiences of learning as they progressed through the course, it is likely that course designers and providers who were not in regular contact, however, would only have a theoretical understanding before the course started, which might be shaped by student feedback at different points, and their understanding of participants' individual lifeloads would be likely to be very much lower than other stakeholders.

Because participants were studying at the intersection of the domestic and academic spheres, they often developed a deep shared understanding with their peers of the challenges (and joys) of combining all their roles and commitments

while they were students and eventually as newly qualified practitioners. They were therefore often able to support each other more effectively than either their friends, family and partners or their course tutors, whose levels of awareness tended to be limited to just one sphere. Sometimes participants might collude in keeping different aspects of their learning journeys blurred because they felt under pressure to minimise the conflict between their roles as 'good mothers' and 'good students'. As one NCT tutor explained, they were often 'trying to slip a degree in without anyone noticing' (Smith, 2020, cited by Darlaston, 2020). This bears out research by Lyonette *et al* (2015, p15), who argued participants in their mixed methods longitudinal study of UK student mothers maintained 'academic invisibility' by trying to keep their studies apart from their families and employers, and also downplayed their domestic load to tutors ('maternal invisibility'). Others were more open about the challenges of being student mothers, but still lacked support in either or both spheres, making support they received from peers even more important for them.

As aspiring students before starting the course, many participants had not understood the implications of being mature student mothers as opposed to school leaver students. Their arrangements for dividing domestic labour may have been so entrenched that they had not considered the effect of adding in a studying role. The lived reality of studying could therefore be at odds with their expectations, even if they had studied previously in HE as school leavers. The disjunct between expectations and reality may have had implications for student persistence and retention, although data was not gathered from participants who dropped out during the course to test this.

Recommendations are proposed in the next chapter which are underpinned by the aim of illuminating these areas of obscurity and moving closer to developing shared 'horizons of understanding' (Gadamer, 1975/2013) between the stakeholders involved in mature women students' HE journeys.

Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed how the study answered the research questions, and related the findings to the literature. It has highlighted how participants engaged in heutagogy as increasingly confident, motivated learners taking responsibility for their learning (both as individuals and as part of communities of learning and practice), and developing capability to adapt to new situations in their practice, with a commitment to ongoing learning. Some were more heutagogy-ready than others, however; lack of digital skills and access could act as particular barriers. As student mothers with extensive and unpredictable lifeloads, participants faced specific challenges to their engagement with heutagogy. Moving into practice entailed a transition from student mother to learner-practitioner, which offered a new set of challenges and opportunities; support continued to be important as they moved on to the next stages of their learning trajectories. The findings suggest that participants felt the challenges they faced were often not clear to their partners and families in their domestic spheres (and to employers and colleagues at work), or to tutors and course designers in their academic lives. Understanding and support from peers who shared similar outlooks and approaches was therefore valued highly by many.

Through synthesising the research findings, I have identified how engagement with heutagogy by mature women students, and particularly student mothers, is intrinsically shaped by the other aspects of their lifeloads. A heutagogical approach emphasises the student as a self-regulated, self-motivated learner taking responsibility for her own learning. However, it is important to acknowledge the impact of structural factors leading to inequality on the basis of intersections such as sex, age, digital capability and previous learning experiences, as well as the complexity of students' lives. This links to frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning which aim to make learning inclusive and transformative for all students, regardless of their situations and learning requirements, as part of an equity-oriented pedagogy (Hanesworth, Bracken and Elkington, 2019).

The next chapter draws the thesis together, identifying areas of learning from the research, as well as where it sits within the existing literature.

Chapter 9: Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

The research context and the aims and objectives of the thesis were presented in Chapter 1 (p.18). This chapter revisits these and demonstrates how the latter have been met, before identifying limitations and contributions to theory and practice. I then suggest recommendations for practice and further study, and finally offer my personal reflection on the process of undertaking research and writing this thesis.

Research context

The context for HE has changed since this research commenced in 2015 and continues to develop. A major unforeseen factor has been the Covid-19 pandemic, which has accelerated some changes that were already happening, such as moving more teaching and learning online (Farnell, Skledar Matijević and Šćukanec Schmidt, 2021), but it is unclear which of these changes will become permanent. In the UK, the Augar review of post-18 education has suggested changes to how HE is offered and funded, including greater flexibility through the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and a stronger skills and vocational focus (Hubble and Bolton, 2019), which could have far-reaching consequences for FE and HE. The current study of mature women returning to study on a vocational foundation course which included self-regulated online learning therefore has relevance in this evolving learning landscape.

Aims and objectives of the study

Mature women students are often marginalised because of their age and life stage and related roles and responsibilities. Their learning requirements have often been ignored or considered only in terms of adapting approaches devised for school leaver students, rather than being supported separately and specifically. This study

has focussed on the experiences of a particular group of students on the NCT Birth and Beyond Foundation Degree, which had birth and parenting as its focus. The participants were themselves mostly mothers, which had particular impacts on their approaches and attitudes to learning, how they incorporated learning into their lives and how they traversed landscapes of learning. The combination of course subject and the participants' own roles as mothers could be seen as leading to a uniquely embodied experience of student mothering. My aim in undertaking the study was a pragmatic one because I wanted to increase understanding of how mature women students engage in self-determined learning to develop practice, so such students might be better supported as learners in future. Several objectives were identified to move towards this aim; I now demonstrate how these have been met.

Objective 1:

- **To gain insights into current understandings around mature women and learning through critically reviewing literature across a range of disciplines.**

Critically reviewing literature in Chapter 2 offered insights relevant to the cohort under investigation. Because of the lack of research in this specific area, studies were considered in three overlapping groups according to their focus, whether this was on certain characteristics of participants themselves, their roles and responsibilities or aspects of the courses participants were studying on. Findings were identified about students with some similarities to the cohort in this present study, including how they can differ from 'traditional' students, in terms of their complex lives and their engagement with learning. For example, juggling multiple roles can lead to lack of time and often result in guilt about not fulfilling roles effectively; part-time students could find managing their roles particularly difficult. Mature women students (especially mothers with dependent children) can face challenges around confidence, finances, familial and social support, as well as structural issues, such as lack of childcare and inflexible course design and provision, although distance and blended learning provision can help mediate these issues. Online learning offers benefits for self-regulated learners, although varying

levels of digital access and skills can form barriers. Some studies have investigated differences between adult men and women students as learners, often in relation to 'approaches to learning'. This theory was shown to have disadvantages, however, so I explored other learning theories to find one better suited to exploring mature women learners in the digital age of the 21st century. The theory of heutagogy was identified as having utility in helping to understand how mature women learn, and five research questions were generated through engagement with the literature.

Objective 2:

- **To explore the attitudes and approaches to learning and the experiences of a cohort of NCT students over a two-year period using a qualitative-dominant sequential mixed methods approach and a conceptual framework that includes the theories of heutagogy and matricentric feminism.**

The second objective was to explore the experiences of mature women students on a vocational foundation degree, using a qualitatively focused sequential mixed methods approach. Chapter 3 presented the conceptual framework which incorporated the theories of heutagogy and matricentric feminism, while Chapter 4 provided an explanation and justification of the methods used in this research.

The research participants were part of the cohort of women starting the NCT foundation degree course in September 2017, with the aim of gaining a licence to practice as NCT practitioners qualified to facilitate antenatal courses and provide breastfeeding and postnatal support to new parents. They were mature students, mostly mothers with young children; some worked outside the home as well, in a paid or voluntary capacity. Although a very small proportion of the cohort were younger and childfree, none chose to take part in the research so no comparisons could be drawn between these two groups.

Forty-two participants responded to the first questionnaire as they embarked on the course, and six respondents agreed to take part in interviews. Twenty-three participants responded to the second questionnaire the next year, followed by another round of interviews for the same six participants. Descriptive statistical data from the questionnaires were combined with themes drawn out from the interview transcripts, which were analysed using an IPA approach (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

The study was grounded in a pragmatic worldview (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007; Morgan, 2007; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Hess-Biber, 2015), using a matricentric feminist phenomenology (Baird and Mitchell, 2014; O'Reilly, 2021), to make visible different perspectives of mature women students with children, with the aim of contributing to better designed courses offering better student support. The research used a multiphase sequential mixed methods approach (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Schumacher *et al*, 2020; see Chapter 4, p.102) to combine findings from a single cohort of students, using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews at four timepoints over two years. The research drew together data from the two sets of questionnaires, each followed up by in-depth exploration of relevant issues in the two stages of semi-structured interviews. The findings provide an understanding of the experiences of participants, offering insights into the convergences and divergences in their stories structured through a conceptual framework (see Chapter 3). The research proposal had included an intention to survey course tutors about how they supported participants as heutagogical learners, but it was decided to keep the focus on students as a better use of the limited time available. A life history grid approach was used, partly to help interviewees focus on their previous engagement with learning, which was successful to an extent, but the data collected was not ultimately relevant to the focus of this study. Other methods such as photo-elicitation (Burton, Hughes and Dempsey, 2017) might have been more useful in prompting reflection on participants' learning experiences.

The conceptual framework built on my own experiences, learning from the literature and a theoretical framework which included two main aspects: heutagogy and matricentric feminism. Heutagogy is a learning theory that supports autonomous learners taking control of what, when and how they learn (Hase and Kenyon, 2001), including elements of motivation, self-efficacy and self-regulated learning, metacognition, reflective practice, double-loop and nonlinear learning, and communities of learning and practice. Heutagogy is an emerging theory of learning which is somewhat lacking in empirical support and does not yet have a validated instrument to test it (Moore, 2020), which limited the quantitative element of this study. Like much of the research into heutagogy (Agonács and Matos, 2019), the current study had a strong qualitative focus. Although the NCT course did not specify a heutagogical approach, the findings have shown how research participants engaged in different aspects of heutagogy as mature women students, mostly mothers, and how their sex, gender, age and mothering roles fundamentally shaped this engagement.

The matricentric feminist phenomenology lens originated in a gender-critical standpoint feminism which has been refined through the period of the study. By starting with and staying close to participants' voices, the research developed a matricentric focus (O'Reilly, 2021), articulating the lived reality of students who were mature women and mothers. The research helps to draw out the gendered significance of participants' homes as 'sites of living and learning' (Gouthro, 2005, p5) and particularly mothering. Additionally, using an IPA approach (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) to analyse interview transcripts helped to centre participants' stories about their experiences of learning, with a particular emphasis on their approaches and attitudes to learning, their complex lifeloads and their learning journeys as women in a world and an academia which have historically privileged overwhelmingly white affluent men (Wagner, 2019).

Revealing my status as an insider researcher sharing some similarities with the interviewees (particularly being a mature woman student and an NCT practitioner myself) helped in developing a rapport and atmosphere of trust, although just as

Oakley (2015) found when interviewing women about motherhood, my interviewees seemed to enjoy talking to me about studying as part of their lives. Having had a learning journey similar to those of participants helped me to develop an empathetic understanding of their experiences, because our discourse as interviewer and interviewee was based in similar cultural and sociological contexts. This shared experience helped me quickly develop the 'insider perspective' which is an aim of phenomenological methods (McCormack and Joseph, 2018). It was, however, important to develop an awareness of my own biases and preconceptions (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008; Cooper and Rogers, 2015), and maintain a reflexively aware perspective to avoid forming lazy conclusions, as Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2013) have emphasised. Including descriptive statistics helped to counter bias.

Objective 3:

- **To explore and analyse the data derived from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews in relation to existing literature.**

The quantitative and qualitative data were analysed during each phase and then findings were grouped using the IPA-generated themes and presented in the findings Chapters 5, 6 and 7. These represented three horizons of participants' experiences that emerged from the IPA analysis: their attitudes and approaches to learning, learning as part of their complex lives, and how they navigated landscapes of learning. The quantitative findings provided context for the qualitative findings, offering a snapshot of participants' attitudes and approaches to learning at two different points during the course. The IPA analysis of the two sets of six semi-structured interviews generated super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes that provided insight into the participants' lived experiences of studying as mature women students, mostly mothers. Using the IPA approach to structure the findings chapters allowed for flexibility in reporting of these experiences. In some places theses chimed with heutagogy but in other places they did not, which indicates some of the limits of heutagogy as a holistic theory of learning. Using matricentric

feminism as part of the theoretical framework allowed for a more multifaceted study than using heutagogy alone.

In Chapter 8, I discussed how participants engaged in different aspects of heutagogy, and how this engagement was inextricably linked with their complex lifeloads, in ways that were seemingly different from other groups of students, particularly school leavers and men.

The research supported or extended aspects of some existing studies, and challenged findings from others, although there is a paucity of contemporary research into mature students who are women and particularly mothers. In those studies that have been conducted, the focus has often been on student mothers studying for academic undergraduate degrees (such as Moreau and Kerner, 2015) or student mothers on distance learning courses, particularly in geographically dispersed populations in Australasia (see, for example, Stone and O'Shea, 2019a, 2019b). Studies considering student mothers on UK vocational foundation degrees (see, for example, Smith, 2017, 2019) have usually investigated those with lower levels of education than reported by many participants in the current research. Studies into adults on blended learning courses are also scarce, particularly adults studying part-time, as was the case for many participants in the present study. Research into adults on courses with only women students are exceedingly rare, as are studies exploring mature women students through the lens of heutagogy.

One relevant study was a Canadian PhD thesis (Cordon, 2015), which investigated oncology nurses' engagement with heutagogy after qualification; my thesis provides a complementary exploration of vocational students before and just as they moved into practice. A second was an Australian study (Ashton and Newman, 2006; Ashton and Elliott, 2007a, 2007b) which explored experiences of a student cohort of an early childhood teacher education programme with an explicit flexible, blended heutagogical design. Finally, Canning (2010) and Canning and Callan (2010) studied full-time mature students on a UK early years foundation degree with a high work-based learning content and again an explicit heutagogical approach. Unlike these

latter two studies, the focus of the present research was participants engaging with heutagogy spontaneously as part of their own independent study. This study was therefore unique in terms of the characteristics of the participants and the course they were on.

Objective 4:

- **To discuss the findings and contribute to a developing understanding of mature women students so they can be better supported in their learning.**

In an under-researched area, this study has provided knowledge about mature women studying on a single-sex vocational course, with a variety of educational backgrounds, who were combining studying with their mothering and other roles. This has been achieved by combining descriptive data from questionnaires with insights gained from analysis of experiences shared by Arwen, Becky, Cora, Darby, Esme and Freya. The findings indicated the cohort were reflective, motivated students who took responsibility for their self-regulated learning and supported each other, despite challenges such as lack of dedicated time and space and the complex, unpredictable nature of their lives. While other studies have identified a similar range of challenges mature women students face when integrating study into their lives, this study developed this understanding further by highlighting the unpredictability of student mothers' lives, which could make studying particularly problematic compared to other, less encumbered students. The concept of the student mother which is occasionally mentioned in the literature (for example in Lyonette *et al's* research in UK HE, 2015) was strengthened by this research, providing evidence of a specific learner-identity that differs from other students in HE and is shaped by their complex lifeloads and societal structures and expectations. Student mothers with young babies have been particularly under-researched; this study has shown they face particular challenges and have corresponding support needs. I also proposed the concept of the learner-practitioner, the newly qualified practitioner who is still learning her craft and

coming to terms with the realisation she will always be learning and adapting in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world (Kraaijenbrink, 2018).

Further contributions of the study

In addition to meeting the objectives, the study has also made other contributions. It has provided a consideration of mature women student mothers as learners using the theory of heutagogy as part of the theoretical framework combined with matricentric feminism. This combination provided a structured approach to different aspects of learning, helping to identify attitudes and approaches to learning and areas for improvement in practice (these are presented below). Although the NCT foundation degree course was not designed with an explicitly heutagogical approach, this research has shown participants were nevertheless engaging in aspects of heutagogical self-determined learning, and heutagogy as a theory seemed to be a good fit in encapsulating how participants approached learning, as the discussion in Chapter 8 highlighted; however, the utilisation of matricentric feminism supported a more comprehensive and rounded investigation than one using just heutagogy. The study underlined the value of appropriate scaffolding from tutors and support from peers in conjunction with self-regulated learning, and also the importance of considering students' lifeloads in supporting them to be successful heutagogical learners.

Another contribution concerns the research design, as the study breaks new or lightly trodden ground by using IPA as part of a two-stage sequential mixed methods study in HE. The quantitative and qualitative strands combined an investigation of the authentic lived experiences of the six interviewees with a wider perspective across the cohort which provided snapshots of participants' attitudes and approaches to learning at the beginning of the course and at the end of the second year. Jonathan Smith, one of the originators of IPA, has recently called for more research using mixed methods over different timepoints (Coxon, 2021); this study offers such a contribution. Utilisation of a matricentric feminist

phenomenology allowed a specific focus on the interactions between studying and mothering, which other studies have not explored. By foregrounding the women's stories through the idiographic focus of IPA, including matricentric feminism (Bueskins and Brock, 2020; O'Reilly, 2021) in the theoretical framework supported the development of insights into participants as women and mothers in a patriarchal world where expectations of women's engagement with the world (in particular, regarding domestic and emotional labour) are often different to expectations of men. Surprisingly few studies of mature women students have used a specific feminist lens.

Limitations of the study

A small, single study of one organisation has provided insights that may not be applicable to others, particularly because of the specific aspects that they were all women on the course, and they were studying to gain a qualification to work within the training organisation. However, some main themes, such as the unpredictability of student mothers' lives, as well as the interconnectedness of their complex lives and their engagement with heutagogy could have wider relevance and theoretical generalisability (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) or relatability (Dzakiria, 2012). Information provided about the context and participants may support readers in assessing the relevance of the findings to their own settings (Connelly, 2016).

I chose to focus on the qualitative component of the study more than the quantitative component, limiting the analysis of the survey data to descriptive statistics to contextualise the rich, thick data provided by the interviewees. Quantitative research could be useful in future to develop and test the findings uncovered by this research for greater generalisability, and to investigate changes in attitudes and approaches to learning over time in a statistically rigorous way. The development of a specific validated heutagogy research instrument would be useful in future (Moore, 2020).

Participants' demographics were another limitation. There was a very small proportion of students in the cohort who were younger than 25 and childfree, but none responded to the questionnaires, so their experiences do not form part of this research. Participants were mature, mostly mothers and mainly seemed to be white and middle class (I did not ask them explicitly), which broadly reflects NCT as an organisation (although strategies have been put in place to address diversity in recent years, NCT, 2021). While a homogenous sample is recommended as appropriate for IPA approaches, I acknowledge the study does not offer insights into intersections of race, socioeconomic status and so on, and does not address single mothers as there were none identified in the study. This research explored how mature women student mothers with life partners engaged in heutagogy on an all-women course; experiences on courses with a more diverse range of students may be very different. It is important to note, however, that participants in this research still needed support and regard for their situations as student mothers, even though many might have been considered relatively privileged in terms of socioeconomic status, previous educational experience and partner relationships.

Although the sample was relatively small, the research design (two repeated stages of a questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews) generated a large amount of quantitative and qualitative data which was challenging to analyse and present in an orderly fashion, particularly as mixed methods involving IPA is still a relatively new approach so there were few other studies to learn from. One exception is Taylor's (2015) exploration of music in the lives of older amateur keyboard players; she highlights the personal commitment required in undertaking such studies. Discussions with others in the Scottish IPA Interest Group, attendance at relevant training events and conferences, and guidance from my supervisors were all invaluable in helping me to find a way through.

One factor affecting the methodology was my own complex relationship with NCT, which has evolved over nearly three decades, starting with attendance on an antenatal course when expecting my eldest son; I then took on various volunteer roles, before training as an antenatal teacher, an assessor and finally a tutor. My

tutor role had particular implications for carrying out the research. As a researcher with a partial insider-status (Hellawell, 2006), I needed to maintain awareness and reflexivity to avoid possible bias and unwarranted assumptions about what participants shared with me, as well as to preserve an appropriate ethical stance. Reflecting and writing in my journal during the research process helped me identify my thoughts and feelings (see example extracts in Appendix E, p.472); discussing issues with my supervisory team as well as appropriate people in my wider community of practice was also useful. My tutor role did mean I had a good understanding of the course syllabus and delivery, however, and I was able to draw on my experience as a reflective practice tutor to listen and centre the interviewees' stories, while keeping my own experiences as a student mother and a tutor to one side, as appropriate. I have aimed for transparency by identifying my own positionality, outlining the processes used, and presenting extracts from interview transcripts to support my interpretations.

Despite these limitations, by illuminating the experiences of participants as learners engaging in heutagogy, I have moved towards my aim of contributing knowledge and understanding that can feed into a more effective practice to facilitate mature women students' learning. The invisibilities and obscurities surrounding such students' experiences were a powerful refrain in the literature review; it is important to note claims that the patriarchy is preserved by maintaining invisibilities around women's lives (Spender, 1982). While other researchers have tried to highlight various previously unacknowledged areas, HE remains less than fully supportive of mature women students, especially those with dependent children. There is no doubt truth in Breeze's (2020, p.839) assertion that feminist researchers in HE can face the 'frustrating necessity of repeating themselves', because they are often disregarded. Nevertheless, in a spirit of cautious optimism, I now offer some specific suggestions for practice.

Recommendations

In the last chapter, I highlighted how specific invisibilities and lack of awareness in different stakeholders could affect how mature women students (particularly student mothers) engage in learning. I now explore recommendations relating to the sets of stakeholders I identified.

Course designers and providers

This research has demonstrated the importance of ensuring designers and providers of HE courses taken by mature women students understand the interactions between mature women's complex lifeloads and their approaches to study, as these are inextricably intertwined, but general awareness of the implications may be low. Universities could collect data on numbers of mature student mothers and the range of their situations to develop understanding and meet their needs better, using the knowledge base this research feeds into to frame their questions.

Asking questions and listening to students (about the course content, their experiences of learning on the course, and how it fits into their lives) also has a part to play in course design. The increasingly popular approach of engaging with 'student voice' - while it has its challenges not least in terms of time and commitment - can lead to wider participation and inclusion of students with previously unheard voices and invisible experiences (Brooman, Darwen and Pimor, 2015; Lyonette *et al*, 2015; Seale, 2016; Elliott, 2019; Cook-Sather, 2020).

In the Conceptual Framework chapter (p.76), I identified possible barriers to realising a fully heutagogical approach to HE, especially for vocational courses. One option to mitigate these involves the combination of HE student voice and staff voice to develop a co-created curriculum (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011) with agreed acceptable standards for assessment. Assessment influences students' learning in subtle, complex and powerful ways (Boud and Falchikov, 2007; MacLellan; 2001; Taras, 2007; Bloxham and Boyd, 2008) so as part of a collaborative process to designing curricula, authentic assessments could be designed that link

more closely to students' future practice (Boud and Falchikov, 2007; Boud and Soler, 2016), and explicitly emphasise the need to continue learning and adapting even (and perhaps especially) after qualification.

Students with complex and extensive lifeloads could benefit from flexible courses allowing them to study more when they have time and space, and study less at times when their lives become unexpectedly complicated. While 'confronting the monoculture of linear time in the university' (Costa-Renders, 2019, p. 164) would no doubt be challenging for course designers, a wider practice of giving students access to modules in advance so they can work ahead if they have time before the timetabled start, or running modules with a rolling programme of small stand-alone sections that are repeated might be possible starting points in incorporating an approach addressing students' 'multi-temporalities' (Costa-Renders, 2019, p.174). Students might appreciate a stronger focus on ubiquitous learning (Ceylan, 2020) with learning tasks and assignments designed to be undertaken in short bursts on smartphones or tablets, rather than requiring students to sit for long periods in front of desktop computers, which may not be available anyway (Ashton and Elliott, 2007a). For example, a recent study in Malawi where there are low levels of laptop and desktop ownership has supported the use of mobile devices for heutagogical learning (Chimpololo, 2020). Such a focus would require maintaining an awareness of the evolving functionality of mobile devices (Kukulska-Hulme *et al*, 2011) and of related developmental support needs of both students and tutors.

A flexible approach to course delivery and assessment can sometimes be seen as 'unfair' (O'Neill, 2017) or only needed in special situations, such as student illness or bereavement (Murtagh, 2019). However, this research has indicated the complex and often unpredictable nature of mature women students' lifeloads and the effect on their learning, and has challenged concepts of the traditionally unencumbered school leaver student. In particular, four of the six interviewees in this research had new babies during their studies and although their arrivals were planned for (as much as childbirth can be, given a typical pregnancy lasts anything between 37 and 42 weeks), effects on their lives and their studying were less predictable. HEIs could

therefore consider extending the conditions for mitigating circumstances (for non-attendance or not meeting assessment deadlines) to include the period around childbirth beyond the short maternity-related absence some already offer (see, for example, University of Worcester, 2017).

As feminist research, this study sits within the discourse of social justice in HE (McArthur, 2010, 2016) which favours the creation of equitable teaching and learning environments that dismantle barriers faced by students who do not fit the 'traditional' student model. One approach that works towards such aims is Universal Design for Learning, which focuses on planning to meet the needs of all students by considering the idea of variability, particularly with regard to students with disabilities (Tobin and Behling, 2018; Bracken and Novak, 2019). Including this concept of variability from the start and designing courses that accommodate all students by offering multiple routes to engagement can help to avoid the deficit model of students who do not fit a notional norm, therefore reducing othering and associated stigma and discrimination (Wilson, 2017). Notably, a richer, more varied and adaptive curriculum potentially benefits all students (Chen, 2014). Similarly, an approach to curriculum design and delivery which assumes *all* students have complex lifeloads and caring responsibilities, echoing the universal caregiver model (Fraser, 2000, cited in Murtagh, 2017), and which therefore offers flexibility and choice, incorporating the awareness and compassion Brooks (2012) noted in Danish HEIs, would no doubt be beneficial to all students, not just mature women student mothers. After all, there are indications one of the results of widening participation in HE is that increasing numbers of students have complex lifeloads to manage compared to 'traditional' students, which requires consideration when designing and delivering courses (Goldrick-Rab and Stommel, 2018). It is to be hoped HEIs are taking the opportunity to learn from the changes put in place to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic and are moving to a more flexible blended approach to course design and delivery where appropriate and possible.

While some UK universities have social societies for mature student parents, this could be encouraged more widely to enable peer support across courses. The

findings of this study indicate potential for collaborative cross-institutional working (see, for example, Nerantzi and Gossman, 2018) could also be investigated. For example, HEIs offering courses popular with mature women students such as Nursing, Midwifery and Teaching could work together to develop and trial new ways of offering more flexible courses, and share learning around facilitating peer and tutor support.

Finally, it is important for course designers and providers to develop and maintain an awareness of what students such as the participants in this study may have to offer as often highly motivated, reflective learners with a range of previous life experiences to draw on.

Tutors

Like course designers and providers, course tutors may have a low awareness of the impact of their students' complex lives on their learning unless they ask them explicitly; students may not spontaneously offer information until a crisis occurs (Higgins, 1985; Murtagh, 2019). Tutors could therefore prioritise keeping a dialogue open about how students feel they are juggling their roles and responsibilities and recognise that lives can change in unexpected ways. For example, several of the interviewees went through the upheaval of having another pregnancy and birth while studying but had different experiences with tutors. While Cora felt a tutor did not acknowledge her having a new baby as she would have wished, Arwen valued being able to attend a study day virtually because she was breastfeeding her new-born baby. Tutors could make it clear that targeted support is available to all students throughout the course (and even that they are all expected to need it at some point). They could also consider (if time allows, considering how overworked tutors often are) making proactive contact with students at key points during the course, such as when the first assignment is due (Gibbs, Regan and Simpson, 2006) or when they are moving into practice, as this was often a time of apprehension for participants in the present study.

Peer support was identified as extremely important to participants in this study. Tutors could therefore be encouraged to take a more proactive role in embedding it into the student learning experience (Hockings *et al*, 2018) to enable all students to access suitable support from like-minded peers, both during the course and as they transition into practice. It can be challenging but worthwhile to stimulate peer-to-peer interaction in online environments (Boelens, De Wever and Voet, 2017; Smith and Hill, 2019). One example could be ensuring WhatsApp groups (or similar) are set up if they are not formed spontaneously by students. Opportunities for support across the cohort and also between cohorts could be maximised, and students could be encouraged to share ideas and strategies around managing their lifeloads to enable them to study as effectively as possible, as well as encouraged to share learning approaches and resources.

In courses specifically designed to incorporate heutagogical approaches, students are likely to benefit from scaffolding around the different aspects of heutagogy, especially if they are less experienced at directing their own learning; learning how to learn is itself a foundational aspect of heutagogy (Blaschke and Hase, 2016). Explicit exploration of metacognition, reflective practice and the idea of learning as wandering would be particularly useful, as these are likely to be new areas for many students.

Although heutagogy holds students as self-determined learners, it is still teacher-dependent (Glassner and Back, 2020), requiring a flexible 'guide on the side' (McWilliam, 2009) to support their learning. Therefore, as Ashton and Elliott (2007b) pointed out, tutors may need to reflect on and be supported to develop their own practice to facilitate students' self-determined learning, as they may require a shift in attitudes and approaches to their tutoring role, because teaching has traditionally been teacher- rather than student-focused. Additionally, a balance is required in combining pastoral and academic support that understands students' specific needs without being too intrusive, and is also achievable within tutors' time and personal boundaries. Many of these points would no doubt apply for mature learners on courses not designed with an explicit heutagogical approach, as they

may nevertheless be engaging in self-determined learning, like participants in this study.

If implementation of a fully heutagogical approach is deemed inappropriate or impossible, perhaps because of the challenges identified previously in the literature review (see p.61) and above in this section, this study has reinforced Moore's (2020) recommendation that there is still value in including heutagogical approaches into existing curricula, in order to support students to become more reflective, critical and autonomous lifelong learners.

The current study has highlighted how participants' digital skills and access varied widely, even though confidence levels were often high. Relevant data could be collected from each cohort so online learning can be targeted effectively, and students with skills and access gaps signposted and supported appropriately (Aquino and BuShell, 2020). While age is likely to be an important factor in mature women's digital capability, even younger students do not necessarily have high levels of digital skills and access (Gilliam, 2021) and may therefore experience some level of digital exclusion. Additionally, assumptions should not be made about tutors' digital capability (Ashton and Elliott, 2007a, 2007b); they could be encouraged to assess and update their own digital skills to be able to support students effectively, as well as to provide even more engaging and accessible learning opportunities online.

Participants' partners, families and friends

This current study has highlighted that students' partners, families and friends may struggle to understand their studying commitments. Students could be encouraged to develop strategies for discussing combining their studying commitments with roles and responsibilities in their domestic spheres. For example, tutors could help them explore whether they see themselves as 'connectors', 'separators' or 'mixers' (Chapter 2, p.36); discussions around different expectations of men and women studying could be empowering for some. Universities might offer resources to share

with families and friends to explain and help legitimise students' studying commitments.

Aspiring students

Participants in this study indicated some aspects of the course were surprising even (or perhaps especially) for those who had studied for a first degree, in part because of their changed and increased lifeloads. Sharing information with students applying to courses like the NCT one or with an explicit heutagogical approach could be beneficial. For example, current students could share their stories of studying on university website application pages to demonstrate benefits, challenges and coping strategies. This could help aspiring students to think through how they might take on an additional studying role, and might even encourage those who are being unnecessarily pessimistic. For courses taking an explicit heutagogical approach, heutagogy-readiness tools could be developed for aspiring students to help identify support needs before and during the course, adapting tools such as those for self-directed learning readiness. Prospective students could be informed how technology will be used as part of their learning so they can assess their digital skills and take up opportunities to improve these before the course start; specific support could be signposted.

Recommendation summary

In brief, the recommendations work towards the following goals:

- Appropriate individualised support for students to develop self-determined life-long learning skills and attitudes
- Increased flexibility of courses underpinned by the assumption that *all* students have potentially complex lifeloads that can change over time in unexpected ways
- Increased collaboration with mature women students in designing co-created curricula

- Improved support for aspiring and current mature women students and their families around coping with the challenges of studying, but also increased awareness of the benefits of becoming more critical, more reflective life-long learners.

Areas for further research

This research has identified some areas that would benefit from further investigation. Undertaking further mixed methods research incorporating IPA in HE or with a stronger quantitative focus, perhaps using a specific heutagogy instrument (see p.77) once one is developed and validated (Moore, 2020), could help develop research theory and practice. Carrying out similar studies and also undertaking action research with mature women students on courses with an explicit heutagogical design or elements of one could build a broader body of knowledge on mature women students, especially student mothers. In particular, understanding more about how mature women students negotiate learning online, both as part of formal learning activities and as self-regulated study, could contribute to courses being designed and delivered to meet their needs better. A former NCT colleague has started a doctorate in this area; we have already made plans for future collaboration on writing papers and developing practice.

Extending the parameters of this study by exploring experiences of qualified NCT practitioners as lifelong learners could afford useful understanding into their engagement with heutagogy and explore whether they were sufficiently prepared to take responsibility for recognising gaps in their skills and knowledge, and to what extent they could identify suitable strategies for rectifying these (Blaschke, 2021). Investigating how tutors support learners on courses with specifically heutagogical elements would also provide an interesting perspective on tutor experiences, yielding insights to help offer better support and learning opportunities to students on this and similar courses.

This study has looked at a relatively homogenous group of mature students who were mostly middle class, white and in family households with two parents. Further

study to explore mature women students' engagement with heutagogy with regard to intersections of ethnicity, socio-economic group, lone parenthood, previous education experiences and being older (aged 40+) could be illuminating.

Final thoughts

As I approach the end of six years of exploring the journeys of mature women students, I find myself reflecting on my own journey, how it has affected me and what I shall take from it into the future (Bolton, 2010). As Jenny Mercer (2007) points out, personal development is an integral part of negotiating learning, and leads to a change in one's sense of self. As was the case for some research participants, imposter syndrome has been a frequent visitor, so in some ways I am slightly surprised to have reached this point, but I can see how my self-confidence has grown, nevertheless. I have had to foster my resilience as a sometimes-solitary learner (a useful attribute for future endeavours, according to Karzunina *et al*, 2018); to cultivate a more focussed approach to studying than I have ever had before; and above all, to construct my doctoral writing self (Thomson and Kamler, 2016; French, 2020) as part of the socialisation entailed by the doctoral process (Gardner, 2010). Learning how to use academic language has been at times an emotionally draining, laborious process, even though I was previously a tutor and therefore used to give feedback to foundation degree students on their written work. I had not appreciated that PhD writing has a different purpose: less about demonstrating awareness of extant knowledge, and more about inviting the reader into new realms of understanding. I have often struggled with combining academic language and my own voice while writing this thesis, wishing I could only find the 'right' way to be academic and also be myself; to sound knowledgeable with interesting new ideas, and yet also be authentic. Practice will no doubt help me in future endeavours; I need to perhaps 'savour writerly pleasure' in the craft of academic writing (Carter, 2020, p.63). But I have also been exploring the idea of performing the role of a scholar (Thomson and Kamler, 2016), which allows for a separation of personal and professional aspects and therefore feels less exposing. This is something I will continue to ponder on.

This was a mixed methods study which was the pragmatic choice and provided depth to the research. I have come to realise my heart lies in qualitative research, which became the main focus of the study. It was a privilege to listen to the stories of the interviewees, to hear them making sense of their situations and to consider my own perspectives on their sense-making. It is strange to consider how much time I have spent thinking about them, when they have probably forgotten all about the couple of hours they each generously shared with me. I hope this thesis conveys the high levels of admiration and respect I have for them.

My lifeload, like that of many participants in the present study, and also other women PhD students (Brown and Watson, 2010; Carter, Blumenstein and Cook, 2013), has affected the way I have engaged in this research. I have faced challenges around prioritising my studies over my family's calls on me and the emotional labour required of me as a mother, and my life too has changed considerably since I embarked on this journey. I have had to balance my studying commitments with a long-distance house move, job changes, deaths and also the beginning of new lives, providing long-distance support to my sons and my newly widowed mother who were all heart-wrenchingly distant and unhuggable, against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic. And yet I have persevered. I have developed new skills, wandered down fascinating and sometimes futile rabbit holes, examined familiar things from strange perspectives and, like Eliot (1942, V), sometimes found I had returned to where I started, but only then able to really 'know the place for the first time'. I have learnt much from inspiring people online and face-to-face, and developed new understandings of the processes, pitfalls and pleasures of undertaking research. I have even improved my ability to 'murder my darlings' (Quiller-Couch, 1914, 6), regretfully cutting out my favourite participants' illuminating quotes (and my scintillating analysis) when they did not further my research story.

My desk remains as untidy as ever, and I still do not know what I want to be when I grow up, but I have reached the end of this exploration of different shared horizons feeling better equipped for whatever the next episode of my life may hold.

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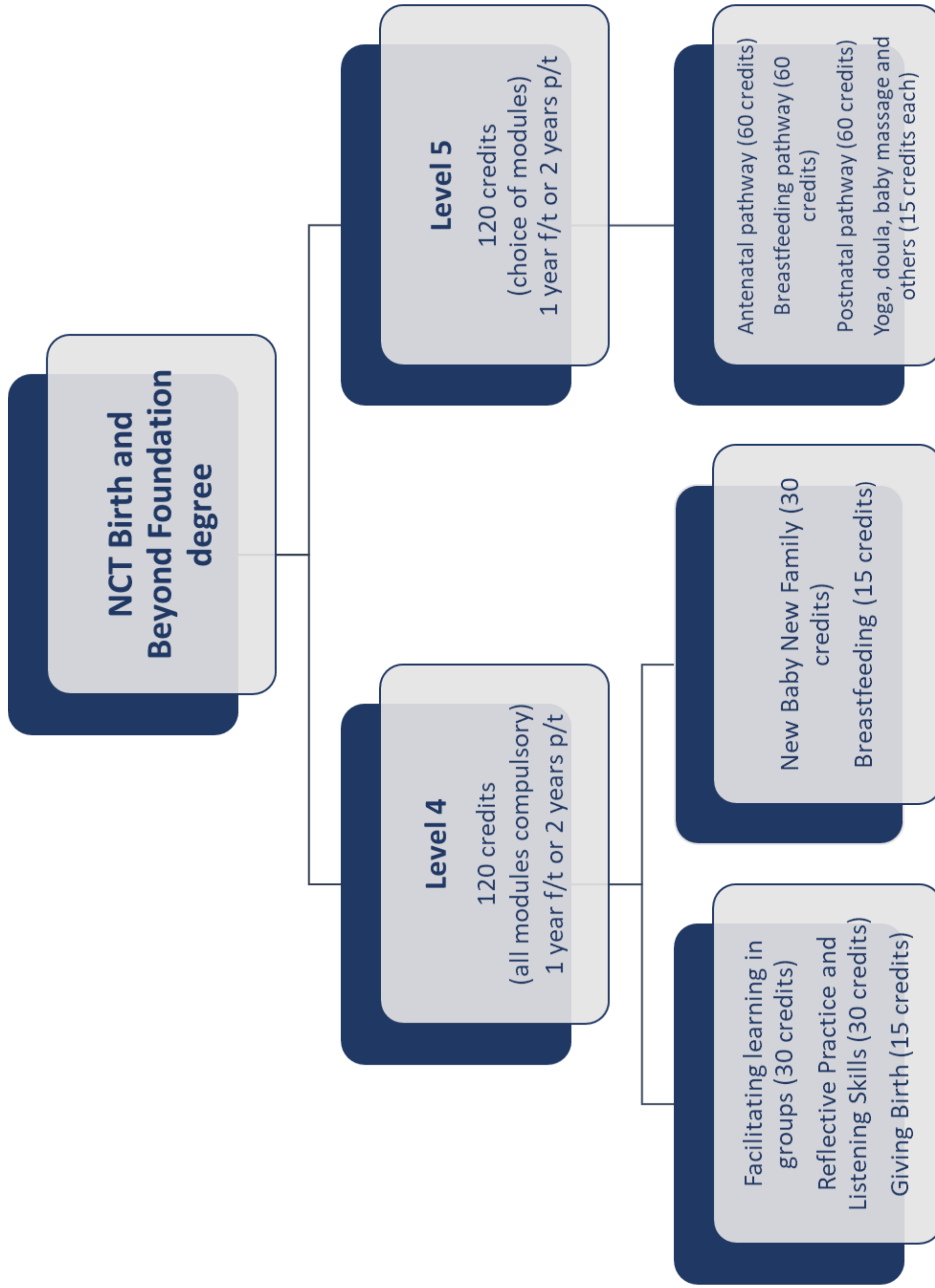
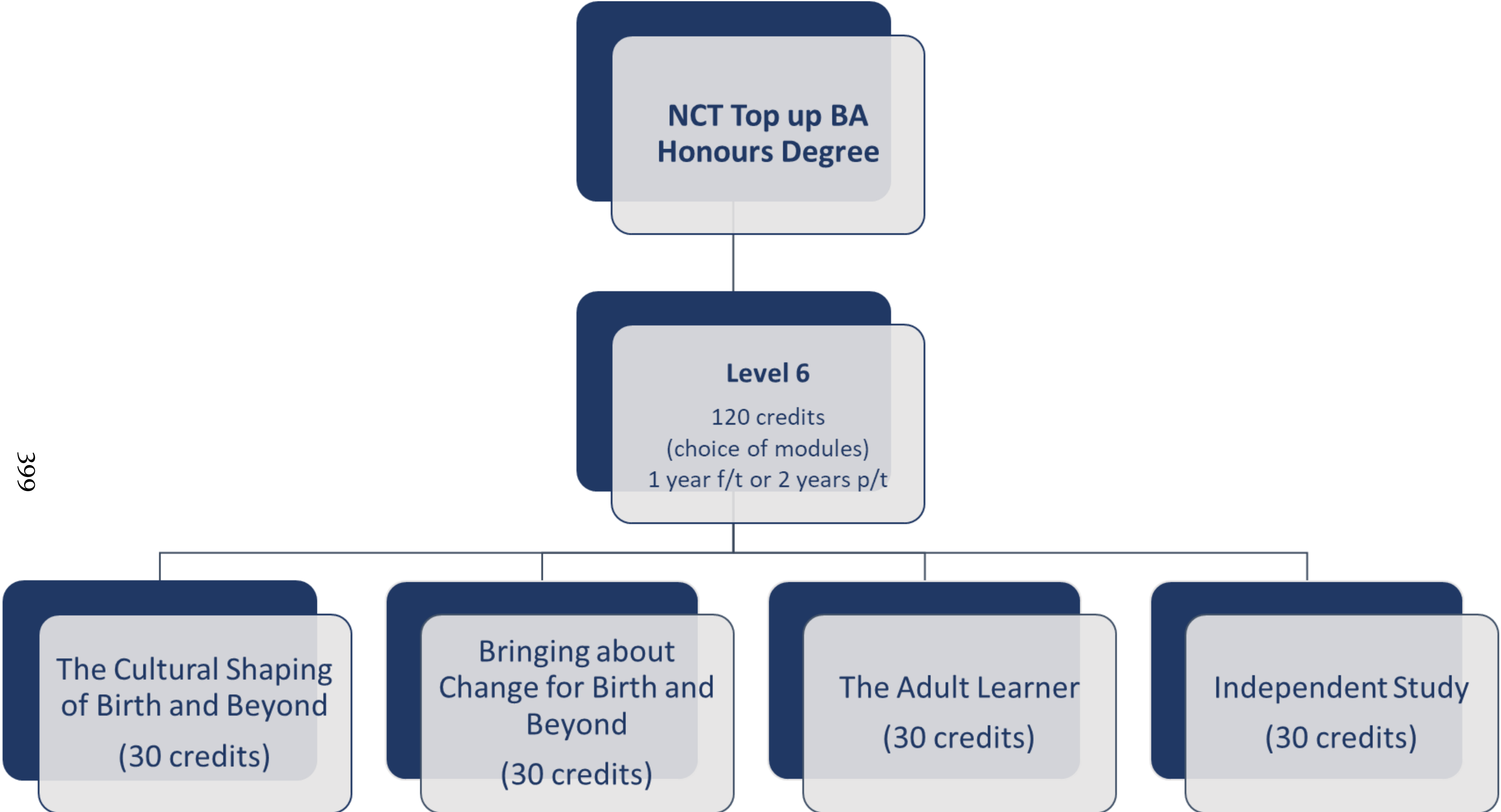
Appendices

Appendix A: NCT Course Modules

This appendix illustrates the structure of the modules at Levels 4 and 5 of the NCT Birth and Beyond Foundation Degree, and the modules at Level 6 of the Top Up Honours Degree.



NCT Birth and Beyond Foundation degree
Level 4
120 credits
(all modules compulsory)
1 year f/t or 2 years p/t
Level 5
120 credits
(choice of modules)
1 year f/t or 2 years p/t
Facilitating learning in groups (30 credits)
Reflective Practice and Listening Skills (30 credits)
Giving Birth (15 credits)
New Baby New Family (30 credits)
Breastfeeding (15 credits)
Antenatal pathway (60 credits)
Breastfeeding pathway (60 credits)
Postnatal pathway (60 credits)
Yoga, doula, baby massage and others (15 credits each)


NCT Top up BA Honours Degree
Level 6
120 credits
(choice of modules)
1 year f/t or 2 years p/t
The Cultural Shaping of Birth and Beyond
(30 credits)
Bringing about Change for Birth and Beyond
(30 credits)
The Adult Learner
(30 credits)
Independent Study
(30 credits)

Appendix B: Application for ethical approval

This appendix includes:

- the application form submitted to University of Worcester Research Integrity and Governance Committee
- the data management plan
- the approval letter.

Application for Ethical Approval (PGR Student)

To be completed by staff and associate researchers proposing to undertake ANY research involving humans [that is research with living human beings; human beings who have died (cadavers, human remains and body parts); embryos and fetuses, human tissue, DNA and bodily fluids; data and records relating to humans; human burial sites] or animals.

Section A: Researcher and Project Details

PGR Student:	Sarah Carr
Director of Studies:	Sean Bracken
Email:	cars1_15@uni.worc.ac.uk
Institute/Department:	Education
Project Title:	Experiences of mature and 'new traditional' women students on a vocational foundation degree: how do they engage in self-determined learning?
Is project externally funded or been submitted to an external funder?	No
Name of Funder:	
UW bid reference number:	

Section B: Checklist

		Yes	No
1.	Does your proposed research involve the collection of data from living humans?	☒	☐
2.	Does your proposed research require access to secondary data or documentary material of a sensitive or confidential nature from other organisations?	☐	☒
3.	Does your proposed research involve the use of data or documentary material which (a) is not anonymised **and** (b) is of a sensitive or confidential nature **and** (c) relates to the living or recently deceased?	☐	☒
4.	Does your proposed research involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent?	☐	☒
5.	Will your proposed research require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited?	☐	☒
6.	Will financial inducements be offered to participants in your proposed research beyond reasonable expenses and/or compensation for time?	☐	☒
7.	Will your proposed research involve collection of data relating to sensitive topics?	☐	☒
8.	Will your proposed research involve collection of security-sensitive materials?	☐	☒
9.	Is pain or discomfort likely to result from your proposed research?	☐	☒
10.	Could your proposed research induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?	☐	☒
11.	Will it be necessary for participants to take part in your proposed research without their knowledge and consent at the time?	☐	☒
12.	Does your proposed research involve deception?	☐	☒
13.	Will your proposed research require the gathering of information about unlawful activity?	☐	☒
14.	Will invasive procedures be part of your proposed research?	☐	☒
15.	Will your proposed research involve prolonged, high intensity or repetitive testing?	☐	☒
16.	Does your proposed research involve the testing or observation of animals?	☐	☒
17.	Does your proposed research involve the significant destruction of invertebrates?	☐	☒
18.	Does your proposed research involve collection of DNA, cells, tissues or other samples from humans or animals?	☐	☒
19.	Does your proposed research involve human remains?	☐	☒
20.	Does your proposed research involve human burial sites?	☐	☒
21.	Will the proposed data collection in part or in whole be undertaken outside the UK?	☐	☒
22.	Does your proposed research involve NHS staff or premises?	☐	☒
23.	Does your proposed research involve NHS patients?	☐	☒

If the answers to any of these questions change during the course of your research, you should discuss this with your supervisor immediately

Signatures

By signing below I declare that I have answered the questions above honestly and to the best of my knowledge:

PGR Student:	**Sarah Carr**	**Date:**	**3rd July 2017**

By signing below I declare that I am satisfied with the student's answers to these questions:

Director of Studies:	**Sean Bracken**	**Date:**	**3rd July 2017**

(**Please note** that the Lead Researcher is, where applicable, signing on behalf of all researchers involved with the research)

If you have answered NO to all questions you should now submit this form to ethics@worc.ac.uk .

If you have answered YES to one or more questions you must now complete **Section C** (below) and submit the completed form to ethics@worc.ac.uk identifying the Research Ethics Committee you wish to review your application in the subject line.

Section C: Full Application

Please tick one of the boxes below. Please consult the relevant guidance before doing so.

I wish to submit for Full Review	☐
I wish to submit for Proportionate Review	☒

Details of the research Outline the context and rationale for the research, the aims and objectives of the research and the methods of data collection
This research will form a case study approach to explore the lived experiences of women students training to become birth educators on a vocational course which has elements of distance learning. Their learning journeys will be explored using feminist theory and self-determined learning (also known as heutagogy) as a joint conceptual framework. Heutagogy combines various elements including meta-cognition, self-efficacy (Zimmerman 2000), self-determination (Ryan and Deci 2000), motivation, collaboration with communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015), use of the internet and reflective practice. Quantitative and qualitative data from students will be triangulated with data from course tutors to develop a deeper understanding of adult learning. This research aims to provide a greater understanding of women students' experiences of studying on a vocational degree and therefore a better ability to support women returners to study. Eventually, this will result in better training that produces more competent and capable antenatal educators to support and empower parents to give their children the best possible start in life. The objectives are: - To investigate students' experiences as they progress through their course and consider how they engage in heutagogical aspects of learning. - To examine how course tutors perceive students' development as self-determined learners and what they do to support this. - To investigate how women students take responsibility for their own learning to become life-long learners and the implications for their practice post-qualification. An exploratory sequential mixed methods approach (Cresswell 2010) will be used. Quantative data from closed questions on the student and tutor questionnaires will be analysed to find the most important aspects for further exploration in the next stage (semi-structured interviews). Qualitative data from the open questions on the questionnaires and the subsequent interviews will be analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Data will be collected through online questionnaires (using Bristol Online Surveys) and one to one semi-structured interviews (see attached questionnaires for students and tutors, and a question schedule for the interviews). The first questionnaire will take place in September 2017 which will be at the beginning of the course before the students have too much work to do. The individual semi-structured interviews will take place in person at a time and place that suits each student. These will be during the Autumn term to fit in with the timetable (so not just before work deadlines). The second round of questionnaires and interviews will also be planned to minimise disruption to students' studies. Questionnaires to tutors will be sent out at a time to be agreed with the course manager which best fits in with their workload. Cresswell, J.W. (2010) Research design: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. London: Sage.

Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009) Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and research. London: Sage.
Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. American Psychologist, 55, 68–78.
Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015) What is a community of practice? [Online] Available from: http://wengertrayner.com/ [Accessed 19 February 2016].
Zimmerman, B. (2000) Self-efficacy: an essential motive to learn. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25, 82-91.

Who are your participants/subjects? (if applicable)

Participants will be students and tutors from Level 4 of the NCT Birth and Beyond Foundation Degee at the University of Worcester.

Students will be the whole cohort (curently forecast to be around 100) starting the course in September 2017 (questionnaires). A small sample will be invited to participate in the interview stage.

Tutors will be all those who have teaching or core tutoring responsibility for students at Level 4.

How do you intend to recruit your participants? (if applicable)
This should explain the means by which participants in the research will be recruited. If any incentives and/or compensation (financial or other) is to be offered to participants, this should be clearly explained and justified.

I will give a presentation about my research to all students starting the course in September 2017 (this will take place at their induction event). They will then be invited to take part in the online questionnaire. Later in the Autumn term, a small sample of students will be approached by a member of NCT College staff to see if they are interested in participating in semi-structured interviews. Having an intermediary will help the students to feel comfortable if they want to refuse to take part.

Tutors will be invited to answer online questionnaires. I have worked with them over the last few

years as colleagues and know them well. I intend to give a presentation about the research to them so that they can make an informed decision about whether they wish to take part. There will be no repercussions if they decide they do not want to.

How will you gain informed consent/assent? (if applicable)
Where you will provide an information sheet and/or consent form, please append this. If you are undertaking a deception study or covert research please outline how you will debrief participants below

An information sheet and consent form will be provided (see attached forms for students and for tutors).

Confidentiality, anonymity, data storage and disposal (if applicable)
Provide explanation of any measures to preserve confidentiality and anonymity of data, including specific explanation of data storage and disposal plans.

Please see attached data management plan.

Potential risks to participants/subjects (if applicable)
Identify any risks for participants/subjects that may arise from the research and how you intend to mitigate these risks.

There are no risks to participants that I can foresee at this time. In the unlikely event that participants become distressed during the semi-structured interviews, I will check if they wish to take a break or stop completely (which they will be able to do without consequence). I will make sure that they know that they can access support if they need to from their core tutors or the course manager.

Other ethical issues
Identify any other ethical issues (not addressed in the sections above) that may arise from your research and how you intend to address them.

I have been a tutor on this course for the last four years but I have arranged to take a sabbatical year from August 2017 so I will not have any responsibility for grades or feedback: students can therefore be assured that their responses or refusal to participate will not affect their assessments. This will mitigate the risks of this as insider research (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). I will still need to be aware that students might feel intimidated or otherwise affected by my status as a tutor and so will need to be mindful of power relations. I will clarify my stance from the start of each interview: that is, that I see myself and each participant as equally important co-creators of the research. I will not have managerial responsibilities for tutor colleagues over the year either.

I have chosen to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to analyse the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews. I will need to bear in mind the responsibility this confers on me to anchor my interpretations in the participants' meaning, and to be open to new perspectives beyond my own original ones (this also links to my position as an insider: I must take care to step back from the understanding I have developed of my own setting and try to follow Van Manaan's suggestion (1995 p20) for ethnographers of "making the familiar strange"). I have joined the Scottish Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Interest Group (I live in Edinburgh) which offers training and support around this approach, and will give me the opportunity to further develop my skills and also periodically check my interpretation of transcripts with other researchers. I have attended the recent IPA Conference in Glasgow, and will continue to take part in relevant events.

It will be important to ensure that this research addresses issues of accessibility and inclusion so that it is representative of the views and experiences of all students on the course. The questionnaires and interviews will be piloted, and feedback will be sought on how appropriate they are for students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities and where and how improvements can be made.

This PhD is match-funded by NCT and University of Worcester, so I will need to be able to maintain integrity and independence as a researcher. NCT strives to be an evidence based organisation and is currently supporting several PhD students. The NCT Course manager has carried out research herself with students and tutors this year as part of the PG Cert Education at Worcester, and has indicated that she will do what she can to facilitate my research, so I am confident that NCT College will be supportive of my aims and not interfere with the research process. Nevertheless, I will be reviewing this issue regularly with my supervisory team.

There are likely to be unexpected ethical dilemmas that arise during my research which I will need to deal with by adopting a reflexive and moral approach that tries to balance the interests of all concerned in a situation (Atkins and Wallace, 2012 p31). I will discuss issues with my supervisory team and refer to the literature to try and establish the best way forward in each case, as part of an approach that puts ethics as the foundation of everything I do as a researcher.

Atkins, L. and Wallace, S. (2012) Qualitative research in education. London: Sage.
Costley, C., Elliott, G. and Gibbs, P. (2010) Doing work-based research: approaches to enquiry for insider-researchers. London: Sage.
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Published ethical guidelines to be followed
Identify the professional code(s) of practice and/or ethical guidelines relevant to the subject domain of the research.

The University of Worcester ethical guidelines
www.worcester.ac.uk/researchportal/documents/Ethics_Policy_Aprroved_by_AB_8_10_14.pdf

British Educational Research Assocation ethical guidelines for educational research
https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2011

Declaration of PGR Student

I have read the University Ethics Policy and any relevant codes of practice or guidelines and I have identified and addressed the ethical issues in my research honestly and to the best of my knowledge

Signature: **Sarah Carr** **Date:** **3rd July 2017**

Declaration of Director of Studies

I am satisfied that the student has identified and addressed the ethical issues in their research

Signature: **Sean Bracken** **Date:** **3rd July 2017**

Document Checklist

Please tick boxes below to identify which documents are sent with this application:

Consent Form	☒
Participant Information Sheet	☒
Data Collection Tool	☒
Other documents (please specify):	☒

Data management plan

Data Generation

1. What data will you generate?

   Answers to questionnaires and transcribed audio recordings of interviews. Additional written information volunteered by participants (for example, tutorial plans from tutors).

2. How will you generate the data?

   I will send out online questionnaires to the whole cohort of students starting the course in September 2017 to collect data on age, caring responsibilities, previous learning experiences and attitudes to learning. The questionnaires will be processed using SPSS into a database of responses and analysed to find areas for further investigation through semi-structured interviews with a small number of students. I will record interviews using a digital audio recorder, and then transcribe them into text. The interview transcripts will be analysed to generate codes and themes using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Online questionnaires wil l be sent to the whole cohort again in June 2018 to identify changes in their attitudes and approaches to learning, and will be analysed to identify areas for further investigation in the second set of interviews with the small set of students. Online questionnaires will be sent to all course tutors and analysed to identify their views on factors affecting students' learning, including specific ways that they support students and how the relationships between them change over time.

Data Storage

3. How will data be stored and backed-up during the research?

   Audio recordings will be stored as MP3s and transcripts will be in Word documents. Handwritten notes about the interviews will be scanned or transcribed and kept in separate Word documents, then the original paper will be destroyed. The primary copy of my data will be kept on the N: drive on the UW secure servers which are backed up by ICT. I will copy files to my laptop to work on at home and make sure that the latest versions of these working files are copied back onto the N: drive each day.

4. How will you manage access and security?

   My laptop is encrypted and access is password protected, as is the UW N: drive. Data that could identify participants will be stored separately from their responses to questionnaires and from recordings and transcripts of the interviews.

Data Preservation

5. What data will you keep at the end of the project and why?

   In line with University of Worcester policy, I will keep the database of responses to questionnaires and the interview transcripts for at least ten years but will destroy the MP3 recordings.

6. How will you preserve the data?

   Quantitative and qualitative data will be transferred to approved formats such as SPSS portable format and RTF and deposited with the UK Data Archive.

Data Sharing

7. How will you share the data?

   Through the UK Data Archive.

8. Are there any restrictions on data sharing?

   Only data from consenting participants will be shared, and it will be anonymised.

9. What documentation and metadata will accompany the data?

   A file will accompany the data describing how they were collected; the naming conventions for files and how they are organised; procedures employed for quality assurance; and the process undertaken to anonymise data.

Ethical issues and legal compliance

10.	What are the ethical and legal issues relating to storage, preservation and sharing of your research data? The University of Worcester ethical guidelines http://www.worcester.ac.uk/researchportal/documents/Ethics_Policy_Aprroved_by_AB_8_10_14.pdf will be followed and written consent will be sought from participants regarding preserving and sharing data and this will be fully and effectively anonymised.

Data Ownership

11.	Who owns the data? Data will be owned jointly by UW and NCT College as matched funders of the research. The researcher owns the intellectual property of publications generated from the data.

Ethical approval letter

HUMANITIES, ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HASSREC) REVIEW OUTCOME

10 August 2017

HASSREC CODE: HCA16170051-R

Experiences of mature and 'new traditional' women students on a vocational foundation degree: how do they engage in self-determined learning?

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for your application for proportionate review ethical approval to the Humanities Arts & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee on the 4 July 2017 and subsequent revised application on the 27 July 2017.

Your application has been reviewed in accordance with the University of Worcester Ethics Policy and in compliance with the Standard Operating Procedures for proportionate ethical review.

The Committee has now completed its peer review of the project work and is happy to grant this project ethical approval to proceed.

Your research must be undertaken as set out in the approved application for the approval to be valid. You must review your answers to the checklist on an ongoing basis and resubmit for approval where you intend to deviate from the approved research. Any major deviation from the approved application will require a new application for approval.

As part of the University Ethic Policy, the University Research Committees audit a random sample of approved research. You may be required to complete a questionnaire about your research.

Yours sincerely

Bere

BERE MAHONEY
Chair - Proportionate Review Committee
Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HASSREC)
Ethics@worc.ac.uk

Appendix C: Participant information sheets and life history grid example

This contains:

- participant information sheet included as part of the first online questionnaire (S-1)
- participant information sheet and consent form for the interviews (Int1 and Int2)
- participant information sheet included as part of the second online questionnaire (S-2)
- a life history grid example that was shared with interviewees.

Participant information sheet: Questionnaire 1 (S-1)

Dear Student,

You are being invited to take part in this research project. Before you decide whether to accept this invitation, please read the following information sheet and feel free to ask me any questions you have.

About the researcher:

I am an NCT practitioner and tutor, although I am currently on a sabbatical year in order to focus on my studies.

About the research:

The title is "Experiences of mature and 'new-traditional' women students on a vocational foundation degree: how do they engage in self-determined learning?"

This project investigates the learning experiences of students on the NCT Birth and Beyond course. The aim is to increase understanding of the experiences and needs of women students, particularly where they are combining studies with other work and family responsibilities, and may have had a break from studying.

The research forms part of my PhD at University of Worcester, match-funded by NCT. The research has been subject to ethical review by the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HASSREC), University of Worcester.

How is data being collected?

I am sending out questionnaires to all students starting Level 4 in September 2017. Once I have reviewed the answers to these, I will invite a small number of students to take part in a one to one discussion at a convenient time and place. This cycle of questionnaires and one to one discussions will then be repeated later on during the course.

What will happen to the questionnaires?

I will keep all your responses securely and confidentially: they will not be shared individually with tutors or anyone else at NCT College or beyond. All data will be kept for ten years in line with University policy. It may be shared with other institutions but only in a format that means that you as an individual will not be identifiable. The responses of the whole group will be analysed

and used as part of my PhD. Direct quotes may be taken from the material but will be kept completely anonymous.

How long will the questionnaire take?

Probably around 30 minutes, although it is up to you how long you take: there are some short questions and ones which may take a little more time and thought. If there are any questions that are irrelevant to you or that you don't want to answer, please leave them blank.

Do I have to complete the questionnaire?

Taking part in this research is completely voluntary, and you can also change your mind at any time. If you have started answering but don't wish to continue, you can shut down your browser without submitting. You can also come back to it at a later date. If you change your mind about my using the answers you have shared, it will be possible for me to locate them and remove them from the research (until 31st December 2017). The research is totally separate from your studies and taking part or not will not affect your grades in any way.

Who can I talk to if I have any questions or concerns?

If completing the questionnaire brings up questions or issues for you around studying on this course, please contact your core tutor so that you can discuss things with her, or contact Xxxxx Xxxxx who is Level 4 Lead (xxxxx@xxxxx).

Should you require further information about this research, have any questions or concerns, or would like to withdraw please do not hesitate to contact the Lead Researcher, Sarah Carr, via e-mail (xxxxx@xxxxx or telephone (xxxxx xxxxx). If you have concerns over the study and would like to formally complain about any aspect of the process you may contact Dr Xxxxx Xxxxx, Director of Research at the University of Worcester, on xxxxx xxxxx or email xxxxx@xxxxx .

Consent

By completing and returning the questionnaire it will be understood you are aged 18 or over and that you give consent for your responses to be used for the purposes of this research.

What to do next:

I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this first stage of the research by completing this online questionnaire by **1st October, 2017**.

Many thanks for your support,

Sarah Carr

Participant information sheet and consent form: Interviews (Int1 and Int2)

Dear Student,

You are being invited to take part in this research project. Before you decide whether to accept this invitation, please read the following information sheet and feel free to ask me any questions you have.

About the researcher:

I am an NCT practitioner and tutor, although I am currently on a sabbatical year in order to focus on my studies.

About the research:

The title is “Experiences of mature and ‘new-traditional’ women students on a vocational foundation degree: how do they engage in self-determined learning?”

This project investigates the learning experiences of students on the NCT Birth and Beyond course. The aim is to increase understanding of the experiences and needs of women students, particularly where they are combining studies with other work and family responsibilities, and may have had a break from studying.

The research forms part of my PhD at University of Worcester, match-funded by NCT. The research has been subject to ethical review by the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HASSREC), University of Worcester.

How is data being collected?

I am sending out questionnaires to all students starting Level 4 in September 2017. Once I have reviewed the answers to these, I will invite a small number of students to take part in a one to one discussion at a convenient time and place. This cycle of questionnaires and one to one interviews will then be repeated later on during the course.

What happens in the one-to-one interviews?

First we will create a grid of your life history with regards to learning. Then I will ask you some questions about your learning experiences. The interview will be recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

I will keep the transcription of your interview and the paperwork securely and confidentially: they will not be shared individually with tutors or anyone else at NCT College or beyond. All data will be kept for ten years in line with University policy. It may be shared with other institutions but

only in a format that means that you as an individual will not be identifiable. The responses you give will be analysed and used as part of my PhD. Direct quotes may be taken from the material and included in my thesis and papers for publication but will be kept anonymous.

How long will the interview take?

Anything up to about 2 hours, although it is up to you how long we go on for and you can stop at any time. You can share as much or as little with me as you wish.

Do I have to take part in the interview?

Taking part in this research is completely voluntary, and you can also change your mind at any time. If you have started answering but don't wish to continue, you can just say that you want to stop (you don't need to give a reason). The research is totally separate from your studies and taking part or not will not affect your grades in any way.

Who can I talk to if I have any questions or concerns?

If taking part in this interview brings up questions or issues for you around studying on this course, please contact your core tutor so that you can discuss things with her, or contact Xxxxx Xxxxx who is Level 4 Lead (xxxxx@xxxxx).

Should you require further information about this research, have any questions or concerns, or would like to withdraw please do not hesitate to contact the Lead Researcher, Sarah Carr, via e-mail xxxxx@xxxxx or telephone (xxxxx xxxxxx). If you have concerns over the study and would like to formally complain about any aspect of the process you may contact Dr John-Paul Wilson, Director of Research at the University of Worcester, on xxxxx xxxxxxx or email xxxxx@xxxxx .

Consent

Please could you sign and date below to show that you have read this form and give your consent to take part in this research.

Many thanks for your support,

Sarah Carr

Name: **Signature:**
Date:

Participant information sheet: Questionnaire 2

Dear Student,

You are being invited to take part in this research project. Before you decide whether to accept this invitation, please read the following information sheet and feel free to ask me any questions you have.

About the researcher:

I am an NCT practitioner and tutor undertaking a PhD.

About the research:

The title is "Experiences of mature and 'new-traditional' women students on a vocational foundation degree: how do they engage in self-determined learning?"

This project investigates the learning experiences of students on the NCT Birth and Beyond course. The aim is to increase understanding of the experiences and needs of UK women students, particularly where they are combining studies with other work and family responsibilities, and may have had a break from studying.

The research forms part of my PhD at University of Worcester, match-funded by NCT. The research has been subject to ethical review by the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HASSREC), University of Worcester and has been signed off by Xxxxx Xxxxx, NCT Education Manager.

How is data being collected?

I sent out questionnaires to all students starting Level 4 in September 2017 and then invited a small number of students to take part in a one to one discussion. I am now repeating this cycle of questionnaires and one to one discussions to collect data on any changes since the start of the course.

What will happen to the questionnaires?

I will keep all your responses securely and confidentially: they will not be shared individually with tutors or anyone else at NCT College or beyond. Data from questions will be kept for ten years in line with University policy. It may be shared with other institutions but only in a format that means that you as an individual will not be identifiable. The responses of the whole group will be analysed and used as part of my PhD. Direct quotes may be taken from the material but will be

kept completely anonymous. Personal details such as email addresses will be deleted as soon as I am sure they will not be needed for the purpose of carrying out the research.

How long will the questionnaire take?

Probably around 30 minutes, although it is up to you how long you take: there are some short questions and ones which may take a little more time and thought. If there are any questions that are irrelevant to you or that you don't want to answer, please leave them blank.

Do I have to complete the questionnaire?

Taking part in this research is completely voluntary, and you can also change your mind at any time. If you have started answering but don't wish to continue, you can shut down your browser without submitting. You can also come back to it at a later date. If you change your mind about my using the answers you have shared, it will be possible for me to locate them and remove them from the research (until 30th July 2019). The research is totally separate from your studies and taking part or not will not affect your grades or your standing in the NCT in any way.

Who can I talk to if I have any questions or concerns?

If completing the questionnaire brings up questions or issues for you around studying on this course, please contact your core tutor or your Personal Academic Tutor so that you can discuss things with her, or contact Level 4 Lead Xxxxx Xxxxx (xxxx@xxxx) or Level 5 Lead Xxxxx Xxxxx (xxxxx@xxxxx).

Should you require further information about this research, or have any questions or concerns, or if you would like to withdraw, please do not hesitate to contact the Lead Researcher, Sarah Carr, via e-mail (xxxxx@xxxxx) or telephone (xxxxx xxxxxx). If you have concerns over the study and would like to formally complain about any aspect of the process you may contact Dr Xxxxx Xxxxx, Director of Research at the University of Worcester, on xxxxx xxxxxx or email xxxxx@xxxxx.

Consent

By completing and returning the questionnaire it will be understood you are aged 18 or over and that you give consent for your responses to be used for the purposes of this research.

What to do next:

I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in my research by completing this online questionnaire by **28th May, 2019**.

Many thanks for your support,
Sarah Carr

Life history grid

Family situation	Education	Work situation	Comments/What else?
Living with parents and three younger siblings	Started primary school		Mother late sorting school place so started a term late – felt like new person who didn't know anything
Moved area	Started new school		Moved up a class, but then stayed down a year as not very mature
	Started secondary school (girls only)		In top sets – felt a fraud
	O Levels		Did well (but not perfectly so parents disappointed)
	A levels at 6th Form (with boys)	Holiday job in bookshop at home	Social life meant schoolwork came second
Moved out to university city	BA (Hons) Linguistics		Sleep issues, struggled to get to lectures, felt alone
		F/T job in bookshop	Main earner as husband doing PhD
Married, moved city		Job in London LA	
1st baby		Job in City Council	
2nd baby moved city		Maternity leave then at home full time	Husband worked away a lot so was main carer for majority of time
3rd baby		Voluntary roles in local NCT branch	
4th baby			
	Started training as NCT ANT		Enjoyed taking time out and doing something for myself but felt guilty too
		NCT ANT	Enjoyed working with parents
	NCT Assessing modules	NCT Assessor	Studying easier with children being older. Loved studying as part of supportive group
	NCT Tutoring modules	NCT Tutor	
3 adult children left home Moved country	Started PhD		Stretching myself Interest keeps me going

Appendix D: Data collection

This includes:

- a reflection on the pilot questionnaire and a table of changes made as a result
- the first online questionnaire (September 2017)
- the first interview schedule (Summer 2018)
- the second online questionnaire (May 2019)
- the second interview schedule (Autumn 2019)

Changes made following pilot questionnaire

As soon as I had obtained ethical approval, I approached some of the students I had worked with over the previous academic year to ask if they would be willing to answer the questionnaire using Bristol Online Surveys (BOS). Some then shared my request with others from their cohort. In total, emails were sent to 25 students from the previous academic year to ask if they would be prepared to help pilot the questionnaire. Eighteen said they agreed to participate but only nine finished the whole questionnaire in the end, although one got all the way to the last page, but then did not submit. Three more said that they ran out of time. The others did not respond to follow up emails, but as it was the summer school holidays, I did not want to chase them any further. I made some changes to the questionnaire and asked three people who had previously been enthusiastic about helping out to participate in this second pilot. I made a couple more changes, and then asked one last student and a tutor colleague to pilot this final version. They answered all the questions and had no issues or concerns. This final version was then ready to be distributed to the new cohort of students on Wednesday 6th September.

It would have been ideal to be able to run a pilot study with students at the beginning of the course as this would have made it more similar to the actual research, but timing did not allow for this. Instead, I had to allow for the pilot students being at a different stage of their learning journeys, although I did ask them to put themselves back into how they felt when they were new students as much as possible.

As well as giving me invaluable practice in using the BOS tool, the pilot highlighted several areas where changes needed to be made, including the content of the questionnaire, its format, the distribution process and obtaining informed consent. Table A shows details of these changes:

Pilot	Outcome	Changes for final questionnaire	Notes
Content			
I asked participants which strategies they planned to use and also about their attitudes to learning thinking of as many as I could from reading and talking to tutors.	A couple of suggestions in the "Something else" box came out of the pilot which I added to the lists.	I added "making notes during study days and tutorials" (I had only included "making notes afterwards", for some reason) and changed "I prefer to start work when a deadline is looming" to "I tend to start work . . ."	"Tend" is more realistic than "prefer" I think.
I asked participants of the pilot specifically if there was anything I should add.	One suggested I ask about what sacrifices students might be making.	I felt 'sacrifice' was quite a loaded term, so I decided to ask "what sort of changes are you making in your life to allow you to study?"	The idea of sacrifices would be interesting to explore in the interviews, perhaps.
I did not ask where in the country they were.	I realised I would not be able to identify where the participants were based and whether there were any regional and group variations.	I added a question about which tutorial group they would be attending.	This would help me to identify where in the UK they are studying, which felt more useful than where they live, as there might be themes that show up within specific groups.
Format			
Several of the questions give options to choose from, followed by boxes for free writing with more detail about three of their answers.	Two student participants and a tutor felt that they were being asked to write too much.	I kept the three boxes in for some of the questions, but reduced the number of boxes to just one for the last two of these questions.	As participants get to the end of the questionnaire they might be getting fed up with writing, so I felt that it was sensible to balance my need for data with participants' boredom thresholds.
Some questions had long lists of answers to choose from and then to write about in more detail.	Participants had to write in a bit to identify which particular answer they were exploring in more depth. One said this was a nuisance.	To make it easier for them to identify which answer they were writing about, I put in a), b), c) etc by each answer.	
I asked the students to tell me how long they took to answer the questionnaire.	Most said that they took around 30 to 40 minutes.	I added an indication of how long it might take to answer the questionnaire, as well as a reminder that participants could stop part way through and come back at a later stage if they wanted to.	

Pilot	Outcome	Changes for final questionnaire	Notes
Distribution			
I asked possible participants to send me their email address if they were interested in taking part in the pilot so that I could input it into BOS which then sent them out a link.	This was quite time consuming and probably put some people off because there were a couple of steps. Some did not receive the emails.	I changed the process so that all students would be sent a link to the survey and a password. I included a question asking them to tell me their names and email addresses so that I can contact them if necessary.	The NCT College manager was reluctant to let me have access to the list of new students and said a member of staff would have to input the list, which would have meant I did not control the process and risked it not being done in time (straight after my talk at their induction event at the beginning of September).This approach risked people other than intended participants might decide to answer the questionnaire if they see the URL and password. I asked students to share their University of Worcester email addresses and their tutorial group as a way of helping to weed out any unintended participants.
I set the closing time as midnight on a Friday.	A couple of students emailed after the deadline to say they had been planning to take part over the weekend, as they had run out of time during the previous week.	I decided to set the deadline at 23.59 on a Sunday to allow for those who might have more time over the final weekend.	
I set BOS to send out reminders twice.	Three people participated in the questionnaire straight after the first link, then there was no activity until I send out the first reminder, when two more participated. The final four participated on the last day following another reminder.	I decided to send out reminders to new students via Blackboard and also Facebook as there is a closed group for NCT practitioners.	I also planned to remind them that they needed to click through to the last page if they wanted to submit the questionnaire: BOS does not allow access to unfinished questionnaires.

Pilot	Outcome	Changes for final questionnaire	Notes
Informed consent			
For the first pilot I sent out the participant information sheet in an email.	I had two emails back specifically saying that they found the information sheet easy to read and understand (one also spotted a typo).	As part of the changes to the distribution process, I decided to embed a link to the information sheet on the first page for participants to read. My reading and talking to colleagues who did action research on the PG Cert last year suggested it is common practice not to require separate signed consent forms, but that ticking a box to say they had read the sheet and then participating would be taken as consent.	I put the link to the info sheet on the last page of the questionnaire as well as the first page in case they needed the contact details for me or Dr John-Paul Wilson (as required by the ethics board). Written consent would still need to be obtained for the individual interviews.

Table A: Changes made to first questionnaire after pilot

Questionnaire for first survey (S-1)

NCT UW SC Survey September 2017

S-1 Attitudes and approaches to learning

Thank you for showing an interest in this research. This is a confidential survey: collecteddata will be kept on a secure server and your individual answers will not be shared with tutors or anyone else. Any quotes that are used in the published research will be anonymised.

Introduction

The questionnaire should take about 30 minutes to complete, but you have the option tostop part way through and finish it later.

Please read the Participant Information Sheet and contact me if you have any questions. When you are happy to proceed, please indicate the following (NB you will only be able to continue to the survey if you answer *Yes*):

1. I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet. I consent to participate in this survey.

○ Yes
○ No

About You

2. How old are you?

○ Under 21	○ 21-25	○ 26-30
○ 31-35	○ 36-40	○ 41-45
○ 46-50	○ 51 or above	

3. How many children under 11 do you have who are living with you (at least part of thetime)?

○ None	○ 1	○ 2
○ 3	○ 4 or more	

4. How many children aged 11-18 do you have who are living with you (at least part of the time)?

○ None	○ 1	○ 2
○ 3	○ 4 or more	

5. What is your highest level of education before starting this course?

○ Level 3 (e.g. A levels, International Baccalaureate, NVQs, NCT Access course)
○ Level 4 (e.g. Certificate of Higher Education, HNCs, NVQs at Level 4)
○ Level 5 (e.g. HNCS and HNDs, other higher diplomas, foundation degree)
○ Level 6 (e.g. bachelor degree, BTEC Advanced professional diploma)
○ Level 7 (masters degree, postgrad diploma, NVQs at Level 5)
○ Level 8 (e.g. doctoral degree, specialist award)
○ Other

5.a. If you put *Other* please give details:

6. When were you last in formal education (such as college or university) whether full-time or part-time?

○ Last academic year
○ 2-3 years ago
○ 4-5 years ago
○ 6-10 years ago
○ 11-15 years ago
○ 16+ years ago

7. Please tell me briefly about your roles and responsibilities over the last five years at home. For example, have you been the main carer for young children

or a relative?

8. Please tell me briefly about your roles and responsibilities over the last five years in paid work. For example, if you been working outside the home, what did/do you do? *Put N/A if this does not apply to you.*

About Your Approaches to Learning

9. When do you think you will spend time studying (outside tutorials and study days)? *Please indicate all that apply.*

☐ Weekday daytime
☐ Weekday evenings
☐ Weekend daytime
☐ Weekend evenings
☐ I will block out whole days to study
☐ I will fit short bursts of studying in around other commitments

10. Please tell me a little bit more about how you intend to manage your time for studying.

11. What sort of changes are you making in your life to allow you to study?

12. Thinking back to your previous experiences of learning, what strategies did you use then that you plan to use on this course? *Remember that there are no right or wrong answers.*

☐ a) reading the set texts from cover to cover
☐ b) dipping in and out of set texts
☐ c) reading other sources not on the list of set texts
☐ d) reading journal articles
☐ e) making notes on what I read
☐ f) making notes during study days and tutorials
☐ g) writing in a journal after study days and tutorials
☐ h) meeting up in person with other students on the course to discuss topics
☐ i) talking to other students via apps such as WhatsApp
☐ j) participating in or following discussions on social media such as Facebook
☐ k) practising skills regularly
☐ l) attending relevant conferences and events outside the course
☐ m) discussing topics with my partner
☐ n) discussing topics with friends or family
☐ o) watching YouTube videos on related topics
☐ p) observing others
☐ q) having set times for working each week
☐ r) motivating myself by giving myself rewards when I meet my goals
☐ s) sharing my intentions to tackle pieces of work with others
☐ t) recording myself talking about topics
☐ u) making mindmaps
☐ v) listening to podcasts on related topics
☐ w) reading blogs on related topics
☐ x) following discussions on Twitter
☐ y) revisiting my notes or recordings or mindmaps on a regular basis
☐ z) something else

12.a. If you put *Something else* please give details.

13. Please choose one of the answers you have given to Question 12 and tell me moreabout it.

13.a. Please choose another one of the answers you have given to Question 12 and tell me more about it.

13.b. Please choose a final one of the answers you have given to Question 12 and tellme more about it.

14. Are there any strategies that you have not used in previous experiences of learning which you plan to take forward to use on this course? *Remember that there are no right or wrong answers.*

☐ a) reading the set texts from cover to cover
☐ b) dipping in and out of set texts
☐ c) reading other sources not on the list of set texts
☐ d) reading journal articles
☐ e) making notes on what I read
☐ f) making notes during study days and tutorials
☐ g) writing in a journal after study days and tutorials
☐ h) meeting up in person with other students on the course to discuss topics
☐ i) talking to other students via apps such as WhatsApp
☐ j) participating in or following discussions on social media such as Facebook
☐ k) practising skills regularly
☐ l) attending relevant conferences and events outside the course
☐ m) discussing topics with my partner
☐ n) discussing topics with friends or family
☐ o) watching YouTube videos on related topics
☐ p) observing others
☐ q) having set times for working each week
☐ r) motivating myself by giving myself rewards when I meet my goals
☐ s) sharing my intentions to tackle pieces of work with others
☐ t) recording myself talking about topics
☐ u) making mindmaps
☐ v) listening to podcasts on related topics
☐ w) reading blogs on related topics
☐ x) following discussions on Twitter
☐ y) revisiting my notes or recordings or mindmaps on a regular basis
☐ z) something else

14.a. If you put *Something else* please give details.

15. Please choose one of the answers you have given to Question 14 and tell

me moreabout it.

15.a Please choose another one of the answers you have given to Question 14 and tell me more about it.

15.b Please choose a final one of the answers you have given to Question 14 and tell me more about it.

About Your Attitudes to Learning

16. Please read each item and then indicate the extent to which it is true for you. *Remember that there are no right or wrong answers.*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Almost never true; I hardly ever feel like this	Not often true; I feellike this less than half the time	Sometimes true; I feel like this about half the time	Often true:I feel like this more than half the time	Almost always true: it is very rare that I don't feel like this
a) I enjoy learningfor its own sake	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b) I see this course primarily as something to get through in order to become an NCT practitioner working with parents	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c) I tend to prioritise work that counts towards my final grades, rather than work that is not going to be marked	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d) I enjoy working with others in a group	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e) I think it is possible to increase my intelligence	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Almost never true; I hardly ever feel like this	Not often true; I feellike this less than half the time	Sometimes true; I feel like this about half the time	Often true:I feel like this more than half the time	Almost always true: it is very rare that I don't feel like this
f) I like to think about a situation in advance and prepare well	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g) I am confident about using online resources and the internet to help me learn	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
h) getting high grades is very important to me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
i) I am the person responsible for what I learn	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
j) tutors should tellstudents exactly what to do	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
k) I prefer to make my own decisions about what I will learn and how	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Almost never true; I hardly ever feel like this	Not often true; I feellike this less than half the time	Sometimes true; I feel like this about half the time	Often true:I feel like this more than half the time	Almost always true: it is very rare that I don't feel like this
l) I prefer to go away and think about things on my own	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
m) I am interested in developing my knowledge around the topics covered in this course (such as giving birth, breastfeeding and life with a new baby)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
n) I tend to do just enough work to make sure that I pass an assignment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
o) I am excited by the prospect of learning through a mixture of study days, tutorials and self-directed study	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Almost never true; I hardly ever feel like this	Not often true; I feellike this less than half the time	Sometimes true; I feel like this about half the time	Often true:I feel like this more than half the time	Almost always true: it is very rare that I don't feel like this
p) when I am approaching an assignment, I like to prepare by making lots of notes and have agood idea of the final structure before I start	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
o) fate has an important part to play in whether I will be successful or not	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
q) I am good at planning my work in plenty of time tomeet deadlines	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
r) I think that intelligence and abilities are fixed at birth	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
s) I learn well by observing others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Almost never true; I hardly ever feel like this	Not often true; I feellike this less than half the time	Sometimes true; I feel like this about half the time	Often true:I feel like this more than half the time	Almost always true: it is very rare that I don't feel like this
t) I like to jump straight into a piece of work and see where it takesme	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
u) I tend to start work on an assignment when the deadline is looming	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
v) making mistakes is an important part of learning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
w) success is more down to hard work than luck	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
x) learning is easier for younger people	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
y) most other students will be more academic/more able than I am	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
z) NCT tutors wantme to do well	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

17. Please choose one of the answers you have given to Question 16 and tell me more about it.

17.a. Please choose another one of the answers you have given to Question 16 and tell me more about it.

17.b. Please choose a final one of the answers you have given to Question 16 and tell me more about it.

18. Please tell me which of the following will probably be some of the most challenging issues for you, and which will probably be the least challenging. *Choose up to three for each column.*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.
Please don't select more than 3 answer(s) in any single column.

	Most challenging	Least challenging
a) combining studying with family	☐	☐
b) combining studying with paid work	☐	☐
c) prioritising my studies over work and family	☐	☐
d) accessing resources	☐	☐
e) working independently	☐	☐
f) having dedicated space to work on my studies	☐	☐
g) learning new skills	☐	☐
h) learning new topics	☐	☐
i) reflecting on my own experiences	☐	☐
j) keeping up with deadlines	☐	☐
k) working with a group of people	☐	☐
l) reading widely	☐	☐
m) understanding what I read	☐	☐
n) being given feedback	☐	☐
o) writing assignments such as essays	☐	☐
p) learning information for exams	☐	☐
q) practical assignments (e.g. facilitating a group discussion on a topic)	☐	☐
r) returning to study after a break	☐	☐
s) knowing if I am doing well	☐	☐
t) something else (please explain below)	☐	☐

18.a. If you put *Something else* please give details.

19. Please choose one of the answers you have given to Question 18 and tell me more about it.

19.a. Please choose another one of the answers you have given to Question 18 and tell me more about it.

19.b. Please choose a final one of the answers you have given to Question 18 and tell me more about it.

20. On this course you will be learning new information (around birth, breastfeeding and so on), skills (such as how to work with groups) and exploring feelings. Please tellme how you feel about learning in these different areas.

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Very anxious	Fairly anxious	Neither anxious nor confident	Fairly confident	Very confident
a) learning new information	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b) learning new skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c) exploring feelings	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

21. Please choose one of the answers you have given to Question 20 and tell me more about it.

22. How do you feel about being a learner on this course? *Please indicate all that apply to you.*

☐ a) excited
☐ b) anxious
☐ c) liberated
☐ d) looking forward to making friends
☐ e) looking forward to a change of direction
☐ f) interested
☐ g) unsure
☐ h) passionate
☐ i) confident
☐ j) confused
☐ k) motivated
☐ l) concerned
☐ m) proud
☐ n) looking forward to getting a qualification
☐ o) something else

22.a. If you said *Something else* please give details.

23. Please tell me a bit more about the answers you have given to Question 22.

24. Please tell me a little about what you are looking forward to in terms of being a learner this year.

Finally . . .

25. What else would you like to say about your attitudes and approaches to learning?

26. Please tell me your name. *This is for admin purposes only and will be kept confidential. No one will be able to identify you in the published research.*

27. Please tell me your University of Worcester email address in case I need to contact you about this research. *Your email address will be kept confidential and not shared with anyone else.*
Please enter a valid email address.

28. Please tell me which tutor group you will be attending (e.g. Manchester).

This is to get an idea of the geographical location of survey participants.

Thank you for completing this survey: your time and effort are much appreciated.

If you have any questions or comments, please refer to the Participant Information Sheet for contact details.

Schedule of questions for first interview (Int1)

Start by co-creating a life history grid from age of 5 onwards.

1. Tell me about your experiences as a learner before you started this course.
2. What was your motivation for starting this course?
3. What have been similarities and differences between learning on this course and your previous learning experiences?
4. How have you approached learning on this course – what has worked well for you?
5. What have your experiences been as a learner on this course?
6. What have been the highs and lows of learning on this course?
7. What has surprised you about learning on this course?
8. How has your view of yourself changed since you started this course?
9. Since you started this course, how has your view of what learning is changed?
10. Is there anything else you want to tell me?

Questionnaire for second survey (S-2)

NCT UW Survey Students 2 (2019)

S-2 Attitudes and approaches to learning

Thank you for showing an interest in this research. This is a confidential survey: collecteddata will be kept on a secure server and your individual answers will not be shared with tutors or anyone else. Any quotes that are used in the published research will be anonymised.

Introduction

Please note that this is not an evaluation of the NCT course but rather an investigation into approaches and attitudes to learning.

The questionnaire should take about 30 minutes to complete, but you have the option tostop part way through and finish it later.

Please read the Participant Information Sheet and contact me if you have any questions. When you are happy to proceed, please indicate the following (NB you will only be able to continue to the survey if you answer *Yes*):

1. I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet. I consent to participate in this survey.

○ Yes
○ No

About You

2. How old are you?

○ Under 21	○ 21-25	○ 26-30
○ 31-35	○ 36-40	○ 41-45
○ 46-50	○ 51 or above	

3. How many children under 11 do you have who are living with you (at least part of thetime)?

○ None	○ 1	○ 2
○ 3	○ 4 or more	

4. How many children aged 11-18 do you have who are living with you (at least part of the time)?

○ None	○ 1	○ 2
○ 3	○ 4 or more	

5. Please tell me about your status on Level 4 since you started in September 2017.

- ○ I started full-time and finished full-time last year.
- ○ I started part-time and will finish part-time this year.
- ○ I started full-time and will finish part-time this year.
- ○ I started part-time and finished full-time last year.
- ○ None of the above

5.a. If you changed your status during the course, please can you tell me why?

6. Please tell me briefly about your roles and responsibilities at home since you started this course. For example, have you been the main carer for young children or a relative?

7. Please tell me briefly about your roles and responsibilities in paid work since you started this course. For example, if you have been working outside the home, what do you do? If you do regular unpaid work outside the home, please tell me about this too. *Put N/A if this does not apply to you.*

About Your Approaches to Learning

8. When do you tend to spend time studying (outside tutorials and study days)? *Please indicate all that apply.*

☐ Weekday daytime
☐ Weekday evenings
☐ Weekend daytime
☐ Weekend evenings
☐ I will block out whole days to study
☐ I will fit short bursts of studying in around other commitments

9. Please tell me a little bit more about how you manage your time for studying.

10. What sort of changes have you made in your life to allow you to study?

11. Thinking about your learning since September 2017, what strategies have

used on this course? *Remember that there are no right or wrong answers.*

☐ a) reading the set texts from cover to cover
☐ b) dipping in and out of set texts
☐ c) reading other sources not on the list of set texts
☐ d) reading journal articles
☐ e) making notes on what I read
☐ f) making notes during study days and tutorials
☐ g) writing in a journal after study days and tutorials
☐ h) meeting up in person with other students on the course to discuss topics
☐ i) talking to other students via apps such as WhatsApp
☐ j) participating in or following discussions on social media such as Facebook
☐ k) practising skills regularly
☐ l) attending relevant conferences and events outside the course
☐ m) discussing topics with my partner
☐ n) discussing topics with friends or family
☐ o) watching YouTube videos on related topics
☐ p) observing others
☐ q) having set times for working each week
☐ r) motivating myself by giving myself rewards when I meet my goals
☐ s) sharing my intentions to tackle pieces of work with others
☐ t) recording myself talking about topics
☐ u) making mindmaps
☐ v) listening to podcasts on related topics
☐ w) reading blogs on related topics
☐ x) following discussions on Twitter
☐ y) revisiting my notes or recordings or mindmaps on a regular basis
☐ z) something else

11.a. If you put *Something else* please give details.

12. Please choose one of the answers you have given to Question 11 and tell me more about it. For example, why did you choose it and how has it

enhanced your learning?

13. Are there any strategies which you plan to carry on using once you have finished studying? *Remember that there are no right or wrong answers.*

☐ a) reading the set texts from cover to cover
☐ b) dipping in and out of set texts
☐ c) reading other sources not on the list of set texts
☐ d) reading journal articles
☐ e) making notes on what I read
☐ f) making notes during study days and tutorials
☐ g) writing in a journal after study days and tutorials
☐ h) meeting up in person with other students on the course to discuss topics
☐ i) talking to other students via apps such as WhatsApp
☐ j) participating in or following discussions on social media such as Facebook
☐ k) practising skills regularly
☐ l) attending relevant conferences and events outside the course
☐ m) discussing topics with my partner
☐ n) discussing topics with friends or family
☐ o) watching YouTube videos on related topics
☐ p) observing others
☐ q) having set times for working each week
☐ r) motivating myself by giving myself rewards when I meet my goals
☐ s) sharing my intentions to tackle pieces of work with others
☐ t) recording myself talking about topics
☐ u) making mindmaps
☐ v) listening to podcasts on related topics
☐ w) reading blogs on related topics
☐ x) following discussions on Twitter
☐ y) revisiting my notes or recordings or mindmaps on a regular basis
☐ z) something else

13.a. If you put *Something else* please give details.

14. Please choose one of the answers you have given to Question 13 and tell me more about it. For example, why did you choose it and how will it benefit your ongoing learning?

About Your Attitudes to Learning

15. Please read each item and then indicate the extent to which it is true for you. *Remember that there are no right or wrong answers.*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Almost never true; I hardly ever feel like this	Not often true; I feellike this less than half the time	Sometimes true; I feel like this about half the time	Often true:I feel like this more than half the time	Almost always true: it is very rare that I don't feel like this
a) I enjoy learning for its own sake	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b) I see this course primarily as something to get through in order to become an NCT practitioner working with parents	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c) I tend to prioritise work that counts towards my final grades, rather than work that is not going to be marked	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d) I enjoy working with others in a group	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e) I think it is possible to increase my intelligence	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Almost never true; I hardly ever feel like this	Not often true; I feellike this less than half the time	Sometimes true; I feel like this about half the time	Often true:I feel like this more than half the time	Almost always true: it is very rare that I don't feel like this
f) I like to think about a situation in advance and prepare well	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g) I am confident about using online resources and the internet to help me learn	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
h) getting high grades is very important to me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
i) I am the person responsible for what I learn	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
j) tutors should tell students exactly what to do	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
k) I prefer to makemy own decisions about what I will learn and how	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
l) I prefer to go away and think about things on my own	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Almost never true; I hardly ever feel like this	Not often true; I feellike this less than half the time	Sometimes true; I feel like this about half the time	Often true:I feel like this more than half the time	Almost always true: it is very rare that I don't feel like this
m) I am interested in developing my knowledge around the topics covered in this course (such as giving birth, breastfeeding and life with a new baby)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
n) I tend to do just enough work to make sure that I pass an assignment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
o) I am excited by the prospect of learning through a mixture of study days, tutorials and self-directed study	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Almost never true; I hardly ever feel like this	Not often true; I feellike this less than half the time	Sometimes true; I feel like this about half the time	Often true:I feel like this more than half the time	Almost always true: it is very rare that I don't feel like this
p) when I am approaching an assignment, I like to prepare by making lots of notes and have agood idea of the final structure before I start	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
o) fate has an important part to play in whether I will be successful or not	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
q) I am good at planning my work in plenty of time to meet deadlines	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
r) I think that intelligence and abilities are fixed at birth	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
s) I learn well by observing others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Almost never true; I hardly ever feel like this	Not often true; I feellike this less than half the time	Sometimes true; I feel like this about half the time	Often true:I feel like this more than half the time	Almost always true: it is very rare that I don't feel like this
t) I like to jump straight in to a piece of work and see where it takes me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
u) I tend to start work on an assignment whenthe deadline is looming	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
v) making mistakes is an important part of learning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
w) success is more down to hard work than luck	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
x) learning is easier for younger people	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
y) most other students will be more academic/more able than I am	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
z) NCT tutors wantme to do well	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

16. Please choose one of the answers you have given to Question 15 and tell me moreabout it. For example, how is this belief relevant to you as a learner?

17. Please tell me which of the following have been some of the most challenging issues for you, and which have been the least challenging. *Choose up to three for each column.*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.
Please don't select more than 3 answer(s) in any single column.

	Most challenging	Least challenging
a) combining studying with family	☐	☐
b) combining studying with paid work	☐	☐
c) prioritising my studies over work and family	☐	☐
d) accessing resources	☐	☐
e) working independently	☐	☐
f) having a dedicated space to work on my studies	☐	☐
g) learning new skills	☐	☐
h) learning new topics	☐	☐
i) reflecting on my own experiences	☐	☐
j) keeping up with deadlines	☐	☐
k) working with a group of people	☐	☐
l) reading widely	☐	☐
m) understanding what I read	☐	☐
n) being given feedback	☐	☐
o) writing assignments such as essays	☐	☐
p) learning information for exams	☐	☐
q) practical assignments (e.g. facilitating a discussion)	☐	☐
r) returning to study after a break	☐	☐
s) knowing if I am doing well	☐	☐
t) using IT	☐	☐
u) something else (please explain below)	☐	☐

17.a. If you put *Something else* please give details.

18. Please choose one of the answers you have given to Question 17 and tell me more about it. For example, how has the answer you have chosen affected you as a learner?

19. On this course you have been learning new information (around birth, breastfeeding and so on), skills (such as how to work with groups) and addressing your own feelings. Please tell me how you feel now about these different areas.

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Very anxious	Fairly anxious	Neither anxious nor confident	Fairly confident	Very confident
a) learning new information	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b) learning new skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c) exploring feelings	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

20. Please choose one of the answers you have given to Question 19 and tell me more about it. For example, how have your feelings affected you as a learner?

21. How do you feel at this stage having been a learner on this course?
Please indicate all that apply to you.

☐ a) excited
☐ b) anxious
☐ c) liberated
☐ d) enjoyed making friends
☐ e) enjoyed a change of direction
☐ f) engaged
☐ g) unsure
☐ h) passionate
☐ i) confident
☐ j) confused
☐ k) motivated
☐ l) concerned
☐ m) proud
☐ n) looking forward to the next stage
☐ o) something else

21.a. If you said *Something else* please give details.

22. Please tell me a bit more about the answers you have given to Question 21.

23. Please tell me about the impact of being a learner on this course. As a result of studying on this course, how have the following areas been affected?

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Very negatively	Fairly negatively	Neither negatively nor positively	Fairly positively	Very positively
a) my confidence levels	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b) my level of skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c) my level of knowledge	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d) my study skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e) my ability to think critically	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f) my understanding of how I learn	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g) my motivation to learn	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
h) how I engage with my family	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
i) my relationship with my partner	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
j) how I see myself	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
k) how I work with others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
l) my plans for the future	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

24. Please tell me a bit about more about the answers you have given to Question 22.

25. Please tell me a bit about anything that has surprised you in terms of being a learner since you started this course in September 2017.

26. Please tell me your views on continuing to learn beyond this course.

27. What else would you like to say about your attitudes and approaches to learning and how they have changed since September 2017?

Finally . . .

28. Please tell me your University of Worcester email address in case I need to contact you about this research. This will be kept confidential.
Please enter a valid email address.

29. Please tell me which tutor group you were in in September 2017 (e.g. Manchester).

Thank you for completing this survey: your time and effort are much appreciated.

If you have any questions or comments, please refer to the Participant Information Sheet for contact details.

Schedule of questions for second interview (Int2)

I am interested in the experiences of women returning to higher education.

1. Looking at this summary of the life history grid you filled in last time, can you help me continue the grid since 2017 to the present day?
   (Discuss anything that comes up)

2. How have you approached learning?
   (what has worked well, what has been challenging, what might you have done differently)

3. How does learning fit into your day to day life?
   (separate from or overlapping with other activities)

4. What have been your experiences of learning since September 2017?
   (positive, negative, surprises - examples)

5. Who has supported you in your learning and how?
   (tutors, other students, family and friends, people at work)

6. Can you tell me about how being a student has affected your life?
   (self, family, relationships, work - examples)

7. What implications has being a woman had for you as a learner?
   (expectations, gender roles, emotional load, family situation)

8. Looking again at the grid, what changes might there be in the next few years to the way you learn?
   (For you, for your family, also for society and wider learning context)

9. How do you see yourself as a learner in the future?
   (formal vs informal, motivation, communities of practice, reflective practice, adapting to new situations, identifying gaps in skills and knowledge and finding ways to address these gaps, support – link to question 4)

10. Is there anything else you would like to add that you think might be relevant?

Appendix E: Data analysis

This appendix includes:

- An excerpt of IPA analysis notes, which is an example of how I annotated the transcript according to the process outlined in Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009);
- An excerpt of the table of themes, which shows where themes occurred on the pages of the individual transcription of 1st and 2nd interviews;
- Excerpts from reflective journal.

Emergent themes		Exploratory comments: description and content, *linguistic*, conceptual
Role of tutors	passionate about it, who was up to date and who you wanted to learn from, you wanted to hear things about. So all that aspect of it was absolutely fantastic, yeah, and so interesting. And I always came away with my mind blown about something in that tutorial, whatever it was... I was, 'Oh, I didn't know there were different kinds of pelvises!' - things like that.	Tutors as excellent teachers Very positive Role of tutors
Developing new skills / capability?	And I was, 'Why is it interesting to me?' But it is! So, from that point, brilliant. And I felt that this year - the last academic year with [tutor] - was just fantastic, compared to the first year when I felt we were kind of all over the shop. I didn't really have a very clear idea... [Recording stopped while Becky dealt with baby].	Particularly valued Level Five First year not so good Fantastic vs All over the shop Change in tutors or change in her? Developing skills? Better at learning?
Communities of learning support from students	**So, the next question is: who has supported you in your learning and how have they supported you?** Definitely all my fellow students... they have - and we have all said it of each other - even though we're quite far spread-out, we're always messaging each other. Even through sessions, now we've started - we're all now facilitating courses - and we're saying, 'Somebody has asked this question, quickly, what's the answer?' [Laughs] And they answer it. So - definitely - them first and foremost over even close family and everything. Because I do feel they understand the issues, they are doing the exact same things, they have that.	Fellow students have supported each other through study and into practice Greater support than family, because they understand the issues Fellow students first in terms of support because of being fellow travellers - understand what she's going through Support on social media from fellow students - most important going through same things understand
Support from family / partner Prioritising student's needs	So they have been absolutely brilliant. And yeah, my mum has been supportive in terms of all the childcare and helping out, and my husband has as well. But I just feel with the pair of them, it's just not their priority. So they will absolutely help when they can but if they have got more important things than that takes over. It's not that they weren't supportive, just that maybe it wasn't the	Mother supported by providing childcare as has husband - but not a priority for either Mother and husband supportive but drop things if something more important happens Support family etc Prioritising student's needs

Chapter	Theme Group	Theme	Interview	Arwen	Becky	Cora	Darby	Esme	Freya
Chapter 1: Self as learner	A	Characteristics of herself as a learner	1	5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 18, 23, 26, 26, 28	1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 13, 25, 32	3, 4, 5, 5, 15, 16, 23, 24, 25, 26, 26, 28, 31, 31, 32, 34, 34, 36, 37, 37, 38, 39, 39, 40	1, 3, 19, 20, 20, 24, 27, 28, 31, 35, 35, 36, 36, 40, 41,	7, 8, 9, 9, 10, 10, 12, 14, 23,	2, 4, 4, 23, 26, 27, 30, 33, 33,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	A	Attitudes to learning	1	2, 11, 28	5, 8, 13, 30	5, 14, 16, 19, 25, 27, 27, 31, 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 37	3, 4, 19, 24, 24, 29, 38, 39, 39, 40,	23, 24,	3, 7, 15, 16, 28, 34, 37,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	A	Expectations of herself	1	3, 11, 17, 18, 18, 19, 26, 29	16, 17, 18, 19, 21	3, 3, 4, 4, 11, 15, 22, 23, 23, 28, 36	3, 3, 3, 27, 28, 30, 35, 35, 40, 41,	14, 17,	6, 15, 22, 23, 27, 30,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	A	Characteristics of herself as a learner	2	11, 12, 19,	3, 6, 7,		33,	11,	4, 7, 11, 12, 12, 13, 13, 14, 16, 27, 30, 31, 34, 34,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	A	Attitudes to learning	2	4	3, 12, 16, 17, 17, 18,	9, 13,		3, 9, 11,	35,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	A	Expectations of herself	2	12,		1, 3,	3, 6, 6, 7, 20, 25,	5,	4, 5,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	A	Characteristics of herself as a learning practitioner	2	15, 26,		29,	14, 19,		
Chapter 1: Self as learner	A	Learning in the future	2	24, 25,	16, 17,	25, 26, 28, 29, 30,	32, 32, 33,	4, 12, 13,	15, 29, 29, 29, 29, 31,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	B	Motivation	1	12, 13, 17, 19, 20, 22, 24, 28	9, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 25, 10	6, 7, 13, 14, 17,18, 18, 18, 18, 19, 19, 20, 40	3, 19, 21, 22, 23, 25, 32	4, 7, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 21,	3, 13, 14, 15, 16, 22, 22, 36, 36, 37,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	B	Engagement with subject	1	13, 21, 21, 24	6, 8, 13, 33	6, 15, 17, 18, 25, 31, 35	4, 24,	9, 17, 20, 21,	4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 13,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	B	Autonomy and agency	1	4, 12, 14, 16, 25	4, 6, 9, 13, 25	4, 14, 25, 28	3, 19,	4,	
Chapter 1: Self as learner	B	Worth/value/proving herself	1	2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 20, 26	5, 25, 26	18, 22, 36			23,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	B	Self-development, self-actualisation	1	6, 10, 14, 17	3, 9, 25, 29, 30	4, 5		10,	5, 7,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	B	Motivation	2	6, 9, 25,	15,	2, 5,	7, 18, 18, 21, 37, 38,	4,	1, 2, 2, 3, 7, 30, 30, 36, 37,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	B	Engagement with subject	2	13,	6, 18,			5, 6,	5, 8, 29, 30, 33,
Chapter 1: Self as learner	B	Autonomy and agency	2		19, 20,				
Chapter 1: Self as learner	B	Worth/value/proving herself	2	12, 22, 23, 23, 24, 29	11,15, 16		8,		
Chapter 1: Self as learner	B	Self-development, self-actualisation	2		12,				29,

Excerpts from reflective journal: interviews with one of the participants

Excerpt 1: 22.10.19

Second interview: took the train out and met her at a local café. She seemed relaxed and happy to see me again. It was very noisy and therefore difficult to hear at points, but it was so interesting listening to what she had to say. I think there is some good stuff to analyse. Some aspects sounded really positive, but I felt so sad that she did not have the support she could have benefitted from. Wanted to make things better for her with my tutor hat on, but felt I should keep my thoughts to myself. Was that the right decision? She seems to overthink things and worry about getting things right like I do sometimes: felt we could have been friends in other circumstances.

Excerpt 2: 5.3.20

Working through the transcript and remembering how much I connected with her. Important not to let that get in the way of the analysis, though: need to keep the balance between a hermeneutics empathy with a hermeneutics of questioning (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Imposter syndrome seemed to be a big issue for her; I hope she is feeling more confident about her practice now. Her thoughts on the difficulty of asking for help at key moments were really interesting. Does she think that some people 'deserve' more support than others, perhaps?

Excerpt 3: 28.5.21

Writing up the Findings chapters and remembering some of the challenges she was facing. I wonder how she is doing now? I feel a huge responsibility to tell her story and highlight those issues, but also to not make her out to be maybe less competent than I think she probably is in practice. I hope I can get the balance right, anyway.