

Exploring Adult Learners' Transition from the Workplace to Higher Education during
the Covid-19 pandemic

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I, Kristyna Louise Campbell, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

The research aimed to contribute to literature on transition and identity renegotiation, by exploring the return to study from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic, offering insight into the neglect reportedly experienced by some postgraduate (PG) students (1994 Group, 2012). The research questions were, *What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?* and *How do institutional practices impact individual-level transitions?*

Nine postgraduate students, seven full-time and two part-time, contributed qualitative data remotely through email diary entries, digital storytelling tasks, and interviews. The data was first analysed using a narrative thematic analysis to form case studies, followed by Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis. An interpretive-constructionist epistemology, with a psychosocial lens, supported a theoretical framework comprising Schlossberg's model of 4 S's (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022 and Blume's (2010, 2015) theory of identity renegotiation.

Characteristics of transition were largely influenced by the unprecedented pandemic. Some participants implemented former working patterns and professional subject knowledge to cope, while others recognised the incompatibility of behaviours with their student role, impacting identity adjustment. By sustaining workplace traits, some participants regained control over their situations, minimising the influence of unavailable university resources. Culture shock was encountered as support networks were lost. Some felt challenged by the institution's expectations of PG students. Finally, the data shows that part-time students were occasionally absent owing to the perceived lack of support from the university, as their other commitments were not considered.

Implications for institutional practice include: (i) the need to recognise PG diversity; (ii) to support learners' management of 'multimembership'; (iii) to facilitate student autonomy; (iv) to consider the nature and length of induction; (v) to facilitate underrepresented PG students' participation in the academy; (vi) continued exploration of technology use in PG studies for inclusivity and accessibility.

Impact Statement

This research sought to address a gap in the literature regarding postgraduate (PG) experiences of transition to higher education (HE), through the narratives of nine participants returning to HE from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic. While only small in scale, the research offers insight by characterising returning learners' transitions, considering the extent to which institutional practices can affect transition, and the unavoidable influence of the pandemic at this time.

It aimed to enhance scholarship on PG students, their transitions, and identity renegotiation, offering insight into and implications for institutional practice and future research, with suggestions for persevering in times of crisis. Notably, the methodology captured the collective (social constructionist) facets of transitional experiences, the details of which are under-documented in existing literature.

This research may assist in marketing the university to prospective PG students, through welcome, induction, and recruitment roles, as resources are developed to support a diverse student population. These resources might include academic skills workshops, information about learning online, or support with balancing commitments.

Considering lifelong learning and enhancing quality of life, this research may inform prospective students about PG study expectations, and how to prepare. This knowledge might take the form of leaflets about time management or independent study, with input from alumni, for instance. The narratives depicted in the research share the experiences of studying virtually, building community, managing roles, overcoming assumptions, and adjusting to independent practice, all key facets of PG study identified by the participants during Covid-19, some of which are reflected in earlier scholarship.

Organisations encouraging workers to upskill or retrain can employ this knowledge to develop support for colleagues, preparing them to transform skillsets across

contexts. This is significant considering the growing competition in the employment market, and the rise of non-linear learning trajectories.

The knowledge generated from this research may benefit provision within HE. Academic staff may draw on this insight into coping during Covid-19 to enhance relationships with students, and to inform their chosen pedagogy. Knowledge of students' former studies and skillsets can support educators to feel informed about student competence; staff can plan how to support students to build on existing learning. While some students might exhibit transferable skills, others may require more support with adjusting to academic practice, particularly when unfamiliar with remote study. The data revealed that some participants thrived as they were encouraged to share their workplace experiences, while others felt that their expertise was overlooked and lacked acknowledgement. Recognising different strengths and challenges pooled within cohorts may help to develop a more inclusive practice, one where students can begin to overcome institutional barriers and feel as though their contribution matters.

Parts of this doctoral research have been disseminated at conferences throughout the UK, including ECER (2023), University of Warwick (2023), University of Stirling (2022), and BERA (2024). I have also developed articles exploring my role within the academy as a doctoral candidate and a Postgraduate Teaching Assistant (Campbell, 2022, 2024b), and have published the preliminary research study (Campbell, 2024a).

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Chapter 3: Methodology (3.5.2.)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This exploratory research sets out to enrich understanding of adult learners' transitions to higher education (HE), focusing on returning to postgraduate (PG) study from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic. I have investigated the impact of established practices and identities from the workplace on returning to study, and what actions institutions can take to support students during this time, and, importantly, during a global crisis. The research presents narratives from nine PG students from a single UK University, capturing experiences of liminality, boundary-crossing, role change, and identity renegotiation.

Used colloquially, 'transition' often represents movement from one place to another, a state or disposition, a shift, a process, or an upheaval (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). Transitions happen within and between people, associated with events and times of life. For instance, one might encounter personal growth, while another faces professional decay; retirement is an example of both (Schlossberg, 2009 (US)). Transition can create uncertainties leading to renegotiations about who and how to be. Participants in the current research characterise this experience by returning to study during a pandemic. This said, 'transition' is a problematic term. Its varied characterisations and definitions from the literature illustrate this, as such, it cannot be assumed that transition happens or is encountered (see 1.4.2. and 2.2. respectively).

Scholars have used 'transition' and 'change' interchangeably, though these are not the same. For instance, Bridges (1986, 1991) reported that transition represents a psychological process and reaction to change; this reaction is internal, initiating a process of letting go to eventually begin afresh. Instability and uncertainty can occur during transition, as old references become confused in the new reality (Bridges, 1986).

This research employs Schlossberg's conceptualisation of transition developed in a US-based counselling practice defined as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (Goodman, Schlossberg &

Anderson, 2006: 33). Schlossberg's theory of transition is used widely in adult development literature to explore the life course, notably the experiences of returning learners, adult learners, and post-secondary learners.

The term *postgraduate* (PG) describes students' pursuit of learning beyond a bachelor's degree (Welsh, 1980; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013b). The image of PG students in HE in the UK is changing; while many students continue their learning from undergraduate studies (UG), PGs are increasingly returning later in life to pursue interests, to reskill or to enhance their career (Stuart et al., 2008). Students can participate in alternative modes of study (part-time, remote, flexible) (Morgan, 2014), allowing them to manage on-going commitments like work or caring. In addition, PGs contribute to massification and internationalisation of education in the UK (McPherson, Punch & Graham, 2017; White & Ingram, 2021), as they are supported by student visas and scholarships.

The participants in the current research were master's and first year doctoral students. Literature illustrating the PG landscape refers to returning learners as 'returners', 'mature students', 'adult learners', 'independent students', and 'non-traditional students' (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014 (US); Heagney & Benson, 2017 (Australia); Kobena Osam, Bergman & Cumberland, 2017).

1.1. The research context

The research context is explained, illustrating the PG landscape (at the time of fieldwork: 2021-2022) and associated literature (see Fig. 1 – Research Project Timeline). The intention was to explore the return to study from a workplace, but the pandemic and subsequent lockdown resulted in an unexpected shift in focus.

Students enrolled in higher education (HE) during the 2019-2020 academic year were moved to remote study to protect against the spread of SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19), which continued the following year. The lasting influence could be felt as students and staff were encouraged to return safely to campuses in 2021-2022. Because of this, the current study documents returning to study during an unprecedented time, demonstrating the significance of technology to provide support during a crisis, and how existing knowledge and skillsets were activated to manage the situation.

A preliminary study was carried out with five students from the 2020-21 cohort, who engaged exclusively in online learning. Their data highlighted the use of existing knowledge to manage transition, their observations of organisational cultures, the personalisation of support, and the use of technology to support remote study (see 3.5.2).

Contrastingly, the 2021-22 academic year welcomed steady changes in restrictions to university campuses, in line with government guidance. Nine participants were recruited for the main study, the main focus of this thesis. Their data also highlights the resourcefulness of universities in employing technology to avoid disruption.

Throughout the pandemic, students returned home, either in the UK or overseas, and 'high risk' individuals were required to take special precautions to stay safe. These, amongst other things, were likely to influence the participants' studies, continuing roles, or their participation in other practices or memberships. The return to PG study was likely to result in new challenges, the possibility for transition or multiple transitions, and issues with identification.

1.1.1 The Literature

On the whole, the literature cited throughout this thesis is based in the UK, unless stated otherwise. Justification for the relevance of international research in this discussion on UK HE is provided throughout and is detailed upon first mention of the reference. Research on transition and postgraduate study are increasingly informed by scholars in the US, Australia, Canada, and Sweden (see Table 1). To reflect the usefulness of this insight for exploring international students studying in the UK (see Table 3 ‘Sample Demographics’), an international perspective illustrated facets of culture or circumstance not easily grasped otherwise.

The theoretical framework comprises Schlossberg’s theory of transition and Blume’s theory of identity renegotiation, both counselling practices from the US. This study confirms the applicability of American scholarship to the UK landscape, and the suitability of their conceptions for understanding transitions.

Research on PG transition has been dominated by the western world (see 1.2), namely within Europe, the Americas, and Australasia. Table 1 shows the number of results for the search terms “transition”, “postgraduate”, and a country, between 2020-2025. Research from the UK dominates in this thesis, of which a majority occurred after 2010.

Database	UK	US	Australia	Sweden	Canada
Google Scholar	24,000	19,000	19,500	16,900	19,100
UCL Explore	231	78	69	10	76
Taylor & Francis	17,289	51,109	10,561	3,644	9,774
JSTOR	704	451	488	208	447

Table 1 Available articles across five databases.

Universities in the UK, US, and Australia reacted to Covid-19 in similar ways. Although the research topic was not strictly influenced by geographic contexts,

remote study was influenced by international cultural and social experiences. One objective was to avoid disruption to studies, to support international students unable to access the campus or country, and to address widening participation agendas designed to sustain the engagement of individuals from diverse backgrounds. During this time, institutions quickly increased the provision of remote courses. Across the UK, US, and Australia, employment concerns for graduates were heightened as workers were furloughed, and businesses closed, while some of these trends are explored in 1.4., others become apparent in the rationale for individuals staying in HE for longer.

1.2. The Postgraduate Landscape

In UK higher education (HE), students' experiences are influenced by social, cultural, and economic opportunities and concerns, including increasing use of technology, the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and changes to visa restrictions, PG funding and widening participation initiatives, a credential society and competition for employment, and the impacts of marketisation, massification, and internationalisation (McPherson, Punch & Graham, 2017; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022 (US); Taylor, 2022).

PG students have been overlooked, and their student voice and individual-level perspectives neglected (1994 Group, 2012; Coneyworth et al., 2020). This is particularly true of part-time students, whose contribution is rarely recognised (Butcher, 2015; Charlton, 2016). More understanding about returning to PG study and associated transitions is required to develop resources that adequately address student needs (Mellors-Bourne, Hooley & Marriott, 2014; Steele, 2018).

Literature about HE transitions has focused on the experience of first-year undergraduate (UG) and doctoral students (Stuart et al., 2008; Heussi, 2012), while PG transitions are explained through prevailing assumptions regarding academic skillsets and prior knowledge (Robb & Moffat, 2020). Institutional 'one size fits all' approaches to transition have been critiqued because they are based on UG experiences (Sutherland, 2015; Becker, Johnson & Britton, 2019).

A report by the 1994 Group, 'The Postgraduate Crisis' (2012), influenced inquiries into PG experiences by the British Academy (2012) and the Higher Education Commission (2012). The 1994 Group described the devastating long-term consequences of not giving due consideration to their importance and thus the need for them, relaying the significance of PG uptake on the economy and the UK's global research reputation. Their findings influenced the implementation of the PG student loan in 2016, creating opportunities for aspiring PGs unable to self-fund (Charlton, 2016). However, its success was short-lived as concerns about debt grew, highlighting unequal access to academic and career capital (Marvell, 2022). The market's perceived value of PG study increased along with student fees (Stuart et

al., 2008). Research by Scott et al. (2011), describes a 'broken bridge' to research degrees, headlining the absence of support to students striving to flourish in the research community.

There has been growth in research on PG transition in the West, exploring socio-economic status, earlier learning, ethnicity, age, gender, care-experienced, and internationalisation (Marvell, 2022). Scholarship from Australia (Gale & Parker, 2014; Menzies & Baron, 2014) and the US (Prince et al., 2015) is relevant here as they, along with the UK, are increasingly adapting the HE curriculum for lifelong learners, enhancing opportunities for access and participation. Nonetheless, gaps in knowledge and understanding about returning learners and mature students remain; this may correspond with earlier interest in young people's typically vertical transitions - from primary to secondary school to college or university (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010).

The Covid-19 pandemic profoundly impacted research on PG study in UK HE. A Google Scholar search in 2024 of 'postgraduate study', 'UK', and 'Covid-19' revealed 22,700 publications since 2020. Results showed that PG students faced issues with mental health and well-being, adjustment to remote pedagogies and overcoming isolation, as well as highlighting the importance of interactions with academic staff. The current study adds to this growing scholarship, recognising the influence of workplaces and the circumstances created by Covid-19 on returning students.

Recognition of prior work experience, expertise, and organisational commitment has been underexplored (Harris & Whittaker, 2012; Garnett & Cavaye, 2015; Steele, 2018). Prince et al.'s (2015) research on knowledge transfer from the workplace to MBA studies in the US, considers climate, motivation, and career goals. The diversity of support provided to learners in the US owing to their wider spectrum of HE providers may inform how learners are accommodated in the UK. Understanding students' former experiences with learning, will likely help with developing provision that supports students to apply and build on their knowledge. Further insight into learners' professional roles and practices may enhance research on PG well-being, potential barriers, international studies, and online learning, relevant when considering fluctuating recruitment numbers of mature and part-time students

throughout the UK (Steele, 2018; Callender & Thompson, 2018), and the support required for a fulfilling learning experience, helping students to prepare and persevere. Charlton's (2016) investigation of the connection between work and study coined the term 'practitioner-student'. This dual commitment, as someone that studies and teaches at a university, is common during PG study, impacting both studying and learning (ibid.).

Student cohorts comprise returning and continuing learners, pooling a wealth of experience, but they can encounter institutional, cultural, structural, and financial barriers (Heussi, 2012) during participation. Perceived distinctions between students can delay feelings of belonging, owing to imposter syndrome and low self-belief; it is also plausible that student commonalities reduce as age increases (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). In the US, Remenick (2019) characterised support for nontraditional students to include awarded credit, flexible policies, and resources specific to the population. By acknowledging best practice across different countries, the current study can understand international student experiences and expectations, and how the UK may help students to overcome barriers. Based on the 'otherness' experienced by distinctive populations (Sutherland, 2015), scholars argue for the reconsideration of support systems because simply providing access to the academy is insufficient (ibid.).

Social practices can create barriers, leading to discrimination and lack of acceptance. Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022: 10) identify students' psychosocial issues, including "acculturation stress, language barriers, incongruity between cultural values and the values of educational institutions, academic isolation, and socioeconomic inequalities". In Perrucci and Hu's (1995) study also in the US, the international students showed concern for communication, issues of race, and homesickness (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001), which is important given the UK's increasing reliance on international students owing to their impact on the economy. Cruwys et al. (2021: 933) tell how "if an individual has only a single source of social identity, this puts them in a vulnerable situation because they are psychologically invested in just one group membership", however emotional support can be sought through others going through a similar transition (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022).

The next section illustrates the wide-ranging lived realities, skills, and knowledge that PGs contribute to their studies (Fawns et al., 2022). Consideration is given to changing environments and the consequential personal and professional development. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007: 313) contend that more transparency regarding returning to study is required, stating,

“adult students themselves are not a homogeneous group—in any given group there will be different career experiences, different family situations, and variable educational backgrounds.”

Such diversity is evident in the literature set out below.

1.2.1. Postgraduate learners

The postgraduate (PG) population is diverse; Aitken et al. (2022: 772) describe students as “typically older, bringing their professional expertise to the academic environment”. These students often carry out roles within and beyond the academy, which can be challenging for students as they balance the demands of switching between physical and virtual spaces to fulfil the beliefs and behaviours of distinctive identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009). In Canada, research by Jafar (2022) explains how mature students’ mature status is characterised by knowledge and skills from former work and studies. This context mimics the experiences of mature students in the UK who often navigate different responsibilities and require more inclusive and flexible learning experiences.

Canada’s curriculum has a growing focus on PG study and lifelong learning, which is useful to consider as career paths changed owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. Often, PG students’ ‘multimembership’ (Wenger, 1998) leads to partial participation in their studies. Christie, Munro and Wager (2005) use the term ‘day student’ to distinguish between full-time students on campus and infrequent participants. Like UK HE, the Australian context also has growing numbers of non-traditional students (Heagney & Benson, 2017), and increasingly uses flexibility, timely interactions, and feedback to support student participation.

Many PG students are constrained by institutional assumptions. These include the belief that PGs are experts (owing to scarce research about them), they have previously succeeded in higher education, and they are doing more of the same (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010; West, 2012; Bownes et al., 2017; McPherson, Punch & Graham, 2017). These attitudes can create barriers for returning students, as fewer resources are available to support preparation for student expectations (Heussi, 2012; Remenick, 2019). Hence, students often undergo multiple adjustments to feel part of the academic community. Remenick (2019) acknowledged the difficulty for universities to address the needs of diverse populations, but stresses that non-traditional students are often the majority, thus should be better accommodated.

Robb and Moffat (2020: 41) asserted that, “success at undergraduate level does not mean students are prepared for studying at Master’s level”. The distinctions between study are evidenced in student norms, and studies on ‘mastersness’ that feature abstraction, depth, research and enquiry, complexity, autonomy, unpredictability, and professionalism (Bamber et al., 2013; QAA Scotland, 2014; QAA 2020). Notably, expected levels of autonomy differ, described as a “shift of responsibility from the teacher to the learner” (QAA Scotland, 2013: 6). Despite such expectations, the actual experiences of students and staff depends on the culture of the institution and student preparedness (Macleod, Barnes & Huttly, 2019). PG students are reportedly “confident, independent, co-constructors of their learning, working in partnership with lecturers” (ibid.: 495), however, these expectations have created issues with identity renegotiation and acclimatising to academia. Academic staff are aware of the tensions created by assumptions, and so foster relationships designed to support and encourage agentic behaviour (Anderson, Day & McLaughlin, 2006).

Difficulty adjusting is common for continuing and returning students, as the move from UG to PG is a significant one (Bownes et al., 2017). Returning to study in the US is not dissimilar to the UK as Kinder, Koduri and Byrne (2022) illustrate; students encounter social, cultural, and environmental challenges. These can include new settings, different expectations, and taking on a new identity. The assumed competence of PGs can lead to the provision of poorly-informed resources, as undergraduate (UG) facilities are upcycled to address PG needs (Steele, 2018;

Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022). That assumption may be based on former education or workplace experiences. While prior knowledge is advantageous in some disciplines, it is not always transferable, reducing preparedness (Christie et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2023a). Thus, highlighting gaps in pre-induction or re-orientation resources (Mello, 2016; Bownes et al., 2017), support increasingly relied upon for widening participation (Stuart et al., 2008). This insight can be profound given that transition is thought to begin at the first idea of returning to education (Schlossberg, 2011 (US)).

Stuart et al. (2008: 13) describe widening participation as “lifelong learning and educational progression linked to a process of continuing and professional development”. However, Tobbell and O’Donnell (2007) consider that widening participation can be inclusive or exclusive, based on imposter syndrome (Reay, 2002), uncertainty, entitlement (Bamber & Tett, 2000), and lack of preparedness (Sutherland, 2015; Stuart et al., 2008; Aird, 2017). Rightly, Heussi (2012) contends that some students require more individualised support to navigate a prolonged return from outside HE (Mellors-Bourne, Hooley & Marriott, 2014). This requirement reaffirms that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to transition cannot be applied in diverse settings where students commence (or recommence) their studies from different starting points.

Bamber et al. (2019: 237) state the significance of clear expectations:

“Staff assumptions about what students can do, and how they should be supported to reach Master’s level, may be unarticulated, and these unclear expectations may lead some Master’s students to feel ill-prepared for and anxious about PGT.”

Uncertainty can lead to exclusion, so students feel distant from their new setting (Christie et al., 2008). Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012) refer to ‘social displacement’, illustrating how unfamiliarity can push one towards the periphery of a community. The often-short-term nature of PG study requires students to adjust quickly; this overwhelming task can involve hasty familiarisation with institutional norms and

understanding expectations of roles, and developing support networks (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Bownes et al., 2017).

Often, PG students' aspirations, attitudes, and expectations are informed by earlier experiences and self-perceptions (Harris & Whittaker, 2012; Garnett & Cavaye, 2015), stemming from earlier learning including UG studies, or the workplace (Jones et al., 2023b; Willison & Henderson, 2023). Willison (2019) reported from Australia that adaptation and redefinition can help reduce the likelihood of marginality during transition, as existing beliefs can create conflict and confusion until identity renegotiation takes place (Blume, 2010 (US); Steele, 2018). Aitken et al. (2022) expressed the importance of academic staff being aware of students' prior knowledge and skillsets, as their rationale for learning often correlates with professional development. In Australia, White (2023) suggested that by connecting professional and academic practice, students ascribe greater value to their learning as they detect its influence on career prospects; this might be through placements, networking events, or workshops. The bridge described here between work and academia is not dissimilar to the UK context, where nurturing a skilled workforce is prioritised and shaped to address economic need.

Returning to HE might initiate a learning shock (Davidson, 2009), creating discomfort and doubt. Unclear student expectations and institutional practices are reinforced by independent practice during PG study (Aird, 2017), characterised by an "absence of information" (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010: 274), leading to disappointment and confusion (Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989 (US); Steele, 2018; Bamber et al., 2019). However, being seen to participate in independent practice can help legitimise membership in the academic community (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Steele, 2018).

1.2.2. Online Learners

Lockdown during the pandemic demanded a shift to remote learning. Studying remotely offers flexibility, particularly to individuals balancing different roles (Aitken & Loads, 2019; Lee, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, some students simply favoured online pedagogies, while others felt it catered to restrictions with time and location

(Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). In the UK, offering synchronous and asynchronous study options has helped accommodate different modes of study, while research in Australia found remote practices enabled access to HE for international students and diverse cohorts (Bennet & Lockyer, 2004; Redmond, 2011). Earlier literature on online study has been useful for understanding remote teaching and learning and the availability of resources and knowledge implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Enriquez (2013) referred to 'absent presence', as relationships exist within a single device or environment containing the experience, allowing students to determine their proximity from the learning situation (*ibid.*). Autonomy, to be independent and in control, can be achieved by assigning specific objects to study; students can choose how to interact, and when to (dis)connect, while maintaining access to the online environment. Thus, arguably, presence on-campus is not essential for feeling present in the academy.

On the other hand, some students find remote study lonely (Lee, 2021). Interaction style can limit opportunity for informal conversations. Often, online cohorts are large (for instance, massive open online courses, MOOCs) and PG heterogeneity represents many contrasting ideas and beliefs. Theoretically, using options such as break-out rooms during an online session, might encourage participation or continued interactions beyond the session. This highlights the importance of a community even if students do not have a physical space associated with study. Such spaces facilitate meaningful interactions, collaborations, intimate discussions, and a sense of belonging (Lee, 2021; Chen & Bogachenko, 2022). These challenges have also been noted in the Australian context, a growing competitor of online offerings, where remote study has also risen considerably following the Covid-19 pandemic. Chen and Bogachenko (2022) found that group participation helped with engagement, social presence, and perseverance. Virtual learning environments and social media channels can lead to greater involvement with the academy, supporting the development of student identity (Bearman, Ajjawi & O'Donnell, 2022); factors enabling this include shared knowledge, rationale for studying, or a shared interest.

Current research on remote study focuses on community building and sense of belonging (Fawns, Aitken & Jones, 2021b), resonating with research during Covid-

19. This follows Salmon's (2003) belief that online learning is more than a one-way transmission of knowledge, requiring an understanding of how the virtual space works, and its potential. Facilitators need interpersonal skills to encourage communication in a flexible and uplifting environment (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004). More recently, in Chile, drawing on Esteve-Mon, Llopis-Nebot and Adell-Segura (2020), González, Ponce and Fernández (2023) suggested that facilitators should know how to develop online content, recontextualise technical proficiency through pedagogy, support learners to participate, and support students to understand the value of digital tools for professional development. This insight is useful for the UK owing to Chile's experiences with massification which mimics the UK's attempts at widening participation.

Discussions about facilitator expertise on remote platforms increased during the Covid-19 pandemic (O'Dea & Stern, 2022), unearthing barriers to developing a conducive space, including: good rapport, a sense of community, and an engaging environment. Camera use can also be problematic. If not used, facilitators cannot read student reactions, needed to "familiarize themselves with the classroom climate and make adjustments when necessary" (González, Ponce & Fernández, 2023: 62). Some PG students may be unable or unwilling to be seen, for instance if they are sharing workspaces or have insufficient internet connectivity (ibid.). Moreover, being selective about what is shared in online spaces can impact the development of authentic relationships or genuine communities (Lee, 2021).

As noted above, students encounter synchronous and asynchronous learning. While live sessions can encourage community development, Crawford-Ferre and Wiest (2012) suggest that asynchronous activities inspire students to seek support from one another. During the pandemic, UK and US research documented how university students in transition experienced isolation and negative well-being (Gokey, 2021; Santa-Ramirez et al., 2022) as both countries abruptly moved to online study which required prompt adjustment by students and staff, revealing distinct levels of preparedness. As Aitken et al. (2022) contend, social presence nurtures relationships, particularly between students and staff; staff behaviours and personality traits that show caring (being timely and responsive) help students to feel valued and can positively impact their learning.

1.2.3. Part-time Learners

Part-time students frequently have multiple roles and varying motivations to learn (Charlton, 2016); some are parents or carers, others are enhancing their prospects mid-career, while some have financial obligations that prevent full-time study (Butcher, 2015; Steele, 2018). Scott et al. (2011: 99) described students' competence in "planning and developing routines, creating flexible working spaces, making sacrifices and negotiating with partners", and staying motivated. There are fundamental considerations for part-time students, such as affordability, constraint, and convenience (Butcher, 2015; Charlton, 2016). Affordability relates to financial obligations, constraints are existing commitments, and convenience depends on how manageable study is amongst other demands. These considerations counter the assumption that "students have few responsibilities outside of their schoolwork" (Remenick, 2019: 114), showing disregard for the diversity brought to the situation. This is evident in unaccommodating timetables and unrealistic student expectations (Stuart et al., 2008; Remenick, 2019).

Furthermore, part-time learners often experience considerable internal adjustment while partially participating in various pursuits (Prince et al., 2015; Charlton, 2016). Moving from a professional role to a novice can create conflict (Charlton, 2016: 2), owing to the "complex power relationships of the university". However, it is possible to move expertise between domains to support learning outcomes (Prince et al., 2015); these facets of knowledge and identity become developmental resources (Beach, 1999, 2003).

In 2010, part-time PG student figures decreased across UK HE (Butcher, 2015; HESA 2023a, 2023b), just as research into widening participation, social mobility and reskilling the workforce was on the rise (Callender & Thompson, 2018). The decrease was attributed to insufficient funding, increased fees, and more online classes (Remenick, 2019), some part-time students rely on self-funding or their employers for support (Callender & Thompson, 2018). The flexibility and accessibility of remote study that part-timers sought, may justify the rising student numbers from 211,975 (2019) to 254,290 (2021) (HESA, 2023b). The overall UK postgraduate

(taught) population rose by 16% in 2019, and by a further 10% the following year. Enrolment rates were influenced by the pandemic, as well as changes to graduate visas for European and International students (ibid.).

Steele's (2018) thesis on working, part-time PGs notes the institutional policies and practices that marginalise and hinder student participation. She showed how part-time students are often forgotten about when schedules are designed, unlike the 'traditional majority'. Butcher (2015) similarly noted that part-time students are forced to fit into inflexible systems and to take part in opportunities that do not accommodate their diverse needs. This neglect can create feelings of exclusion, hampering attempts at widening participation (Callender & Thompson, 2018; Steele, 2018; Broadhead, 2019).

1.2.4. Mature, Returning, and Adult Learners

Adult learners bring knowledge, beliefs, and values from former roles to their studies (Mellors-Bourne, Hooley & Marriott, 2014). According to Dane (2022), returning learners often approach a transition to HE like a transition into employment, often owing to their age and earlier professional experiences. This indicates that existing transition models (historically informed by undergraduate experiences) may become more inclusive and accommodating to diverse student cohorts should they consider models experienced in other areas of life. While skill and expertise may allow students to appear prepared for study, these can hold them back as they resume a novice role (Aird, 2017; Bamber et al, 2019; Robb & Moffat, 2020). The distance between past and present learning can influence expectations and confidence, creating "feelings of inferiority and of being unworthy" (Aird, 2017: 522), which may also be influenced by perceptions of student identity. Willans and Seary (2011) explain that student uncertainty in Australia relates to "institutional protocols, social interactions [...] other life-role responsibilities" (ibid: 119), not dissimilar to the UK. The tailored transitional support designed to accommodate these challenges, including flexible study and pre-entry modules, which may be insightful for the UK's policies on widening participation and lifelong learning. In research from the UK and US, adult learners demonstrate strong organisational and time management skills, and the motivation to meet objectives independently, helping them to juggle

academic and existing commitments (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014; Heagney & Benson, 2017). This mimics Australia's strong culture of lifelong learning based on adaptability and willingness to learn.

Andersson and Fejes (2005) explained the issues students faced adjusting to HE in Sweden when they repressed earlier learning experiences; this conflicted with their adult education policies prioritising flexibility and developing skills for work. This is not dissimilar to the UK context, who consider flexibility essential to ensuring quality for learners (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015). Repression is not a thing of the past however, and thus can promote socialisation, while also suggesting there is a right way to learn, attributing little value to other experiences. Aird (2017) and Brinthaupt and Eady (2014) propose that a transition could be facilitated by established knowledge, with implications for developing networks and deeper engagement with learning. Participants in Smith's (2006) study found that Australian professional environments prepared students for group work in HE, and that recognition of these skills provided support. It is helpful to understand how Australia's current 'work integrated learning' initiatives shape student participation, much like those in the UK, that aim to bridge the academy and employment. Similarly, Cooper (1999), in a US study, suggested that understanding the applicability of one experience to another led to higher rates of engagement, particularly as participants sensed the significance of their contributions.

Global literature distinguishes between returning and traditional-aged students (Fairchild, 2003; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013a). 'Traditional' is conceptualised as a level of study aligned with age-group, like a bachelor's programme following A-Levels (Gill, 2021). Contrastingly, non-traditional students may be mature or recruited via widening participation initiatives. The latter may feel inspired to attempt acculturation or socialisation as they sense difference from the majority, with the goal of adopting strands of collective identities (Bridges, 1991; Cooper, 1999). Across the UK (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021) and Australia (Stagg & Kimmins, 2014) acculturation and socialisation has influenced educational longevity, as adult learners often spend less time on campus owing to a rise in remote and independent study and the likelihood of working alongside study. The issue of students missing social activities and developing relationships with peers has proved a concern in the UK (Marvell,

2022), the US (O'Connor, 1994; Fairchild, 2003), Australia (Smith, 2006), and Denmark (Gregersen & Nielsen, 2023), hampering opportunities to become familiar with HE norms and associated identities.

Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022) believe that weathering transition with others can help overcome alienation and loneliness (Marvell, 2022). This is consistent with Heagney and Benson (2017: 224) who highlight the significance of “knowing that other people are going through what you’re going through”. The difficulty with developing community in new settings is explored by Willans and Seary (2011) who reported that while making connections can positively influence retention, it should not solely be the responsibility of the student (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010). The support sought by students may come from staff as well as peers; notably, adult learners often sense similarity with academic staff, attributing greater value to feedback from accepted academics (Gravett & Winstone, 2022), whose affirmation is evident through “respect, acceptance, and support” (Brinthaup & Eady, 2014: 132).

Research in Canada presents external memberships as obstacles for learners, leading to studying at unconventional times, or through part-time or distance modes (Teeuwssen, Ratković & Tilley, 2014). This can create role conflict, role overload, or role contagion (Home, 1998). There is potential for the same here in the UK, as this balancing act can create issues with well-being and performance. Conflict arises when incompatible expectations and demands pull an individual in contrasting directions. Feeling overloaded can result from too little time available for tasks. Contagion may arise during one task, as distractions interfere. This last concept connects with ‘spillover’ (see 2.7.) (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000), illustrating how characteristics of a role, membership, or identity, impress on other areas of our lives.

1.2.5. Covid-19

The current study was designed in 2019, when the nation was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. March 2020 marked the first official lockdown, which required everyone to stay indoors - except for key workers from the health care sector (Wright, Steptoe &

Fancourt, 2021). In the UK, individuals could leave their homes for an hour each day for exercise and groceries and eventually formed support bubbles (ibid.). During this time, large-scale events were cancelled, hospitality venues and schools closed, fewer hospital appointments were available, and little access was granted to vulnerable family members (Harari, Keep & Brien, 2021).

For HE, Covid-19 signified a prompt move to online teaching and learning as university campuses closed - 'the Great Online Transition' (González, Ponce & Fernández, 2023; Howard & Tondeur, 2023; Markauskaite, Carvalho & Fawns, 2023). To prevent disruption to learning, students and staff around the world hastily upskilled and adjusted to digital pedagogies, which was a first for many (see Gustafson & Gibbs, 2000 (Australia); Aitken & Loads, 2019 (UK); Eberle & Hobrecht, 2021 (Germany)). Those with limited access to technology risked exclusion (Khan, 2021). Some students were confined to halls of residence, while others returned home as travel restrictions were established (Osobajo & Oke, 2022).

Although remote study has existed in HE for decades (Redmond, 2011; Fawns, Aitken & Jones, 2021a, 2021b) offering provision to global audiences of life-long learners (Gale & Parker, 2011; Casanova & Paguaia, 2022), the success of this was "drowned out by the crowd" (Fawns, Aitken & Jones, 2021a: 218). Existing knowledge was overlooked, evidenced by practitioners' efforts to adapt their pedagogic styles for virtual spaces. There was uncertainty about the use of Zoom, Teams, and subject-specific online tools, not formerly utilised in teaching. Early on, provision was not often evidence-informed, complicating community building and the creation of engaging settings (Littlejohn et al., 2021) but increasing technical competence led to more effective asynchronous and synchronous resources that helped recreate human connection and social relatedness (Eberle & Hobrecht, 2021; Gourlay et al., 2021). The shift to online course offerings had a lasting impact on countries like Greece (Salta et al., 2022) and the Philippines (Casanova & Paguaia, 2022) who formerly relied on their Open Universities, established in the late 1990s. The expansion of remote networks globally can increase opportunity for knowledge and cultural exchange and collaboration. For the UK, these changes help with understanding the international student experience better, its impact on mobility, and notably the experience of learning at partner institutions.

Fawns et al. (2022), with reference to remote PG study, confirmed the significance of human connection and facilitating 'socially meaningful experiences': "people are the most important thing about online learning; trust and relationships are crucial" (ibid.: 559). Strategies to nurture relationships include institutional and non-institutional tools like break-out rooms, video conferencing platforms, and videos and podcasts on asynchronous platforms (Lee, 2021; González, Ponce & Fernández, 2023). As Fawns, Aitken and Jones (2021a: 1) said of the future of online education:

"good online education requires significant planning, the nurturing of a culture, the development of specific forms of educational expertise, and numerous iterations of design and evaluation".

In the context of Covid-19, Adedoyin and Soykan (2023: 866) revealed the negative impacts of online study,

"(i) pandemic-related anxiety will have negative effects on student academic performance, (ii) academic performance of students might be affected by racial, economic and resource differences, and (iii) the larger parts of instructors were not effectively ready to deliver high-quality instruction remotely."

Households without access to technology, where students relied on on-campus internet, struggled to persevere (Eberle & Hobrecht, 2021). The less digitally literate struggled to progress, and students sharing space were often disrupted, hampering participation (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). Many of these challenges prevailed in HE. Khan (2021) discovered that some digital pedagogies did not accommodate learning needs, like becoming independent learners, sustaining motivation, and developing study skills. Additionally, learning materials were not always compatible with the new digital teaching.

Reportedly, many students had relied on their campuses and study spaces to inform academic identity development, but these were unavailable (Eberle & Hobrecht, 2021; Khan, 2021). Limited camera use and opportunities to informally contribute influenced relationship building and socialisation (González, Ponce & Fernández,

2023). Indeed, belonging can have profound implications for adult learners' attrition and retention (Tinto, 2006; Peacock et al., 2020; Dennis & Clifton, 2021); being unable to establish relationships likely impacted adjustment, leading to greater reliance on existing networks. Zile et al.'s (2023) research on postgraduate research students unearthed the significance of supervision on mental health, indicating that access to quality academic and pastoral support is important for wellbeing and resilience.

Staff also suffered during online learning (Watermeyer et al., 2021); it is important to consider how this might have affected students. Many staff members lived and worked in one space, quickly developing resources in unfamiliar formats (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Their spaces were impacted by families and housemates (Yeo & Li, 2022) who hampered work spaces and quiet areas for meetings (ibid.). Access to strong internet connection limited productivity and engagement with the academic community (Littlejohn et al., 2021; Yeo & Li, 2022). Staff felt distanced from their practices, negatively affecting their academic and professional identities (Salta et al., 2022). Around this time, the 'iceberg metaphor' appeared in the literature (Fawns, Aitken & Jones, 2021a) representing the extent of seen and unseen demands placed on facilitators during online provision. The lower part represents the bulk of responsibilities that go unnoticed.

1.2.6. Departing the Workplace

During Covid-19, relationships with work started changing. People were restricted in pursuing careers. The impact on the economy resulted in fewer jobs being available, and many existing workers were furloughed or made redundant (Stuart et al., 2021), making the job market even more competitive. The situation was addressed by more students staying in education following their UG studies, while others returned mid-career or later in life to retrain (Keep, 2020). Notably, students trained in modern technologies, with knowledge of topical issues, can be more appealing to employers (Morgan, 2014), generating insecurities in workers unable to develop their credentials.

As more people return to HE amidst the credential society, non-linear learning careers become increasingly commonplace, facilitated by alternative study modes. These modes accommodate other commitments and conflicts, like ongoing professional roles (Fawns, Aitken & Jones, 2021a, 2021b; Aitken et al., 2022).

Understanding participants' relationships with the workplace was important for the current study. This information illustrated where they had come from, not simply where they were heading. Reportedly, little consideration is given to PGs' prior experiences of work and study when they return to HE, impacting attrition and retention (Morgan, 2015; Jones, 2018). Morgan (2015) argued that this insight can help staff prepare support for prospective students, which is significant when a prolonged break in study has occurred (White, 2023); this support can address and demystify expectations, institutional language, and developing study skills.

Where recognition of prior experience is concerned, the application of knowledge from one domain to another has been overlooked in the literature. 'Horizontal transitions' (Gale & Parker, 2011, 2014; Popov, 2018) involve movement between contexts where individuals share and collect knowledge, creating new understandings (Engeström & Engeström, 2003). Movement between social worlds requires that roles and demands are negotiated, in this instance, academia and the workplace in a time of crisis. Building on knowledge can help with problem-solving and meeting objectives. Horizontal transitions appear in research exploring multi-organisational settings (Engeström & Engeström, 2003), and internships (Popov, 2018, 2023). This connects with Wenger's (1998) 'multimembership', describing participation in distinct settings or groups simultaneously; individuals span boundaries of social practices, sharing information, characteristics of identity, and interpretations of practice (ibid.).

1.3. Transition

This introductory section on transition reviews the following: Schlossberg's theory of transition, transition as a social construction, conceptions exploring the move from previous study or the workplace into higher education, and topics related to transition. The disputed definition of transition is discussed in Chapter 2: Literature Review, drawing on Schlossberg (1981 (US)), Beach (1999), Zittoun (2009), Gale and Parker (2011) and Jindal-Snape (2023). The suitability of Schlossberg's theory to the research is explained through their research on adult development and the life course, exploring returning learners, adult learners, and post-secondary learners.

1.3.1. Transition as Social Construction

It is widely believed that transition is a social construct (Stauber, Walther & Settersten Jr., 2022). As change and experience are bound to contexts and circumstances, transitions often revolve around events shaping the life course, including stage of life, timing, socioeconomic status, culture, organisation, role, identity, and social norms (ibid.; Schlossberg, 1981). A socially constructed view might be influenced by interpretations of social, cultural, or historical events, such as, in the current study, Covid-19. In this research, Covid-19 likely impressed on how roles, communities, and societies formed (Vygotsky, 1930). While social constructions help organise knowledge about society, this cannot represent all members of society, owing to subjective interactions between and within each person, society, and culture. These occur within discourses and social practices, like higher education for example. Within these settings, rituals and expectations exist based on historic norms, influencing how and when transition begins (Stauber, Walther & Settersten Jr., 2022), and likely beliefs about what constitutes as transition based on expectation and eventual interpretation. Stauber, Walther and Settersten Jr. (2022) explain that institutions can determine the timing, procedure, and support for transition. Thus, transition is not believed to happen in isolation; it is relational owing to its interconnectedness with social practices, relationships and memberships, roles, and status (Vygotsky, 1930; Stauber, Walther & Settersten Jr., 2022). Transition support is significant as the unstable position can increase risk of marginalisation and exclusion, as individuals detach from norms and memberships.

Schlossberg's theory of transition in studies of adult learners makes it evident that society and culture largely shape narratives of experience. Her participants drew upon departing from professional memberships or roles, beginnings and endings of relationships, and moving into unfamiliar practices and organisations (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022); each time, the relational aspect of transition becomes apparent, while also signalling the subjectivities of transition and the importance of recognising diverse experiences brought to a setting or community.

1.3.2. Transition according to Schlossberg

Schlossberg conceptualises transition as “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006: 33). Schlossberg's (2008 (US)) theory of transition is employed in the current study to explore characteristics of transition when returning to PG study during Covid-19.

Returning to academia may trigger adjustments corresponding with Schlossberg's characterisations of transition, including establishing support networks (Alsford & Smith, 2013; Gravett & Winstone, 2022; Jones et al., 2023b), adopting different practices or developing skills (Robb & Moffat, 2020; Dreznick, 2022; Willison & Henderson, 2023), and changing self-perceptions or new branches of identity (Scott et al., 2014; Sutherland, 2015; Willison & Henderson, 2023). Based on the likelihood for these, it is possible that transition may occur.

Schlossberg's theory and model of 4 S's is employed widely in education and psychology research, notably in the US, exploring transition coping mechanisms at different times of life, in adult learners and during retirement (Powers, 2010; Schlossberg, 2011; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Lazarowicz, 2015; Neber, 2018). This is valuable for the UK context as the US has experience with employing a diversity of institution types, funding models, and education policies, depicting a breadth of responses. Schlossberg (1981; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022) believes that transition comprises three stages: moving in, moving through, and moving out. In the current research, this could include enrolment, persevering with PG studies, and graduation. Schlossberg's (2008) model of 4 S's (each one in bold below) is

designed to examine individual assets and liabilities during transition and is employed here. The **situation** can reveal a lot about timing, triggers, and the assessment of transition. Reflecting on **self** can uncover psychological resources, like values, behaviours, and resilience. **Support** indicates the availability of networks, like families, friends, or others. Finally, **strategies** reveal the approaches and responses taken to address transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

1.3.3. Topics Connected with Transition

This sub-section further contextualises the current study, with insight into social and cultural experiences intertwined with literature on transition from across the globe, notably in the UK, US, and Australia. While transition has been problematised suggesting that it may be a social construction, it is described in earlier research as a 'real thing' and nonetheless accounted for in various institutional ways. An example of this includes transition and student identity: a student identity is connected to various social and cultural expectations, while also influencing one's sense of self and their reactions to the environment.

These sub-sections include, but are not limited to, access to HE, the implementation of technology, support available to learners, and identity adjustment by learners in transition.

1.3.3.1. Access and Barriers to HE

Understanding how access and barriers influence transition is important for the current research, highlighting the changing needs of learners. Cross (1981) characterised barriers as institutional, situational, psychological, or dispositional, the symptoms differing from person to person. These have been explored extensively in US scholarship (Ekstrom, 1972; Hardin, 2008; Kobena Osam, Bergman & Cumberland, 2017); similar social issues are thought to permeate the UK HE system, including socioeconomic disparity and access to information. Notably, issues associated with access and barriers include how the curriculum is designed to accommodate students, how communities are developed within the institution, language barriers, and the social norms designed to include or exclude. Universities support returning to study by offering alternative modes of study, merit for former

study or work, or through funding opportunities like council tax exemption or temporary paid roles (European Commission, 2012; Saar, Täht & Roosalu, 2014; Morgan, 2014; Cagliesi & Hawkes, 2023; Travis et al., 2023). Willans and Seary (2011) contend that opportunities should be communicated to reduce the stress of the commitment.

Transition programmes can support acculturation, as students adjust behaviours to identify with different cultural groups (Hardin, 2008; Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022). In HE, this might include buddy and mentorship schemes, or by pairing students with established peers (ibid.). Students returning after a prolonged period often have extensive skillsets, although these can create social and academic disadvantages (Hardin, 2008; Kobena Osam, Bergman & Cumberland, 2017). Research from the UK (Willans & Seary, 2011; Burnell, 2015), US (Karmelita, 2018), and Australia (Stone, Downing & Dymment, 2021) suggest that knowledge about students' needs and barriers may inform institutional resources, like networks so students do not weather transition alone, support for academic writing and reading, or computer literacy.

Scholarship across Europe acknowledges the limited consideration given to the impact of society on student enrolment (Saar, Täht & Roosalu, 2014). Examples include the role of family, community, economics, politics, the environment, and culture (Remenick, 2019). In Chapter 3: Methodology (Participant Case Studies), Chapter 4: Findings, and Chapter 5: Discussion, the social and psychological facets of transition are acknowledged, capturing a transparent depiction of how different characteristics can influence returning to study.

Covid-19 both reinforced and added barriers for students; individuals were unable to travel or return to campus to study, some lacked access to internet (Brown-Wilsher, 2021), while others felt marginalised without a community or support network (Kahn, 2021). Students with little experience of remote study struggled to access knowledge on unfamiliar platforms, with few opportunities to clarify content through critique (O'Regan, 2020; Goldstone & Zhang, 2022); confidence in independent study was also hampered as learning materials were not always adequately developed for remote provision.

1.3.3.2. Implementation of Technology

Technology use in HE has intensified, and with this, issues that may influence transition; these can include student and staff training/readiness to use technology, problems regarding the digital divide, and the adjustment to communication and interaction in remote spaces. The likely influence on transition includes how students form communities (Lee, 2021), their attitudes towards learning materials (Chen & Bogachenko, 2022; González, Ponce & Fernández, 2023), or their chosen mode of study (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Gast, 2013; Aitken & Loads, 2019). Reasons for this include the Covid-19 pandemic and widening participation strategies (Department for the Economy, 2018; AdvanceHE, 2020b; Gov.uk, 2023), which have advanced research on digital pedagogies and virtual learning environments (Martzoukou et al., 2020 (Scotland, Ireland, Greece)).

Together, widening participation and technology create social mobility without the need to relocate and affords the flexibility students require to study alongside other demands, which helped during the pandemic. When HE is accessible to diverse and disadvantaged communities, learning becomes more inclusive; while this can be enriching for students, both the institution and workforce may also benefit from insight and skills brought to the situation by divergent learners (HE Professional, 2023).

Following online migration during the pandemic, students in the UK have since transitioned to offline learning, stirring debate about conducive strategies for teaching and learning (Zhao & Xue, 2023). Virtual platforms have enhanced accessibility around the world, as asynchronous resources like transcriptions and class recordings cater to rising numbers of non-traditional and lifelong learners as seen in Australia (Stone & Springer, 2019) and the UK (Zhao & Xue, 2023). These opportunities allow students to choose their pace and format, helping them to prepare for classes and manage study schedules. However, the digital divide became apparent in students who appeared in their roles as 'digital natives', but who had previously encountered limited integration of taught digital skills in prior learning owing to assumptions in competence made by staff (González, Ponce & Fernández,

2023). This led to a series of adjustments in their experience with content delivery, assessment, and relationship building (ibid.). Reports show that preparatory classes for returning learners help with digital literacy (Bamber et al., 2019). Students required support with virtual resources across the US (Moore, Vitale & Stawinoga, 2018) and UK (Jones et al., 2023b), often corresponding with student age, socioeconomic background, and access to technology. Therefore, while technology presents opportunity for some adults, it also has the potential to exclude (Cross, 1991; Karmelita, 2018), marginalising individuals and impeding their learning (Reay, 2018).

1.3.3.3. Student Support

Based on the diversity of PG students, adjusting to study is likely to vary depending on the assets students have available (Schlossberg, 1981). For instance, when departing the workplace, one might require support with establishing relationships having lost a stable network, while another might prioritise help regarding academic study skills. Exploring student support will help assess the suitability of resources across the current landscape, unearthing gaps. Support might appear differently owing to Covid-19, as access to campuses was limited, and remote study was impacted by unique circumstances (work space, internet access, shared space, other roles and duties). Support in HE can be helpful during transition as individuals adjust to new expectations and norms within the culture, new learning styles and different resources, and seek connection with the new environment and academic community.

Being on campus can support development of student identity and sense of belonging, however, encouraging adult learners to participate is not always easy (Gast, 2013) as they prioritise academic activities above informal and social events. Research from America illustrates that there is a correlation between student support and economic impact goals. Gast (2013) believed that boosting attainment for adult learners would positively influence the 'individual and society'. Similarly, in the UK, HE is relied upon for world leading research and knowledge exchange, notwithstanding human capital.

Technology has meant that students around the world can attend more experiences remotely, but online environments do not always address their diverse needs, as Guppy et al. (2022) found across six countries. Earlier research in Australia by Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) and later by Maldon and Pedlow (2023) contended that institutional support tailored to student demands may foster 'belonging', supporting students to feel enthusiastic about participating in-person and virtually. Kasworm, Polson and Fishback (2002) agree, suggesting that student-informed programmes can promote successful transition and course completion. Building on these points, Parks, Evans and Getch (2013) in the US, suggested that belonging can support adult learners' adjustment to student identity, as they reflect and connect with others in transition (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022; Raaper, Brown & Llewellyn, 2021).

Resources for a heterogeneous population should be informed by who the students are, where they come from, and where they are heading, because adults often bring diverse experiences, skills and training, relationships, networks, and barriers or responsibilities to the setting (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022).

Knowledge of student demands can aid staff in providing support that is sensitive to students' lives. When absent, students may rely on established networks rather than institutional resources (Kasworm, 2008; Gast, 2013). Morris (2023) confirmed the significance of clearly signposting PG information, particularly for students returning to study after a break or who are adjusting to the dominant system from abroad; this could be via mentoring or study skills. It is likely that Covid-19 has drawn attention to what can arise if standard educational modes are disrupted, leading to a clearer indication of how institutions might respond to crisis in terms of support and provision.

1.3.3.4. Identity Adaptation

Exploring identity in this research will help draw out prevailing assumptions about PG learners, from both students and staff. Recognising these assumptions may offer implications for transition, and how students adjust relationships and roles (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006). Identity adaptation is a HE transition issue because it corresponds with the social and cultural context the individual is

adjusting to, which may influence how academic tasks and relationships are responded to.

Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010) reported that PG students are often depicted as experts in HE, however the use of technology across physical and virtual campuses has made being an expert more complicated. Poorly informed PG resources have unsuccessfully addressed their needs (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010; Jones et al., 2023a), portraying the respective requirements for PG and UG. Notably resources in short supply for PGs begin with the application process and subsequently funding. There are reportedly fewer opportunities to develop relationships in participatory learning activities, and a shortage of mentoring. This can marginalise students, hindering movement to and from the periphery, challenging their identification with the institution or student identity (Kasworm, 2008). Babineau and Packard's (2008) study speaks to the current research as it carves out the support required by returning learners to adjust strands of identity; this US study has implications for understanding nontraditional student experiences in the UK. Institutional support can help students feel that they matter, without this, they may feel disconnected from the experience (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022).

PG study is often characterised by 'independent practice' (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010), referring to managing one's own study schedule or tasks, working exclusively on assignments, and discovering necessary resources for support (ibid.). This may have been heightened for students studying remotely during the pandemic, as they were challenged with developing connections with academic culture and community using virtual platforms. To achieve independence, one might distance themselves from peers and refrain from collaborating; however, this can hinder relationships and adaptation to student identity, norms, and behaviours (Karmelita, 2018). In Scott et al. (2011), PG students felt these interactions influenced their learning more so than knowledge transmission, stressing the importance of relational practice. Further, feedback from the academic community can support students' understanding of progression, whether they are meeting academic expectations and if they fit in, which is not as easily sensed at a distance.

1.3.4. Summary of topics

These topics demonstrate that PGs bring complex situations, needs, life stories, and, consequently, unique encounters with what can be understood as a transition to HE. The literature indicates that better understanding of the diversifying population would inform support for students, contributing to a learning experience that fosters community, identity, and the establishing of connections within the setting (Jones et al., 2023a).

In theory, the emergence of technology has increased accessibility to education, while also emphasising the digital divide; however, growing scholarship recommends developing virtual platforms for students (Markauskaite, Carvalho & Fawns, 2023). Existing PG support is rarely designed for their needs owing to assumed competence obtained at UG level, creating potential barriers to participation (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010; Guppy et al., 2022). These assumptions can also influence feelings of belonging, with implications for motivation and retention. Lastly, the expectations of PG student roles and academic practices remain unclear, creating uncertainty about how students are doing in the returned-to setting, thus emphasising the significance of re-induction and feedback to PGs (Scott et al., 2011; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018).

1.4. Rationale for the research / Research Position

Within this rationale, I describe my positionality and the perceived need for the research, along with my interest in and assumptions about PG study.

The demand for PG research is twofold; academic literature details little understanding of the PG population, but there is also a need for insight into returning to study during Covid-19.

1.4.1. Observed demand

This research stems from observations of peers I had as a master's student. Returning to study from the workplace, I was fascinated by the approaches to learning adopted by peers, and how these influenced their roles within our academic community. Cultures and identities were merged during our studies, despite the characteristics that differentiated us; this revealed the possibility of conflicting needs and expectations within the setting. I considered that who we were as students was informed by earlier relationships and frames of reference. This led to the belief that people could hold multiple identities, and that these could change (Blume, 2010, 2015 (US)), corresponding with findings from the US,

“...scholars, practitioners, and institutional leaders alike must continue to examine within-group differences and seek to understand what individual students need based on their multiple identities” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015: 95).

Understanding students' differences may be useful for addressing gaps in knowledge and experience, so that support can be tailored (academic, pastoral, financial) to help overcome challenges faced during their return. This support may also facilitate their adjustment to the academic community and environment.

My position revealed commonalities with the participants, inspiring reflection on potential bias. At the time of the fieldwork, I also studied at the host institution, albeit at doctoral level, and had previously returned to higher education (HE) from the workplace. Importantly and in addition, both the participants and I experienced the effects of Covid-19 on study. Visualising myself in the research picture, I deliberated

how this might influence the research process and outcomes, and how it informed my assumptions and beliefs about PG study (see 3.3. and 5.8.).

I contemplated the coping mechanisms I had used to overcome the differences between work and student life. This led me to consider how this research may impact prospective student preparedness, the ways academic staff or workplaces develop support for diverse cohorts, and what effect the disruption to normal HE practice might have. This insight was important for understanding the decision-making process for returners.

These reflections were followed by an exploration of related scholarship, revealing little about returning PG learners from the workplace, not least the effect of a national lockdown as I began my research. The last aspect expanded considerably over the course of this study.

1.4.2. The need for additional scholarship

1.4.2.1. Addressing the gap in research

Further research on postgraduate (PG) studies was demanded by the 1994 Group (2012), whose members comprised small-scale UK-based research-intensive HEIs, which, at the time, included the host university. Earlier reports revealed that PGs had encountered neglect concerning funding and support services, despite the continued growth of cohorts and their notable contribution to the university, society, and the economy. Menzies and Baron's (2014) study on international postgraduate transition in Australia is insightful for the UK as their curriculum is largely student-centred, focusing on student well-being; notably, they acknowledge how students might acquire alternative support where the institution is unable to provide it. Since 2017, UK postgraduate taught student figures have risen from 470,160 to 706,995 in 2021, while postgraduate research students only increased from 111,850 to 113,315 (HESA, 2023a; HESA, 2023b), indicating that this growing population demands further attention.

The literature illustrates transition spanning many fields across the globe including education, nursing (Schumacher & Meleis, 1994; Kralik, Visentin & van Loon, 2006;

Liehr & Smith, 2014 (US)), counselling (Schlossberg, 1981), and organisational theory (Nicholson, 1984 (US)). Some researchers explore moving between roles and environments (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Schumacher & Meleis, 1994; Wenger, 1998; Popov, 2023), while others document horizontal shifts within a single setting (Schultz, 1991 (Denmark)).

Importantly, scholars reported that PG support is often modelled on undergraduate (UG) experiences, likely misinforming how participation and engagement is encouraged, and the approaches taken to addressing student needs. This could hamper the experience for diverse cohorts known for studying in full-time, part-time, remote, or flexible modes (Gale & Parker, 2014; Butcher, 2015; Charlton, 2016; Steele, 2018), and from different demographics, where socio-economic status, ethnicity or culture, or carer status has influenced participation (Travis et al., 2023). Research identifies resources for PG study, including study skills support, academic writing, and demystifying independent study (Morris, 2023), however little data exists evaluating how successful these have been.

Contrastingly, research on UG experiences abounds, often conceptualised as a vertical transition (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011; Popov, 2020), assuming “that moving on will in some way be moving up” (McQueen et al., 2009: 5). Correspondingly, Crane et al. (2016) add that in Australia information and support for UGs is also more readily available, likely owing to the larger population having warranted more attention, whereas PG unpreparedness can be attributed to unclear expectations, inaccessible resources, and limited careers support (ibid) – this highlights knowledge and experience gaps that if accommodated could enhance the student experience. Research on doctoral studies is growing in the UK, exploring the lengthy commitment, and transition into professional life (Leonard et al., 2006; John & Denicolo, 2013; Coneyworth et al., 2020).

The current study happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, presenting HE with new challenges (see 1.2.5.). Earlier literature documented the impact of emergency situations on education, including natural disasters, attacks and shootings, and epidemics or pandemics (Littlejohn et al., 2021), offering insight into responses by institutions and society. However, the full force of Covid-19 was yet to be

experienced. The current research is framed by this unprecedented context and builds on understanding of study during a global crisis.

1.4.2.2. Addressing PG assumptions

The under-documented PG experience has led to assumptions about students, which may influence their adjustment to study, and how positively they view the experience. Notably, PGs are believed to be expert learners because they completed an undergraduate degree. The absence of research implies there is little to be concerned about (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010). White (2023) reported that universities often assume PGs are 'confident and independent', but that these traits emerge because of personalised institutional support. While PGs may project characteristics of alternative identities upon returning to study, they may feel insecure about studying after time away from the setting.

Assumptions about PG students has led to limited support being available, thus PGs placing greater value on induction. Induction commonly features at the start of term, following enrolment. To help students settle into their role, social events, society fairs, and programme meetings (detailing key information) are available. Their purpose is multifaceted, depending on student motivations to study and institutional aims. Kinder, Koduri and Byrne (2022: 1) found that induction informs students about "campus logistics and interpersonal belonging", whereas Robb and Moffat (2020) suggest that online induction can illustrate the support available and how to develop study skills. Returning students may encounter a 're-induction'. Re-induction might go over student expectations, with pointers about PG skills and demands (Jones et al., 2023b). Jones et al. (2023b) and Willison and Henderson (2023) identified that some PGs desired to develop academic competence with the guidance of staff as well as having the opportunity to collaborate with peers. Reportedly, PGs wanted more information about what their studies entailed and suggested that informal networks with peers should be emphasised; these challenge the 'expert' assumption in earlier claims. This is a significant gap to address, as it may influence performance and completion.

1.4.2.3. Bridging the workplace and the academy

Literature on returning learners from the workplace details snippets of experience brought to their studies (Coneyworth et al., 2020, Travis et al., 2023). The shortage of this scholarship reinforces Martin et al.'s (2014) call to bridge identities across organisational and educational contexts, indicating that understanding how returning learners "form and manage their identities is vital to understanding their motivations, barriers to learning, and support needs" (Brunton & Buckley, 2020: 1). Additionally, Jones et al. (2023b) claim that students' experiences with education, class, and society can inform our understanding of transition (Bayfield, 2023; Travis et al., 2023). This knowledge could enhance preparedness for study, impacting enrolment, retention, and attainment of PG students (ibid.).

The diversity of learners characterise the dynamic HE landscape, redefining what it means to be a student. However, little consideration is given to these traits in practice and policy design, creating issues with acculturation, absorbing characteristics of another culture into one's own; retention, student perseverance; and identity renegotiation (Blume, 2015), integrating ways of being into one's identity portfolio. Student background, culture, or prior learning, can impact personal investment, self-perception, and engagement, ultimately influencing student preparedness to learn (Jones et al., 2023b). This corresponded with Tinto's (2006) earlier US study which revealed that the quality of transition may influence student success.

1.4.2.4. Understanding lifelong learning

The path to academic enhancement has evolved in recent years, to include a dynamic population with wide-ranging rationales. This calls for contemporary insight into the return to HE to understand how aspects are experienced; this includes, widening participation initiatives, induction programmes, study modes, funding, and how students are supported to employ skills across contexts.

Historically, progression was perceived as linear, often with the goal of employment (Yorke, 2006). Graduates' knowledge and skills provide a competitive advantage, although these require updating throughout employment (ibid.). A competitive labour

market has influenced continued study after an undergraduate degree, to obtain higher-level qualifications (Evans et al., 2010). Employability skills are increasingly included in the curriculum, through work placements and workshops on communication and strategizing, helping students to recontextualise knowledge and model attributes of an employee (see the Framework for Embedding Employability in Higher Education, AdvanceHE, 2020a).

The Covid-19 pandemic inspired many students to stay in education, owing to the short supply of jobs available. This, and the credential society (Bull, 2016), generated insecurities in professionals around the globe (Boeren, Roumell & Roessger, 2020), particularly in those laid-off in the UK's 2020 recession, influencing workers to reskill to enhance their career prospects. However, many adults return for self-fulfilment, enhancing their quality of life (Jafar, 2022). The non-linear path of lifelong learning has become commonplace, leading to frequent negotiation between roles and identities (Blume, 2010) across boundaries, like work and study (Engeström & Engeström, 2003).

Universities have developed opportunities for participation in HE, including widening participation initiatives to recruit students from underrepresented backgrounds (Department for the Economy, 2018; AdvanceHE 2020b; Gov.uk, 2023), designing programmes in various modes, and by providing PG funding and financial assistance. Despite these attempts, widening participation at PG level continues to unearth issues with student representation, socioeconomic inequalities, inaccessible social practices, PG funding, the expectations of PG study, and 'pre-arrival support' (Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2020, 2022). As PG cohorts evolve and participation in HE grows, consideration for student needs during their move into new roles and environments is required, because the 'one-size-fits-all' provision does not appear to be working (Alsford & Smith 2013; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016).

1.4.2.5. Summary

This section detailed the research rationale, opening with reflections on similarities between my experience of PG study at the host university and the participants', during Covid-19. Justification for the research is provided, capturing the overlooked

PG experience despite their contributions. The growth of this population can be attributed to Covid-19 and the rise in lifelong learning. Resources for PG students have been informed by assumptions about competence, leading students to rely on 're-induction' to unpick university expectations. Scholarship conveys a lack of awareness for PGs' former experiences of learning within and beyond the academy.

1.5. Thesis Aims

To formulate an extensive review of literature on transition

To compile literature documenting student transition in HE, I sought scholarship exploring the experience in view of Covid-19. This acknowledged issues of access and participation, the impact of technology, student support, and identity renegotiation, as well as influences listed in Chapter 2: Literature Review: induction, support, community, study skills, expectations, and preparedness.

To enrich understanding of returning to study from the workplace during Covid-19

I aimed to understand the experience of returning to postgraduate study from the workplace during Covid-19; to learn about how the academy can support adult learners through transition, and what characterises this support during a pandemic. This knowledge sought to contribute subjectivities of experience to scholarship on adult learners, the PG landscape generally, and non-linear and horizontal transitions, apprehending how prior learning, preparedness, existing communities, and networks influence transition.

To understand the challenges for returning PGs

I sought to address the ongoing neglect of PGs in HE research, their unique barriers, and what support or resources are required to persevere. This research is significant for the growing literature on postgraduate students. Insight is aimed at academic staff and workplace colleagues, for realising and supporting the return to study.

To identify assumptions underpinning institutional practices

Literature has revealed that understanding about PG learners is historically based on the experiences of other learners in the academy, forming assumptions that persist. The current research aims to transparently depict the return to study, informing how PGs are perceived and supported, thus influencing the design and implementation of resources. This aim was motivated by the misunderstandings of PGs arising in the literature, influencing institutional and social practices; these included assumptions about student academic competence and their confidence fulfilling the role. I hope to reveal ways that universities and workplace organisations can share, adapt, or adjust

their support for learners, particularly considering the growing diversity of PG cohorts, the rise in upskilling and retraining by returning learners, and the implementation of employability skills in the curriculum.

1.6. Research Questions

An exploration of existing scholarship and identification of significant gaps in the field has informed the research questions, devised to investigate the experiences of learners returning to PG study from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic through the lens of transitions.

1. What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?
2. How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?

1.7. Structure of the thesis

In Chapter 2: Literature Review, scholarship on contemporary higher education is considered, along with the conceptual framework for the current study, comprising transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984, 2008 (US)) and identity renegotiation theory (Blume, 2010, 2015). Transition conceptualisations are explored, focusing on experiences of returning to study. Consideration for the workplace is given, looking at organisational culture, support networks, culture shock, and socialisation.

Transition is explained through a synthesis of scholarship, notably Schlossberg's model of 4 S's, regularly employed in research and counselling to determine individual assets and liabilities to cope with change (Heppner, 1998; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). Understanding how individuals are impacted emotionally and practically, has generated a holistic view of the experience (Scott et al., 2014). While identity renegotiation is primarily visited through Blume, the literature covers social identity, possible selves, and communities of practice too, acknowledging connection, interaction, and identification during transition.

Chapter 3: Methodology, addresses and defends the research design, identifying its aims and objectives. The research questions are reiterated, and my positioning is considered. The design is discussed in the context of Covid-19, detailing the sample, host institution, and resources available to students in 2021-2022. The research methods (email diary entries, digital storytelling, and interviews) are discussed, with justification for their suitability for the research. A rich explanation of how the two analysis were undertaken is offered: Narrative Thematic Analysis and Reflexive Thematic Analysis. A timeline illustrates the fieldwork, presenting data collection and analysis over three separate collection stages. A critique of ethical considerations is offered.

The latter part of Chapter 3: Methodology comprises three participant case studies (3.12.). These exploratory case studies (Yin, 2003) stem from a narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). The entire dataset was employed to construct these, including quotations from email diaries and interviews, and the digital storytelling

artefacts. The structure of these follows Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg's (2022) presentation of case studies using the 4 S's.

In Chapter 4: Findings, data from all nine participants is presented, based on the email diaries and interviews. This is structured using domain summaries characterised by Schlossberg's 4 S's – situation, self, support, and strategy. Domain summaries open with a visualisation of the themes, orienting the reader. The data is described in an illustrative manner, offering semantic and latent meaning.

In Chapter 5: Discussion, key themes are synthesised with theory. This chapter organises interpretations and evaluations of the data with the theoretical framework employed, explicitly addressing the research questions to reveal the contribution to knowledge. Limitations of the study are explored, recommending changes for future research. The implications for practice are presented along with suggestions for their implementation, during and beyond Covid-19. Finally, reflections on my positionality, effectiveness of methods, and the expectations of the research, are given.

Chapter 6: Conclusion, brings the research to a close. The research questions are reiterated, with explanation for how the aims were met. A statement is offered about transition in the context of the research and Covid-19, using characteristics from the data. Key findings are summarised, with explanation for their significance; these are presented in two parts, firstly identifying who the findings are for, and secondly what they are for. Finally, the calls to action are presented, explaining the usefulness of the data and how it can be used going forward.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Introduction

This review explores the transition landscape, focusing on higher education (HE). Scholarship is synthesised depicting the return to study from the workplace, highlighting the impact of organisational culture, support networks, culture shock, and socialisation, amongst other things. The purpose of this review was to consider the major theories of transition and identity, by exploring conceptualisations and metaphors, to develop a rich contextual understanding of the field. This has informed the theoretical framework, the latter part of the chapter, comprising Nancy Schlossberg's Transition theory (2008) and Thomas Blume's (2010) Identity Renegotiation theory. This latter section explains the critical thinking about pertinent theory on transition and identity, and their relevance for exploring the complexities of returning to study during Covid-19.

The current study explores the unique scale and impact of the Covid-19 crisis on higher education, and the individuals returning to the setting during this time. This event will be further illustrated through reference to on-going critiques of working from home (2.6.2.) and spillover and balance (2.7.).

In the first section, Transition, conceptualisations are introduced, exploring their differences between levels and modes of study. To follow is Schlossberg's work, notably their model of 4 S's, used to determine assets and liabilities of individuals in transition (Schlossberg, 1981, 2008). The second part of the framework, identity renegotiation theory (Blume, 2010, 2015), features later in the review, stipulating that identity formation is a collective activity, through interactions and evolving narratives over the life course. This is examined with social identity theory, possible selves, socialisation, and communities of practice, demonstrating the influence of community and culture on exiting the workforce and enrolling in HE.

Literature on boundary crossing is also considered, for those departing the workforce to re-enter study, and those participating in both (Engeström & Engeström, 2003;

Smith, 2006; Scott et al., 2014); these serve as horizontal or non-linear transitions. However, individuals working and studying simultaneously might be experiencing both a vertical and horizontal transition; their choice to pursue these together may have been influenced by the pandemic, involving mostly remote activity. The literature exhibits ways that transition can be facilitated, and the influence of social and cultural practices on these. Coping mechanisms appear changeable and circumstantial, adjusting or falling away over the life course (Heppner, 1998; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022), as considered in Chapter 5: Discussion.

Literature in this chapter is predominantly from the UK. However, growing scholarship from the US and Australia features too, as their respective HE systems share similarities with the UK, as do their reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic (see 1.1.1.). These similarities have included policies on access and participation, English provision, and teaching and assessment styles. During Covid-19, these countries focused on developing remote provision, ensuring that students unable to attend campus (notably international students) sustained their engagement. Research from the US has further affirmed the suitability of Schlossberg and Blume's practices to the framework, while insight from Europe and the Western World provides an international perspective required when exploring a sample of mostly international students.

2.2. Transition

UK higher education (HE) has become a dynamic site for learning following massification, internationalisation, and the credential society. While this has developed opportunities for global citizens, the difference between students has made providing support to this heterogeneous group more complicated, as depicted in research from New Zealand (Amundsen, 2022), Australia (Nelson et al., 2006) and Canada (Jafar, 2022). Resources provided to postgraduates (PG) but designed for other levels of study, have left students feeling unsupported and unprepared (ibid.). Rather, what students appear to want are staff and administrators that recognise their diversity (Gale & Parker, 2011; Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2022). The little understanding about PG transitions has been problematic (1994 Group, 2012); hence, the current research seeks insight for academic staff supporting this process, for prospective students on coping and strategising, and for organisations supporting employee upskilling. Individual-level narratives from the current research will inform how individuals can prepare to manage transition (Evans et al., 2010; Karmelita, 2016).

While scholarship from the UK dominates in this review (Morgan, 2015; White & Ingram, 2021; Morris, 2023; Travis et al., 2023), research on student transitions has flourished across the western world, to include the US, Australia (White, 2023), and Germany (Eberle & Hobrecht, 2021), featuring studies of international students.

During Covid-19 (2020 onwards), research on student transition (interpreted as a change in circumstance) largely focused on moving from on-campus to online study (Gokey, 2021; González, Ponce & Fernández, 2023; Howard & Tondeur, 2023; Markauskaite, Carvalho & Fawns, 2023). This headlined other encounters like returning home or relocating (Osobajo & Oke, 2022), adjusting to new pedagogies or technologies (Smith Curtis, 2023 (US); Turner, 2024 (US)), and becoming more independent learners (O'Dea, 2023; Santa-Ramirez et al., 2022). Students adapted to alternative forms of assessment, communicated in innovative ways on new platforms (Hobbs and Whitsett, 2023 (US)), and created remote spaces to fulfil

studies (Littlejohn et al., 2021). This literature shows how Covid-19 impacted students and staff.

Schlossberg's theory of transition (2008) is discussed throughout the Literature Review, justifying the chosen conceptualisation to explore returning to study during Covid-19. Although centred on Schlossberg's model of 4 S's, various theories and metaphors from the field are also analysed. Interestingly, Schlossberg's theory gained considerable momentum during the pandemic as an increasing body of scholarship used her ideas to explore HE (see Gokey, 2021; Hobbs & Whitsett, 2023; O'Dea, 2023; and others), further affirming its suitability for the theoretical framework. There is bountiful research on the developmental nature of transition, particularly young people's linear transitions (Gale & Parker, 2011). Gale and Parker (2011) have however claimed that the HE experience for adults is dominating the gradually broadening field, while returning and accessing HE is less explored.

Some research misrepresents the adult student population suggesting that transition still occurs in outdated linear ways (Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018), despite the multiplicity of study modes catering to non-linear learning across the globe (see Shaw's work in South Africa (2010) or Blair, Cline & Wallis (2010) from the UK for examples). Scholars are increasingly studying students' lived realities to understand how institutional practices can accommodate diverse needs (ibid.), helping build connections with the new setting.

2.2.1. Transition and Change

Transition is associated with various research topics, metaphors, theoretical frameworks, and perspectives, resulting in little agreement of its meaning (Gale & Parker, 2011). In the current research, Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson's (2006: 33) conceptualisation of transition has been adopted, defining transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles".

The terms transition and change have been used interchangeably, though some argue that transition occurs within changes (Bridges, 2001; Armstrong, 2009).

Through a psychological lens, Bridges (2001) uses 'shift' and 'process' to distinguish between the terms, describing change as an adjustment to a situation, like a new role, whereas transition is the departure from one state to another, with implications for identity as attributes of the new setting are adopted. Armstrong (2009: 14) also contends that "Change is the outer force, while transitions are the internal psychological processes that individuals go through as they cope with change". Similarly, Merriam (2005: 3) suggested that "Transitions are periods of changes in our lives that seem to alternate with periods of stability". Based on this, our lives appear subject to shifts, spurring on transition to new ways of being. Bridges' (1991) and Bridges and Mitchell (2000) argue that transition begins with an ending, as the individual breaks from known norms before becoming liminal (Merriam, 2005); this involves the ending, the neutral zone, and the new beginning. In the current study, returning students may perceive departing the workplace as an ending too. Bridges and Mitchell (2000: 30) state that,

"Transition is the state that change puts people into. The change is external (the different policy, practice, or structure that the leader is trying to bring about), while transition is internal (a psychological reorientation that people have to go through before the change can work)".

In HE, changes might include adjusting to academic practice, becoming an independent learner, and understanding role expectations. The transition however may depict the responses to these adjustments, and strategies for coping.

Many existing characterisations of transition refer to change. Take Gale and Parker (2011, 2014) who explore engaging with, approaching, and navigating change. These experiences require resources for managing and understanding change, which will vary between transition (ibid.). Outlined by James (2018) and Stauber, Walther and Settersten Jr (2022: 3) "events are usually conceptualized as relatively abrupt changes, transitions refer to longer processes that may include discrete events". This differentiation reveals that trajectories across the life course comprise a mix of events and transitions (ibid.).

Different still, is a 'pathway', "an attribute of a social system" (Gale & Parker, 2011: 29), whereas a trajectory belongs to one person. Transitions can occur simultaneously, creating stable or unfamiliar situations (Menzies & Baron, 2014). The literature predominantly indicates that during transition individuals move towards clarity in a setting or role, which involves learning about norms through interactions with others (ibid.; Davison et al, 2022). In HE, these interactions might occur between staff or peers, sharing information, and developing connection.

2.2.2. Schlossberg

To explore returning to HE from the workplace, Schlossberg's (2008) conceptualisation of transition has been adopted. She determined that transition is "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006: 33), this might involve returning to HE, adapting to a student role, or joining a community, amongst other socially situated influences.

Schlossberg's suitability is confirmed through the applicability of her model to adults, exploring narrative over long periods, and its ability to document social and psychological facets of transition. Reportedly, their 4 S's model accesses diverse lived realities by exploring individual situation, self, support, and strategy, portraying that no one experience of transition is the same, nor will transition be responded to in the same way at different times of life (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg's theory has been increasingly used to explore education during Covid-19, further confirming its timeliness to the current theoretical framework. In the US, the tensions of remote study are documented by Gokey (2021) and Hobbs and Whitsett (2023), who explored social and emotional responses to transition in HE, informed by changing student-staff relationships. Similarly, Turner (2024), investigating first-year college students, identified pedagogical approaches that were deemed unsuitable for virtual environments, impacting attainment; Smith Curtis (2023) explored support and provision across different modes of study; and Santa-Ramirez et al. (2022) contended that connection and belonging in the academic community was problematic for first-generation students. While studies drawing on Schlossberg's theory in the UK are fewer, social and academic belonging was also a notable theme

in O'Dea (2023), who used the 4 S's to explain experiences of international students; their study highlighted the absence of institutional support that they believed would have been significant for helping with adjustment to academic expectations and existing communities. These studies contribute to an under-reported area of unprecedented experience, with implications for prospective learners, staff practice, and policy for future crisis or remote situations.

Schlossberg's 4 S's model is employed within Schlossberg's counselling practice supporting individuals through change and moments of crisis. Examples of transition in their latest publication include relationship transitions (partnering or divorce), and work transitions (new job opportunity, redundancy, retirement) (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). To examine individual coping mechanisms, clients 'take stock' of their assets and liabilities, which can stabilise the liminal state amid transition (ibid.). Assets and liabilities may represent previously weathered transition, providing strategies and wisdom for the situation (Miller, 201), like available support networks or existing skillsets.

Schlossberg conceptualised transition in stages (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012; Karmelita, 2018; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022), illustrating continual involvement in one transition or another, or multiple transitions simultaneously. One begins with **moving in**, as a triggering event activates consideration for change (Robb & Moffat, 2020). Adjustments are made as the individual begins preparing. Once invested, they **move through**. DeVilbiss (2014: 8) has defined this ambiguous stage as "a neutral zone or period of emptiness and confusion; a cycle of renewal; and a time of hope and spirituality". Reflecting on the 4 S's may help with perseverance, and creating understanding about how to "balance their activities with other parts of their lives and how to feel supported and challenged during their journey" (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006: 49). Adult learners with competing commitments may benefit from academic or pastoral resources available as coping mechanisms. Whilst liminal, individuals may become aware of norms, tasks and behaviours expected in the new situation, facilitating acculturation. Schlossberg (2011: 160) explains how one will "begin to separate from the past and move toward the new role, for a while teetering between the two", presenting opportunity for overlap and conflict between frames of

reference – this can impress on identity and self-perception. Finally, **moving out** indicates that transition is ending; although arguably a new transition is beginning as preparations and considerations commence to depart the current state (ibid.).

These stages accentuate the durational nature of transition, as developmental or in continuation – though not explicitly linked with age (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022) contend that transition can be explored through many lenses. Based on Erikson (1997: 114), justification for the psychosocial lens in the current research is provided,

“an individual life cycle cannot be adequately understood apart from the social context in which it comes to fruition. Individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically interrelated in continual exchange”.

Within the current study, the psychosocial lens has enabled an examination of psychological experiences and behaviours as shaped by social spaces and norms. Consideration for culture, community, environment, and the many relationships within, prevents an isolated investigation, thus illustrating in-depth, the impact of society and social context on an individual, and vice versa. It has been necessary to understand former and existing professional roles and communities in this study, to more effectively interpret beliefs and behaviours in the returned-to setting. This contextual information depicts participant subjectivities along with indications of the processes and interactions that shaped them.

Psychosocial factors of transition are subjective, described as consideration for the social and personal, or the social and cultural (Taylor, 2017). Interpreted from Schlossberg’s model of 4 S’s (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022), examples of psychosocial factors can include the stress of a situation, perceived control over the situation, and types or availability of support.

Schlossberg identified three types of transition, which may determine how one undertakes, perceives, and copes with the experience; these include an anticipated transition (expected), a non-anticipated transition (not expected, hence unprepared), or a non-event (expected, but did not happen) (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson,

2006; Schlossberg, 2011). Transition type and its timing can impact one's assessment, outlook, and commitment to transition. Like Brammer (1992), Schlossberg discusses transitions being on-time or off-time. An on-time transition is expected, "...the death of a 90-year-old parent would be considered an on-time event. Involuntary retirement at 40 would be considered off-time" (Brammer, 1992: 243). Perceptions of event timings may correspond with norms of a culture, community, or social or historical context (Jones & McConnell, 2023; Travis et al., 2023), making the return to study for developing workplace competence or self-fulfilment appear acceptable (Davis, 2017). Jones and McConnell's (2023) research on mature students in the UK speaks to this, revealing the influence of social groups on relationships with education.

2.2.2.1. Schlossberg's Model of 4 S's

An individual's assets and liabilities during transition can influence how they renegotiate roles, identities, and relationships, amongst other things. Thus, to evaluate coping mechanisms, Schlossberg developed the model of 4 S's (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Schlossberg, 2008, 2011). This explores the individual's situation, self (psychological resources – not mental health), support, and strategies.

Situation –

The situation offers insight into how, when, and why transition was triggered (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015), with circumstantial information affecting transition (Karmelita, 2016). This may illustrate the perceived duration of transition, and if this experience has been weathered before (ibid.; Neber, 2018). Consideration for these, can clarify how one's life might be impacted by transition.

Self –

Looking inwards, the individual can reflect on unique qualities and characteristics (Karmelita, 2018) to facilitate coping (Powers, 2010); these traits might inform resilience or outlook. Schlossberg outlines two types of internal resources: personal characteristics and psychological resources (Evans et al., 2010; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). Personal characteristics are

defined as “socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage of life and ethnicity” (Pendleton, 2007: 50-51), whereas psychological resources comprise “locus of control, ego development, values, and self-efficacy” (ibid; Schlossberg, 2008; Neber, 2018). Ego development refers to maturity, and one’s autonomy or need for recognition and approval.

Support –

External support during transition could include professional circles, community groups, family, or partners (Pendleton, 2007; Powers, 2010; Karmelita, 2018), offering emotional support like verbal encouragement or someone to listen, or practical support like childcare or transportation (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). People often have multiple networks or ‘convoys of support’ (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), a human structure stabilising transition. Participating in multiple groups, individuals can sense belonging and purpose, helping to weather change (Cruwys et al., 2021; Taylor, 2022).

Strategy –

Strategies are procedures sustained for coping. Schlossberg (2011: 161) asks “Are there ways you might change the situation? If not, can you change the way you see the situation?”. Exploring circumstances like timing or duration (Schlossberg, 2008; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012) can help manage and understand change. Individuals respond to coping with transition in different ways, including, “modifying the situation, controlling the meaning of the problem, and managing stress after the transition” (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015: 75).

2.2.3. Types of transition

The life course comprises many transition types, customary or foreseen and hasty or unplanned. Schlossberg (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022) itemised these as ‘anticipated’ (marriage, graduation), ‘non-anticipated’ (injury, redundancy), or a ‘non-event’ (failure of something planned) (Merriam, 2005). Schlossberg (1989) also identified the sleeper transition, encountered over an extended period, phasing out or enhancing something; these can feel subtle and private, or visible, dominating parts of one’s life (Merriam, 1984; Hardin, 2008; Davis, 2017). In the current

research, a sleeper transition might represent letting a support network go or gradually taking on the language of a space.

Multiple transitions may occur when returning to study, like modified self-perception, adjustment to cohorts, or a renegotiation of roles as studies are integrated with other demands. The multifaceted nature of transition is evidenced in Jindal-Snape's (2023) social cognitive Multidimensions Transition Theory, demonstrating the non-linearity of transition, factoring the various domains involved with simultaneously occurring transitions (Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). These horizontal dimensions might be social or cultural, relating to university, work, or home; nonetheless the individual's movement will transfer influence between the personal, social, and environmental facets of the setting (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; Gordon et al., 2017).

Beach's (1999: 102) sociocultural work on 'consequential transitions' explores "how we experience continuity and transformation in becoming someone or something new". This is a move away from the metaphor 'transfer' which had become problematic as its "narrow definition" (ibid.: 129) created issues with "split agency, difficulty of facilitation, assumption of a static context, a launch model of person-environment relations, and difficulty distinguishing transfer from just plain learning" (ibid.: 129). The definition overlooked the multifaceted nature of transfer, simplifying the process of repurposing and generalisation. 'Transfer' (particularly in education) implied movement of skill and knowledge between contexts, but we now recognise these skills and knowledge to be resources that can profoundly influence identity during periods of change too. Moreover, Beach has argued for further exploration into intentional and non-intentional 'transfer'.

To understand developmental relationships in changing environments over time and the activities within, the concept of 'consequential transition' was conceptualised (Beach, 1999). Notably, Beach contended that contexts and conditions must be considered. Consequential transition is (Beach, 1999: 130),

"the conscious reflective struggle to reconstruct knowledge, skills, and identity in ways that are consequential to the individual becoming someone or something

new, and in ways that contribute to the creation and metamorphosis of social activity and, ultimately, society.”

Beach (1999) proposed four types: lateral, collateral, encompassing, and mediational. In the current study, lateral and collateral transitions resonated with participants navigating social activities. The *lateral transition* is “when an individual moves between two historically related activities in a single direction” (Beach, 1999: 114), like departing the workplace for higher education. Contrastingly, *collateral transition* illustrates “individuals' relatively simultaneous participation in two or more historically related activities” (ibid: 115), evident in part-time students and ‘multimembers’. The *lateral transition* is seen in Jafar (2022) who found that mature students’ workplace experiences influenced their contributions to the academy, despite the academy not always accommodating these skillsets. Differently, a collateral transition can impact identification with different roles and does not assume progression. Beach (1999) connects the *encompassing transition* with communities of practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) (see 2.9.) which may “occur within the boundaries of a social activity that is itself changing” (Beach, 1999: 117). Lastly, *mediational transition* represents experience prior to the fact; Beach poses work-experience as an example, not dissimilarly to earlier experiences in higher education prior to postgraduate study in this research. ‘Consequential transition’ explains how individuals may engineer knowledge and identity influencing their sense of self, rather than simply ‘transferring’ existing traits.

Consideration for consequential transition is significant for the current research because it first revisits the multifaceted nature of ‘transfer’. It speaks to how resources are employed to enable ‘becoming’, which corresponds with the pursuit of identity renegotiation in the current study. These resources are part of reconstructing self and understanding; rather than transporting knowledge over boundaries, knowledge is transformed in new contexts, and in turn, shapes the individual. The four types of consequential transition correspond with the diversity of learner types and their earlier experiences in contemporary HE, offering a lens through which to understand the resources that inform how they respond to the new environment and its challenges.

2.2.4. Models of transition

Schlossberg (1981) focuses on individual lived experiences to inform transition; the literature exhibits alternative prominent conceptualisations following this thought.

Zittoun's (2009) work in the Swiss context illustrates transition as triggered by change, stemming from a rupture, showing its impact on the person-environment-fit. Socioculturally speaking, Zittoun exhibits the likelihood of change creating uncertainty, leading to the identification of a rupture (Zittoun, 2006); this connects encounters and events during transition, exhibiting how a rupture "never takes place in a vacuum" (Sutherland, 2015: 31). Overall, transition relies on the extent that identity is influenced by one of the three rupture types (Sutherland, 2015): adjustment to or in the cultural setting, modification to one's existing environment, and transformation of community or relationships (Zittoun, 2006). Common among transition models is consideration for unique resources, which Schlossberg (2008) contends become evident after 'taking stock' of assets and liabilities (these might include communities/networks, knowledge/wisdom, former weathered situations); Zittoun's work highlights how cognitive and social resources support sense-making, self-perception, and self-definition under changed circumstances. These resources can influence one's outlook and resilience during transition, as social resources create safety through emotional and practical offerings, and cognitive resources can inform perspective and strategies to cope with problematic encounters.

Zittoun's on-going analysis of the environment could explore 'sense of place', focusing on emotional connection with a setting, and how this encroaches on identity negotiation. This featured in some US studies (Holland, 1985, 1997; Holmbeck et al., 2008; Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022) exploring the relationships between the environment and individual. These works demonstrated that the suitability of the individual to the setting can influence developmental experiences; where the environment meets the individual's needs, they may thrive and build on earlier experiences through actions or behaviours. Whereas, a poor fit may be attributed to relationships or little autonomy in the setting.

Gale and Parker's (2014) topology of transition comprises transition as induction, development, and becoming. Exploring this, Mellors-Bourne et al. (2016) explained

how the chosen conception of transition determines the institutional approach to facilitating students.

Transition as induction assumes that transition has fixed beginning and end points, with stages guiding students towards socialisation or integration into the institution's culture (Gale & Parker, 2011, 2014; Broadhead, 2019). Conforming is encouraged by established members of the culture as students participate in and respond to existing practices and structures (Sutherland, 2015).

Transition as development is gradual, leaning towards identity transformation (Gale & Parker, 2011, 2014; Sutherland, 2015). This involves expanding, adjusting, and departing from established characteristics. To differentiate, Gale and Parker (2011) claim that 'induction' relies on institutional facilitation, whereas development is managed separately from the academy. These types are "largely system-driven and system-serving" (Gale & Parker, 2014: 747).

The third conception, becoming, acknowledges the subjectivities of individuals in transition (Sutherland, 2015; Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018), not bound by a single event, in an ongoing process. Hence, transition does not occur in stages, and cannot be confined to singular contexts, roles, or identities; in fact, Sutherland (2015: 37) argues, "it is no more appropriate to speak of a singular transition to higher education than a singular student identity", mirrored in the discontinuities of the Multidimensions Transition Theory (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). This experience of negotiation and becoming underscores the significance of recognising diversity in transition but demonstrates problems with developing support that fits all (Gale & Parker, 2014).

2.2.5. Metaphors for transition

The term (and metaphor) 'transition' illustrates growth, changing states, movement between conditions or ways of being. In the current study, 'transition' represents "changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006: 33); while it cannot be assumed to occur, exploring transition attributes from the literature will help with identifying the experience.

Many metaphors exist in the literature. These include journeys (Bridges, 1980; Brammer, 1992), passages (Glaser & Strauss, 1971), trajectories (Nicholson & West, 1989), crisis (Erikson, 1956), moratorium (Marcia, 1993), critical events (Wapner & Demick, 2005), rhizomes (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), bridges (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012), and turning points (Rutter, 1996).

A 'journey' signifies migration (Brammer, 1992), not dissimilar to Schlossberg's (2011) 'moving out, through, and in'. While this may head towards a lesser-known situation, the individual can consider coping resources through Brammer's transition structure: adaptation, renewal, transformation, and transcendence (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022).

'Turning points' (Mandelbaum, 1973; Rutter, 1996) connect to Giddens' 'fateful moments' (1991), where individuals evaluate their situations, reflecting on weathered experiences to inform their outlook and response. Thomson et al. (2002: 337) call this an "assessment of risk", like Schlossberg's (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022) process of 'taking stock', where a review of assets can help prepare for change. Janis and Mann (1977) proposed a decision-making model to assess readiness to depart from the periphery. Through this, a review of consequences, losses experienced, or stresses, is undertaken (ibid.). Work by Ranzenbach (2013: 13) lists, "a) appraising the challenge, b) surveying the alternatives, c) weighing the alternatives, d) deliberating about commitment, and e) adhering despite negative feedback".

Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009) explore continuities in transitions, considering how 'symbolic objects' enable on-going association by conveying dislocation or alienation from the old or new self, or acting as inspiration for the setting.

2.2.6. Summary

Transition literature is wide-ranging and intertwined, with little agreement regarding the definition of the term, making the notion difficult to identify. Notably, this section presents Schlossberg's transition theory and model of 4 S's, explaining its suitability

for the theoretical framework; the choice to employ this to explore transition during the Covid-19 pandemic is justified, illustrating the changing shape of transition over time. Types of transition are considered, beginning with Schlossberg's 'anticipated', 'non-anticipated', and 'non-event'. In this study, features of these types may correspond with remote study (due to Covid-19), taking on extra roles in the academy (to connect with the culture), or feeling isolated by the absence of community. Jindal-Snape's (2023) Multidimensions Transition Theory headlines the non-linearity of transition, and horizontal transitions, which explains how one may weather many transition experiences or characteristics at one time. This is followed by Beach's consequential transition (1999) which unpicks the problematic nature of 'transfer', and establishment of the lateral, collateral, encompassing and mediational transitions (ibid.), which speak to the transformation of knowledge encountered by returning students in the current study. Models of transition include Zittoun's (2009) notion of a rupture, and Gale and Parker's (2014) exploration of transition as induction, development, or becoming. This section has analysed terminology associated with transition and their various implications, it distinguishes between transition and change highlighting their frequent interchangeability in the literature and offers several transition metaphors, like journeys, passages, and turning points.

2.3. Transition to Higher Education

This section explores transition in higher education (HE). Owing to scarce literature on transition to postgraduate (PG) study (Bownes et al., 2017; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018; Rovagnati, Pitt & Winstone, 2022), literature on undergraduate (UG) study is included (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Davison et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2023), highlighting social, cultural, and psychological influences. These include the experience of induction, preparedness for study, expectations, availability of support, community and networks, and study skills. For information about resources and induction activities at the host university during Covid-19, see University Provision during 2021-2022 (3.5.6.). To compare resources provided by the host university, literature in this section is largely focused on UK research.

2.3.1. Induction

Reportedly, transition can begin when a prospective student first considers enrolling in study (Schlossberg, 2011; Stauber, Walther & Settersten Jr., 2022). Prospective students develop their understanding of being a student by learning about social and cultural practices through observations, earlier learning careers, interactions with peers and alumni, visits to institutions (Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009), summer schools (Bayfield, 2023), or intervention programmes (Jones, 2018). These encounters can “determine the pre-arrival expectations that ultimately influence students’ outcomes” (Jones, 2018: 919). Alternatively, some scholarship claims that induction is the initial stage, with a “fixed point at the start of the programme” (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016: 14). That induction exists for postgraduates (PG) indicates that it is not “more of the same” (O’Donnell et al., 2009: 27), with new information available. Mellors-Bourne et al. (2016) illustrated how induction offers insight into academic practice,

“These include access to information; advice and guidance; personal links with academic staff; accreditation requirements for the discipline; labour market prospects; personal interest and ambitions; and financial issues and funding opportunities.” (ibid.: 7)

During induction, information is circulated via handbooks, ambassador tours, careers and networking events, newsletters, and forums (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022). While these outlets can be insightful, Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012), Nelson et al. (2006), Robb and Moffat (2020), and Davison et al. (2022) suggest staggering the dissemination of information rather than concentrating it early on. Accessing information at relevant times may help students organise their studies and plan for relevant opportunities (Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009; Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012). Dane (2022) recommended ‘touch points’, where opportunities are inducted throughout the year. Gradual induction might also accommodate the multifaceted experiences of international students, who reportedly adjust over six months and longer (Scott et al., 2011); modifying internal and external selves can have a considerable emotional impact on students (ibid.). Consistent with this, Coneyworth et al. (2020) found that home students also struggled with PG transition, the campus, and new relationships and culture, particularly given the short timeframe available to complete their studies.

2.3.2. Preparedness

While induction delivers information about studying to prospective students early on, Stuart et al. (2008), Bamber et al. (2019), and Becker, Johnson and Britton (2019), suggest a shortage of information available, leading to unpreparedness. They argue that institutions should consider the role of pre-induction resources. This initiative is backed by Mello (2016) and Bownes et al.’s (2017: 3) findings stating,

“Better online resources were identified as key to feeling prepared before the commencement of a PGT course, and better communication with lecturers and peers was important to the success and satisfaction of students”.

Considering students’ lived realities, strategies for managing and balancing learning within existing frames are required, to familiarise students with expectations and academic practice (Tobbell, O’Donnell & Zammit, 2010; Crisan et al., 2018; Robb & Moffat, 2020). Early provision can prepare PGs for the assumptions made by staff about their competence in academic study skills and digital literacy, for example.

Online study platforms in HE create additional opportunities to provide resources to prospective students (Bownes et al., 2017). While this has positively influenced preparedness for some, it has also highlighted the digital divide still prominent today (Fawns, Aitken & Jones, 2021a, 2021b; Office for National Statistics, 2021). Morgan (2020: 9) reiterated, “just because new students (especially undergraduate) may be ‘social’ digital natives, they are not necessarily ‘learning’ digital natives”, emphasising the pedagogical adjustment required, hence staff should refrain from making assumptions about proficiency. This finding is consistent with Tang et al. (2023) from Australia, who discovered that students using online tools lacked familiarity with platforms and software, showing less confidence in virtual spaces owing to limited digital literacy. This is insightful, as the UK and Australia have similar policies on online study, regarding the support and provision of students, and quality assurance.

2.3.3. Expectations

Universities have addressed concerns about student and staff expectations; Coneyworth et al. (2020) reported that 80% of their sample, a mixture of home and international PGs, lacked knowledge of what was expected at this level of study. Earlier work shows that information about university life is often passed on by former students and academic staff (Palmer, O’Kane & Owens, 2009; Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012), though much of this remains implicit. The needs and requirements of students change each year, quickly outdated information shared by alumni (Mello, 2016). Poorly communicated expectations of PG studies can create apprehension (Heussi, 2012; Bamber et al., 2019; Coneyworth et al., 2020), and impostership (Steele, 2018). Consistent with Mellors-Bourne et al. (2016: 13), PGs are “anxious and stressful with no clear sense of direction or identity”. This differed considerably with Scott et al.’s (2011) earlier findings, indicating that PGs were more likely to be sociable and confident in their learning career. This assumption stemmed from a belief that students valued strengthening these skillsets (ibid.).

Rovagnati, Pitt and Winstone (2022: 357) believed staff should signpost students to information about “assessment and feedback practices, and about their characteristics and purposes”, helping to build on earlier meaningful learning. This is based on the probability that the expectations and reality of study may not align

(Sutherland, 2015). Information exchange is complicated by misunderstandings that staff have about their students (Bamber et al., 2019); this has revealed limited awareness of former learning (Andersson & Fejes, 2005; Harris & Whittaker, 2012; Garnett & Cavaye, 2015), leading to ill-informed guidance. This confirms Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit's (2010) earlier suggestion that supervisory training should acknowledge the academic and pastoral student experience.

The leap from undergraduate (UG) to PG studies can be severe (Broadhead, 2019). Distinctions between pedagogical approaches and academic relationships can cause confusion when expectations differ (Menzies & Baron, 2014; Coneyworth et al., 2020); student understanding is further disputed when faced with subject-specific approaches or unfamiliar settings like seminars and tutorials (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012). Despite this, PGs are expected to adapt quickly because their programmes are often shorter in length (Bownes et al., 2017). PG students often feel distanced from staff, which encourages their autonomy (Scott et al., 2011); thus, students discover ways to accomplish tasks by acquiring new study skills and being independent (ibid.).

As Crisan et al. (2018) reflect, students alter their characteristics to become critical, reflective, and independent, showing 'mastersness' qualities like abstraction, depth, research and enquiry, complexity, autonomy, unpredictability, and professionalism (Bamber et al., 2013; QAA Scotland, 2014; QAA, 2020). Independent PG study is conveyed by Bamber et al. (2019: 241-242), as "a shift of responsibility from the teacher to the learner". However, developing these skills is not always clearly articulated, characterised by "an absence of information" (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010: 274).

McPherson, Punch and Graham (2017) recognise challenges of PGs, including confidence in study skills, confusion about PG identity, and fit or belonging in the setting. Therefore, students feel unprepared to integrate their studies into their lives (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010). Providing information about campus, managing time, and other key aspects of study, can support student participation (Bownes et al., 2017; Robb & Moffat, 2020). A paucity of knowledge can create

further institutional and structural barriers (Remenick, 2019), impacting motivation and outlook on the experience (Rovagnati, Pitt & Winstone, 2022).

2.3.4. Support

Alsford and Smith (2013) report efforts made in HE to recognise PGs' distinctive experiences and demands, telling them apart from UG students. This reflects Mellors-Bourne et al.'s (2016) belief that students should co-create their resources. Jacoby's (1995) earlier work in the US extends the list of individual-level concerns, including commuting to campus and making friendships – these have not changed in three decades, and remain a prominent global concern as students are increasingly accommodating caring and working responsibilities alongside their studies while universities push widening participation initiatives.

PGs receive support from diversified outlets and memberships, like family or work. They may let go of some relationships owing to circumstance, incompatibility, or changing interests. Correspondingly, support networks often make considerable adjustments for individuals in transition, providing flexibility and understanding of their new demands (Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022).

Transition into PG studies often involves renegotiation of roles, identity, community, practice, and norms of a setting (Scott et al., 2011). While peers can be supportive, PGs place significant value on interactions with staff (Gravett & Winstone, 2022). Early exchanges with academic staff about new demands can help 'tip the balance', supporting adjustment (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022). Lack of understanding about student roles, can lead to struggles with identity and belonging (Robb & Moffat, 2020; Taylor, 2022). Hence, Gravett and Winstone (2022) indicate that peer networks offer a site for relational practices and bench-marking, supporting collective development (Menzies & Baron, 2014; Robb & Moffat, 2020). Critically, Menzies and Baron (2014) reported that these spaces create "a feeling that one is recognised and represented as of importance to someone" (ibid.: 361).

House's (1981) social support theory headlines four types of support experienced by students in academia. Emotional support is fostered between peers weathering

similar transition. Peers might also provide instrumental support, like advice, empathy, and care. Informational support can come from students or staff dependent on the issue; this might be more helpful from someone with shared experiences. Finally, appraisal support is a process of reflection; individuals may benefit from affirmation and encouragement, promoting their development. While social support has benefited students generally across the UK (Sutherland, 2015) and Australia (Mallman & Lee, 2016), meeting policies aimed at student well-being, a gap remains in understanding support required by learners of different demographics and study modes.

2.3.5. Community

Robb and Moffat (2020) highlight the importance for students to sense belonging within their cohort. Other studies confirm this (Heussi, 2012; Kinder, Konduri & Byrne, 2022) illustrating the significance of community building, developed through discussions with peers and social events with academic staff. These interactions can inform students about norms, particularly important for international students developing a network in the host country (Menzies & Baron, 2014). Belonging can help combat isolation and loneliness, also tending to student attrition (Clapp, 2022). Community plays a role in identity building and is central to understanding “who we belong to and who we do not”, providing information about who and how to be in that relationship (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018: 603).

Student learning engagement, strong support networks, and confidence, are reportedly higher in students participating in interactive activities with peers (Bownes et al., 2017), though arguably these should combine social and academic facets of HE, bridging relationships with the wider community (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012). Kinder, Koduri and Byrne (2022) suggest including staff and alumni panels and welcome addresses, while Coneyworth et al. (2020) promote student societies for establishing connections.

Previously, Nelson et al.’s (2006: 4) Australian study claimed that students required “a single point of contact with their new university world that mitigates confusion about knowing where to go and how to access services and resources”. This speaks

to UK policy on inclusive support and accessibility, emphasising connection and security. Transition schemes and mentors for novice students can support overcoming the stress of change (ibid.; Hardin, 2008; Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022); tackling transition with 'someone like me' (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012) can help develop resilience and will encourage students to adjust identity traits as demonstrated by Matheson and Sutcliffe (2018) and Dreznick (2022).

2.3.6. Study-skills

Robb and Moffat (2020) found students were eager to visualise their studies, seeking information about assessment, modules, deadlines, workloads, and organising tasks. This pairs with Dreznick's (2022) research on induction in the US, exhibiting academic events as the most attended by PGs. To support the diversity of student cohorts in present-day HE, institutions both in the UK and US are increasingly implementing policies that accommodate nontraditional student needs too, notably ensuring the availability of information to overcome historic barriers to study, which address retention and the student experience. Unsurprisingly, Becker, Johnson and Britton (2019: 18) also reported that students sought "tailored support to develop appropriate writing styles and research strategies".

PG students' backgrounds may influence their studies and adjustment to the academic community. Some will be shaped by undergraduate (UG) studies, while others by careers or professional roles, and students out of formal education for a while might need to re-learn the norms of the space (Heussi, 2012). These earlier experiences equip students with study skills and tacit knowledge, though they may be unaware of how to apply these (Bamber et al., 2019). The literature exhibits overlooking students existing knowledge, suggesting that it does not fit or have the same value in HE (Broadhead, 2019), despite positive implications for recognising student competence on the overall experience (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016).

Earlier participation in HE has led to assumed competence of PG students (O'Donnell et al., 2009). Students may recognise their capabilities through timely feedback from peers and tutors influencing their outlook and confidence in how their

learning is going (Scott et al., 2011), also “reducing the fear of judgement” (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018: 609).

Research shows that some students confidently source the information required to persevere in their studies, interpreting information from programme handbooks (Scott et al., 2011), like mature students who showed higher levels of independence (Dane, 2022). However, Dane (2022) found that resources were not accommodating of student diversity, reiterating the trend of designing PG resources based on UG or traditional-aged student experiences (ibid.). Gill (2021) emphasises this issue by stating that students often refrain from asking for help, leading to gaps in their understanding.

Students value different aspects of their studies. Coneyworth et al. (2020) report that international students perceive their English language proficiency to influence how others interact with, include, and perceive them. Knowledge of academic terminology also creates insecurities in students, denying access to information, meeting objectives, or demonstrating competence (Sutherland, 2015). Institutional language has historically included and excluded individuals which can be unsettling for new arrivals (ibid). The need for students to understand the language of the academy is reinforced by Gale and Parker (2014) who contend that modelling institutional norms can be detrimental to student success.

Notably, academic writing features prominently in the literature discussing how students adjust styles, expectations, and language use, causes difficulty for students (Sitler, 2001). This corresponded with Charlton’s (2016) research on part-time students, exploring the impact of academic writing competence on student-practitioners’ studies; it was found to hamper integration, creating uncertainties about who and how to be in the academic setting (Willans & Seary, 2011; Aird, 2017).

2.3.7. Summary

This section covers themes from the literature characterising transition to PG study. Within ‘induction’ are activities designed for students early in their studies, including pre-induction events like summer schools and interventions, which influence student

expectations. Upon arrival students often experience tours, networking, and programme handbooks. Some research argues for this to be staggered, to avoid overloading students at the outset of their studies. PGs are likely to adjust over varied lengths of time. The importance of pre-enrolment resources available online is recognised, enhancing preparedness for study. Understanding student expectations can help overcome assumptions made by academic staff about student competence. However, much of this remains implicit. Support for PGs is notoriously based on undergraduate experiences, leading PGs to rely on external support like friends, family, and employers. Finally, the literature speaks to an absence of recognition for learning beyond the academy, like workplace knowledge; this may inform PG provision and study-skill design and engagement.

2.4. Liminality

Departing one context, role, or identification, can create uncertainty as new norms and behaviours in new environments and communities are adjusted to (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). In the current research, liminality is considered to address challenges of boundary crossing, from the workplace into higher education (HE), exploring the potential for culture shock as students adjust to unfamiliar facets of the setting (Adler, 1975). Largely owing to the experience of remote study during the Covid-19 pandemic, which prevented participants from becoming situated on campus, students were challenged to develop identity in isolation, in spaces already associated with established roles and communities that continued to transmit information related to other strands of identity. This likely made sensing the norms of their new academic community and culture more difficult. Research shows how accepted ways of being and doing can complicate adjustment, although the boundary can also be an informative site (Turner, 1974; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022; Popov, 2023; Campbell, 2024b). Wenger (2000) suggested that transitory spaces and networks on the periphery can expand interpretations of practices, roles, and their reciprocal nature (Prince et al., 2015; Popov, 2023) (see Multimembership: 2.9.1.); individuals contribute influence from distinctive social worlds, simultaneously letting go of and reaching out for alternative characteristics. This experience can lead to individuals feeling they belong everywhere and nowhere at once.

Turner (1974: 232) claimed the liminal individual is “neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification”, hence, in transition, they may discontinue one role and learn the ropes of another, using information from the past to inform their present situation. As Söderlund and Borg (2018) conclude in their review of 61 papers on liminality, this often is characterised as feeling like being an insider and outsider, encompassing knowledge of the site without fully participating in it. Correspondingly, Turner (1967) found this betweenness to defy the structure of society; for example, being part-way between positions, being ‘interstructural’ (ibid.: 93). Shortt (2015) determined this was like being on the periphery of defined spaces. Returning to Söderlund and Borg’s (2018: 888) review, they identified situations that

would allow situatedness on the boarder of multiple domains, “when they operate between collective contexts, organizational structures, positions or professional identities”. Within HE, staff fulfilling these roles might be ‘blended professionals’ or third space individuals (Whitchurch, 2008, 2013); PG diversity also exhibits ways that students can be members of many networks.

Notably, Turner observes social structures and mobility, addressing issues of becoming and belonging, within socially prescribed life stages. Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022: 116) contend that “Every time individuals move from one role to another or experience a transition, they risk becoming marginal”, reaffirming the disconnect sensed when between past and future situations; however, knowledge of the new can help manage the perceived duration of transition. Bron’s (2000) concept of ‘floating’ resonates with ‘betweenness’: looking at opposing situations, assessing how to adjust or assimilate.

Prior to Turner, van Gennep’s (1960) ‘rites of passage’ illustrated a rite of separation, a transition rite, and a rite of incorporation, representing departure from one status or societal role to another accepted, more stable one (Thomassen, 2009; Söderlund & Borg, 2018). Within these, an individual experiences separation, liminality, and aggregation (van Gennep, 1960; Beech, 2011). Associated with social practices, the individual may acquire skills and knowledge to suit the setting. Comparable to Schlossberg’s (2008) process of moving in, through, and out phases, van Gennep (1960) details encounters within the distinct phases.

Being liminal can be a state or situation. Shortt’s (2015) workplace research describes the value of physical liminal sites for colleagues in their daily lives. Considering how meaning is made within these spaces (corridors, lifts) leads Shortt to explore transitory dwelling spaces (ibid.: 633), commonly sought by those with no fixed site. While Shortt samples hairdressers, commonalities can be found in alternative occupations using hot-desk systems and staffrooms. Students may encounter similar issues, as they study across sites with no prescribed space of their own. The impact is significant as these sites facilitate interpersonal relationships (Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022), identification, and a sense of belonging, promoting feelings of acceptance (ibid.; Gravett & Ajjaw, 2021). Therefore, it is plausible that

the absence of collaborative workspaces may disrupt how practices are carried out, creating issues with developing and sustaining identities (Couch, O'Sullivan & Malatzky, 2021; Littlejohn et al., 2021).

Liminality can create judgements of risk, where questions about competence and perseverance arise. Jindal-Snape (2023) considers how self-esteem influences perseverance, developed through access to adequate support (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2010). They contend that weathering transition of this nature has long-term benefits as individuals develop strategies to cope (ibid.).

The liminal position can replace the stability and rituals grounding an individual in their practices, identities, and relationships, creating isolation, alienation, and frustration (Armstrong, 2009). In 1988, Ebaugh coined the 'hangover identity' describing the ex-role, representing on-going expectations and associations with former roles despite transition. Following on, Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022) suggest initiating new rituals or milestones to become re-oriented; in the current research, this might involve celebrating their acceptance into university or the outcome of an assignment.

2.4.1. Summary

In the current research liminality bears a closeness to boundary crossing, as experienced by returning to HE from the workplace. One can be in a liminal state, location, or situation. Often individuals will negotiate old and new ways of being, informing their present participation. Information about new practices and communities tell the students where they are moving to, however by not letting go of accepted norms, identifying with new groups can become more challenging (Turner, 1974). The literature compares liminality with 'floating' (Bron, 2000), reiterating the disconnection and instability felt, pointing to the significance of information surrounding and inspiring the situation. The lack of familiarity with the new situation can initiate culture shock (Adler, 1975); however, there is potential for the liminal experience to prepare individuals to adjust and assign meaning to new experiences.

2.5. Culture Shock

‘Culture shock’ captures the feeling of disconnection from cultural stimuli upon entering a new domain (Adler, 1975), as misunderstandings and inaccessible signals and materials appear in the host culture. In a shared culture or community, norms create ‘patterns of perception’ (ibid.) revealing how members perceive and interpret the world.

Adler (1975: 13) stated that “One need not sojourn outside one’s own country to experience culture shock or to undergo a cross-culture experience”. This is pertinent here as students return from various organisational settings, different locations, leading to horizontal transitions across cities, societies, or cultures. However, that this research is situated in a global university with large cohorts of international students, may reveal other reasons for experiencing shock, as individuals negotiate and exchange worldviews based on cultural beliefs, as explained by Jackson II (2002) using cultural contracts theory. Jackson II’s research from the US speaks to current UK HE policy on international students, notably the provision of academic and personal support for adjusting to a new culture or environment in a second language.

When we encounter others, an automatic exchange of cultural characteristics begins; Ting-Toomey’s (1986: 126) early research on cultural identity negotiation describes this relational activity, where individuals “reach out and hold back at the same time, to seek for mutual validation, and yet at the same time to protect their own vulnerability”. Jackson II (2002) contends that difference can create conflict; negotiation is determined by individual responses, creating unpredictable situations (Blume, 2010). Negotiations continue across the life course, but adjustment to or internalisation of the new culture can occur upon sustained interaction with it (Jackson II, 2002). Later, Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) discussed how misunderstanding cultural norms can be a ‘deficit’, depending on resources brought to the situation (Schlossberg, 2008).

On overcoming culture shock, Oberg (1960) identifies four stages: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment. These signify modified perceptions of the situation as sojourners learn about the setting. In the current research, students may feel challenged when faced with their cohort or new role, where different expectations and norms exist. Oberg's (1960) 'honeymoon' period may occur as students prepare for induction; they have not yet been exposed to their demands, and their expectations remain unclarified. Understanding their role in the academy, students may encounter a crisis moment, however, developing relationships may offer support with adjusting to the culture of the setting. Negotiating behaviours can help with developing self-perception and acceptance by the dominant culture (Steele, 2018).

Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001: 6) indicated "the greater the cultural gap between participants, the more difficulties they will experience", like social interactions and behaviours. Indeed, the "absence of information about communication conventions" (ibid.: 48) can prevent access to cultural norms. Based on this, and the scarce information on PG roles, it is unsurprising that the experience of becoming a student again can be stressful (Menzies & Baron, 2014; Bamber et al., 2019). An individual's motivation to overcome stress may depend on their plans to reside in the host culture; a short stay might lead to fewer attempts to become part of a community, whereas an individual hoping to sustain their new position for longer might actively learn about and accept new values and practices. This was evident in studies from the UK and Australia (Cruwys et al., 2021) and is insightful for the current study as HE policies focus more on offerings for international students: to diversify student cohorts and address labour market skills gaps. Transition and culture shock may not only inform one another as related developments but may happen in parallel.

2.5.1. Summary

Culture shock refers to a disconnect with culture, stemming from inaccessible cultural norms, signs, and meanings. Shock can be experienced in new countries, cities, or communities, and even during daily horizontal transitions between work and home. This might relate to how things are done and how people behave. Students often encounter shock re-entering HE, particularly international students who attempt

the norms of the institution to connect with peers and study in a different language. 'Deficits' can vary dependent on the cultural gap (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). During this vulnerable liminal period individuals might seek help in the new setting, simultaneously guarding known traits (Ting-Toomey, 1986). Ultimately, knowledge of the individual's motivations for integrating into the host culture will determine the degree of work put into adjustment.

2.6. The Workplace

Participants in the current research returned from the workplace to postgraduate (PG) study during the Covid-19 pandemic. While their professional settings likely hosted different experiences, some similarities may be drawn owing to restrictions placed on practices during the pandemic. These practices may also have reflected how their studies were carried out, for instance, if they had previously worked from home or used remote technology for communication. The literature highlights key facets of contemporary working life, including working time, working from home (WFH), and organisational culture.

2.6.1. Working Time

The concept of 'working time' addressed relationships of participants with their workplaces. This may have been influenced by mode of study, or by the flexibility afforded by remote study. Taking Gallie et al.'s (2021: 35) conceptualisation, working time is "the duration of time spent at work. This involves setting the daily, weekly or annual number of hours to be worked" and "the timing of work. This refers to when during the day, night, week or year work is performed".

Research on 'spillover' (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000) shows the competing demands and influences of family and work. The current research benefitted from an awareness of these practices and communities, transparently depicting transition. PG research has acknowledged learners' multiplicity of memberships, but there is limited evidence that working time influences transition, making this particularly pertinent. The literature exhibits many working times, patterns, and schedules, including full-time, part-time, flexible work (flexi-time, flexi-space), reduced hours, shift work, remote work, co-working, and zero hours contracts (see Rubery et al., 2005; Felstead et al., 2020). While not all these feature in the current research, it is worth distinguishing between these and the wider implications of these on workers' lives.

Since Ford established the five-day working week in the 1920s (Crowther, 1926), shifts in working times have occurred. Global studies have shown workers

experiencing changes in technology, their physical presence, and in their attitudes towards colleagues in the workplace, each influencing their relationship with a worker identity (Brown, Kirpal & Rauner, 2007). Employers have also addressed issues of employee mental health, diversity quotas (gender, ethnicity, disability), and feelings of value and belonging to a community.

Recessions have also been endured, notably The Great Recession of 2008, followed by the Covid-19 Recession of 2020. Individuals and companies alike faced uncertainty regarding economic capital circulated throughout the country (Harari, Keep & Brien, 2021), leading to reduced working hours and job loss or displacement, creating insecurity as workers received less income (Allas, Canal & Hunt, 2020). Across Europe reduced employment opportunities for graduates prevented them from journeying towards independence (Manzini Ceinar, Pacchi & Mariotti, 2020); mobility restrictions meant pursuits were fulfilled remotely or in proximity to home. This reinforced linear learning careers globally as graduates remained in education for longer, raising their competitiveness in the labour market (Boeren, Roumell & Roessger, 2020). Initially, working from home led workers to encounter burnout and intensification due to longer days with blurred boundaries between work and home; this was met by the Great Resignation of 2021 (Choonara, 2021).

The literature on part-time and flexible work demonstrates workers' attitudes towards flexible arrangements standing the test of time. Eberhardt and Shani's (1984) studies in the US suggest that a part-time role symbolises trust in the worker to complete tasks. This granted workers autonomy over their working pattern as reflected in Kelliher and Anderson's (2010) findings in the UK. This autonomy facilitated workers to cope with competing demands (Caproni, 2004), lessening the number of days absent from work, and reducing stress levels – a notable finding of reduced hours workers too. In achieving balance, workers have shown greater productivity and enthusiasm towards their workload and organisation (ibid.).

Studies from the UK (Metcalf, 2005), US (Mintz, 2021), and Australia (Hall, 2010) illustrate how oftentimes students seek part-time employment to obtain funds to overcome financial hardship, to gain valuable training and experiences, and to undertake workplace learning relevant to their studies. Across the three countries,

this has been found to correspond with rising university fees and the cost-of-living crisis, which has implications for student well-being and academic performance. These issues can be attributed to Brexit and supply chains (UK), housing policies and inflation (US), and wages and rent prices (Australia). Robotham's (2012) research on students in employment reported that a minority of students undertook work relevant to their studies, though this had minimal impact on their academic work. There was however concern for the extent to which 'multimembership' influenced ability to cope with stress. Both Hall (2010) and Robotham (2012) urged HE institutions to consider full-time students' need to be in employment to support their studies. Findings suggest that institutions could offer "online facilities for assignment submission and communication and more flexible timetables and submission requirements" (Hall, 2010: 439). Overall, scholarship depicts that students often spend more time at work than on campus, leading to reduced participation in studying and social activities, and access to support with their academic tasks (ibid.).

2.6.1.1. Summary

The consideration for participants' working time, working patterns, and schedules in the current research provides insight into how earlier relationships and practices might influence their return to study; this also speaks to the influence of Covid-19 on approaches to study. 'Working time' describes the time allocated to a role, in what pattern, and how this is managed. Working time may influence participant attitudes towards study, the strategies used to balance roles, and how different identity attributes are employed in different roles.

2.6.2. Working from home (WFH)

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many workers were expected to continue their professional roles by working from home (WFH) (Harari, Keep & Brien, 2021). Some organisations provided resources and technical equipment to support workers, while others faced uncertainty about maintaining lines of production. Some workers lost their jobs and others sought protection from the government's furlough scheme (ibid.). This initiative supported individuals that could not be present at work, resulting in fewer redundancies.

Littlejohn et al. (2021) from the UK, and Couch, O'Sullivan and Malatzky (2021) from Australia, discovered a correlation between the work setting and identifying with a professional role. Individuals found it difficult to establish divisions between work and home life, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and overwhelm, as they attempted to balance demands and to feel part of specific communities. This was also noted in Olson's (1983) earlier work on telecommuters in the US who showed reduced motivation because of their literal distance from colleagues. The competing demands of home and family life impressed more on some individuals than others as other strands of identity encroached on their work (Couch, O'Sullivan & Malatzky, 2021). However, WFH was still described as "an effective strategy to manage the demands of our multifaceted roles as academics, partners, mothers, and "family managers"" (ibid.: 268), based on how it helped to protect identities that individuals acquired in their private lives.

In the US, research on WFH describes the possibility for poor person-environment fit, indicating that both parties can suffer; this might be due to work setting conditions, the work schedule, or the organisational culture (Hoffman, 2000). This can impact retention, employee satisfaction, and co-operation (Lingle, 2005). Alternatively, Hoffman (2000: 46) also identified characteristics of working that led to increased contentment, these included "the dimensions of pay, autonomy, and professional status". In recent years, both the US and UK have addressed remote working policies owing to rising numbers of employers and employees requesting flexible and hybrid models. Understanding the evolution of this aspect of working life is helpful for accommodating productivity, well-being, and communication best practices.

Early studies on remote working explored teleworkers and flexible workers (Olson, 1983). These approaches prioritised the worker's desire to balance work and family, but issues with overlapping and conflicting identities soon arose. Olson (1983: 183) reported that "work-at-home can provide employees with extreme flexibility in schedule and life style; theoretically they can work when and where they want in a more casual atmosphere", demonstrating the autonomy this approach afforded (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). But this approach quickly presented distractions to the

worker, including housework, family or caring responsibilities, or even symbolic objects. Hill et al. (2008: 150-151) provided a similar explanation for flexible working, defining “workplace flexibility as the degree to which workers are able to make choices to arrange core aspects of their professional lives, particularly regarding where, when, and for how long work is performed”. This shows that organisational intentions have remained much the same, despite the changing demographic of workers and their evolving needs.

Olson (1983) reported that time recovered from daily commutes was a benefit of the working style, a known contributor to worker stress. On the contrary, WFH has meant that workers need not leave nor arrive at home to begin work, stripping them of rituals, creating issues with establishing routine (Littlejohn et al., 2021).

Preferences to WFH are known to stem from pressure to participate in social interactions in the office, and the need to address needs of colleagues that prevent productivity (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic when remote working was at a peak, distractions in domestic spaces were in abundance, as turned home-offices were gradually taken over by children and partners joining the pursuit. Couch, O’Sullivan and Malaztsky (2021: 268) explained how family obligations interfered with working hours which led to multiple roles being carried out simultaneously, which they described as “ironically lonely, and often overwhelming”. Not surprisingly, loneliness was attributed to poor connections with colleagues and the norms that supported their identification with alternate perceptions of self. The authors projected the fear that other roles (mother, partner) would tell them apart from colleagues, and that the attention demanded by their domestic setting meant that they were being spread too thinly. Similarly, Littlejohn et al. (2021) reviewed individual WFH environments during the pandemic, which was reportedly difficult for academic staff to organise, owing to space and equipment limitations.

Alternatively, Manzini Ceinar, Pacchi and Mariotti (2020) explored the lifestyles of freelance workers from across Europe, who frequently work in unfixed locations according to unique schedules. Their research details strategies that provide balance and stability, ensuring the continuation of remote practices and a healthy personal

lifestyle. Meeting with other professionals was considered integral to this working style. These interactions “foster a sense of local place and community” (ibid.: 138), where practitioners unite and share knowledge, they benchmark and feel connection with the wider field, with the potential of creating a community of practice. This is thought to be a shortcoming of Couch, O’Sullivan and Malaztsky’s (2021) pandemic-infused professional practices, as they experienced withdrawal from their professional collectives. While freelance workers appear to have considerable autonomy in their roles, this flexibility has resulted in over-working, as time is utilised differently. Unsurprisingly, Henninger and Gottschall (2007: 56) from Germany, explained that this may be a result of inconsistent opportunities, workaholism, or the individuals’ capacity to merge their home and work lives, achieving a “single life style”.

2.6.2.1. Summary

‘Working from home’ (WFH) offers insight into the current working climate where individuals undertake more flexible positions to accommodate other demands – this was a relatable experience for participants during the time of the current research, as Covid-19 had led to remote study. Recessions and global pandemics have played a profound role in the paths students take following graduation; most recently, this led to a rise in linear learning careers as individuals studied for longer due to mobility restrictions, as well as individuals returning to retrain. The move to WFH was significant as workers struggled to identify with their professional roles and identities, balance competing demands of the family and home, and re-invent spaces to prevent disruptions to their working roles.

2.6.3. Organisational Culture

Organisational culture is largely depicted by American scholars as a web (Geertz, 1973; Tierney, 1988; Reich, 1992); consider the threads and intersections transmitting knowledge of the norms and understandings at play within organisational collectives. These norms can comprise language use, behaviours, or communication styles; participants are connected by their common values, assumptions, and beliefs (Tierney, 1988). An absence of these could create issues with acculturation or establishing characteristics of a new identity – a plausible issue created by remote working. Beech (2011) contends that these interactions

profoundly impact identity construction, bringing together the 'self-identity' with the 'social-identity' introducing the newcomer to the norms of the setting. Organisational identity can be sensed through observed traits of participants (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006).

Workplaces often emphasise the importance of these webs to achieve organisational objectives, noting that when individuals assemble to channel commonalities, they can form robust communities driven by their ideas about practice and practitioners (Peters & Waterman, 1982; Tierney, 1988; van den Berg & Wilderom, 2004). Alternatively, as scholars in the US have found, it is possible that practitioners may organically unite and create collective norms, but oftentimes managers facilitate these cultures for organisational benefit (Schein, 1985; Coman, 2016). Bringing a heterogenous group of workers together to pool resources can help "accomplish collectively what they could not accomplish separately" (Fisher, 2003: 1). Reportedly, Donze and Gunnes (2018) and Walker (2021) indicate that this can enhance productivity in the workplace as motivations to participate grow when worker interactions create positive results. When implementing particular activity within the workplace, "organisational culture complements the rational managerial tools by playing an indirect role in shaping and influencing behavior" (Coman, 2016: 136). Strangleman and Roberts (1999: 48) distinguish culture as something an organisation has, separate from the organisation. This suggests that culture, the 'personality of the place' (Tierney, 1988: 11), is more inherently felt – communicated through "symbols, feelings, meanings, behavior, physical settings and artifacts" (Coman, 2016: 136).

Van den Berg and Wilderom (2004: 570) suggest that in the Netherlands "Organisational culture is defined as shared perceptions of organisational work practices within organisational units", emerging through "stories, special language, norms, institutional ideology, and attitudes" (Tierney, 1988: 4). Cultures can be orientated by different things, people, teams, and outcomes, exhibiting shared traits (Tierney, 1988). Cultures can comprise groups of socialised individuals, who reach an alliance by taking on shared principles and values (ibid).

Models of organisational culture explain the goings on of workplaces. Participating in an organisation may help workers feel part of a group with who they identify, but participation is looking increasingly different as technology supports individuals to access collective experiences from afar. Campbell and Alexander (1965) and more recently Walker (2021), suggest that identification stems from frequented behaviours communicated through existing networks, described as “shifting the employees’ identity from being personal (“I”) to collective (“we”) (Donze & Gunnes, 2018: 106). These cultures project an image of the organisation, its values, and identity, influenced by the various enterprise carried out in the setting. While organisational cultures can create feelings of belonging, they also indoctrinate individuals, stripping them of their unique traits as trade-offs occur (Smith, 2014). This is problematic, as Knez (2016: 4) reminds us in research from Sweden, that “personal and social identifications are profoundly involved in formations of work-related self-image, self-esteem, motivation, task perception and valuation of future professional perspectives”, which will be a valuable consideration to take in the current research to explore the return to study, as individuals encounter new roles, identities (Akehi, 2020) and possible selves (Slay & Smith, 2011).

Many organisational models remain prevalent in today’s workplaces; for instance, Handy’s (1993) model of organisational culture comprises a topology of four cultures: the power culture, person culture, task culture, and role culture. These reveal much about the boundaries of worker’s roles. These help to explain the relationships between workers, relationships with the organisation, autonomy of the worker, contribution to the setting, amongst other things. Models have been employed to explore existing beliefs, values, and behaviours within organisations, and to understand how communication takes place, how expectations are transmitted, what the environment and atmosphere is like for workers, where the motivations of individuals stem from, and whether collaboration plays a role. These are further investigated through Hofstede’s model on developing culture (2001) across 50 nations, the cultural iceberg model by Hall in the US (1989), and Cameron and Quinn’s (1999) model designed explicitly for US corporate culture, which identifies the clan, adhocracy, market, and hierarchy cultures.

Contrastingly, the 'Framework for Organizational Culture' explores cultures within academia (Tierney, 1988), examining the environment, mission, socialisation, information, strategy, and leadership. Tierney (1988: 9) explains how "Each cultural term occurs in organisational settings, yet the way they occur, the forms they take, and the importance they have, differs dramatically." Instead, Martins' (1989) framework developed in South Africa within the year, reviewed the "mission, external environment, means to achieve objectives, image of the organisation, management processes, employees' needs and objectives, interpersonal relationships and leadership" (Coman, 2016: 137-138).

In HE, cultures can be established through student perceptions of each other, relative to their identities as learners, their disciplines, or social or personal characteristics (Silver, 2003). Universities' organisational cultures are often reflected in the practices of staff, known in the UK and US as a 'community of scholars' (Goodman, 1962), and values laid out by the institution (Coman & Bonciu, 2016). These can be both inclusive and exclusive; for students and staff with temporary or part-time roles in HE, it can be more difficult to become familiar with norms as they move between settings. It is possible that this might create difficulties in feeling accepted by and connected to the academic community (Steele, 2018).

Välimaa (1998: 119) described how inside academic 'cultural entities', notably in the US, are pockets of communities; these are bound by shared characteristics. Campbell and Alexander (1965) explored culture structures, researching relationships within communities and 'interpersonal influences' (ibid: 285). They propose a model of attraction, that explains how attraction encourages the mirroring of behaviours, thereby fostering socialisation. It is within these 'social climates' (ibid.) that commonalities arise. This corresponds with Brockmann's (2012) view on student interpretations of identity in the UK, suggesting that identity can stem from responses to experiences with others in particular settings. This is important to consider as UK HE is largely shaped by independent study and deep learning, as such, there need to be opportunities for students to engage with peers and new spaces. The same issue was previously found in research from Canada (Saffold, 1988) noting that strength of character can modify the values, beliefs and behaviours of others, as such adjusting performance (Smart & St John, 1996).

2.6.3.1. Summary

This section on 'organisational culture' describes work and study sites as hubs of activity where communities form, exploring the influence of culture on personal and professional development. Organisational culture can be communicated in different ways, through the language of a space or the norms and behaviours projected by individuals, for instance. Participants of a space are connected by shared values (Tierney, 1988); values are important to consider in the current study as individuals unite in a new environment to build community or become socialised, whether remotely or in-person. It also speaks to the importance of diversity in these spaces, as individuals pool their strengths and traits to enrich the shared experience.

2.7. Spillover & Balance

The term 'spillover' describes the impact or overflow of one commitment onto another (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000), something that can be easily felt when undertaking multiple roles or tasks in a single setting; this was frequently reflected in the current study as the host institution implemented a very gradual return to campus for students after an extended period of working from home during the pandemic. This US study (ibid.) is helpful for understanding how UK policies can be designed to support transformation of best practices across contexts; these might include countries, organisations, or different roles within the same setting, to encourage innovation or skills and knowledge growth. Organisational scholarship employs this conceptualisation to explore flexible working methods and working from home, which became commonplace during the Covid-19 pandemic. Connected with the work-family interface (McNall, Masuda & Nicklin, 2009), spillover can be both positive and negative. Positive spillover is where knowledge from one pursuit informs or enriches an alternative experience or context. Negative spillover, however, occurs when aspects of one role, demand, or membership, disrupt the flow of another. Similarly, earlier research from the US on 'boundary permeability' by Hall and Richter (1988), explored how facets of contexts or roles are interrupted or influenced by another. Correspondingly, Van Oers' (1998) developed 'recontextualization' to describe the influence of existing knowledge in alternate settings to achieve different objectives. The current research draws on spillover to explore the movement of identities and skillsets across domains.

To support the work-life balance of employees, many organisations have introduced alternative modes of practice, such as flexitime schedules and flexplace schedules (McNall, Masuda & Nicklin, 2009; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). These approaches have helped individuals manage competing responsibilities, further studies, and membership in other organisations. Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) discussed the benefits of flexible working in the US, revealing that consideration of employees' needs may enhance commitment to the organisation, creating motivation and feelings of mattering. Contrary to this, research from New Zealand showed that

conflict can arise from alternative working times, as individuals struggle to govern contrasting obligations (Hayman, 2009).

For individuals working at unconventional times of the day, it is possible that organisation-related tasks might become all consuming, blurring the work-life divide (Henninger & Gottschall, 2007), thus repossessing their autonomy. To avoid this, workers in Henninger and Gottschall's (2007) study in Germany claimed to initiate clear divisions between work objects, settings, and times of the day. This finding is consistent with Kelliher and Anderson (2010: 94) who showed that "it was also very common for reduced hours workers to report that they felt the need to be available at times when they were not scheduled to be working, but when the business was operating". It is probable that being present during typical work hours likely provided opportunities for the employees to connect with the culture and community of the organisation. This issue has been exacerbated following vast technological developments; mobile devices allow access to individuals, making it harder to switch off, while simultaneously offering insight into the organisation's activity (Enriquez, 2013).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact of 'spillover' was felt across the nation in positive and negative ways. While some individuals were relieved of the financial burden of childcare and commuting, others found that their professional roles were hampered by attempts to fulfil tasks while also caring for others (Couch, O'Sullivan & Malatzky, 2021). Being increasingly present in the home owing to remote practices, many people found themselves spending more time with family and contributing more to domestic duties. This was challenging for individuals who relied on having somewhere separate to carry out their roles, as they became distracted by the needs of others (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Remote practices often meant carrying out alternative identities in settings where roles had previously been established; this led to conflict between individuals where expectations existed, as well as confusion and interference as unfamiliar objects and tools influenced how roles were carried out. The blurring of boundaries between the home and the work or study setting, may also create difficulty with creating boundaries around certain roles as responsibilities arise, and notifications from alternate communities interfere (Enriquez, 2013).

2.7.1. Summary

Spillover can be a positive or negative experience; sometimes individuals employ skills across contexts to enrich participation, while at other times on-going association with relationships or tasks can be disruptive. Horizontal transitions were discussed earlier in this chapter, bearing connection to spillover, as knowledge and identity attributes are moved across the boundary. The boundary however can be a creative and informative space and likely a well-known territory for individuals experiencing 'multimembership' (see Multimembership, 2.9.1).

2.8. Identity

Exploring identity has provided insight into adult learners' movement between cultural domains, as evidenced in American literature on boundary-crossing and role conflict (Van Sell, Brief & Schuler, 1981; Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006). To expand understanding of individual-level transitions, this section of literature outlines the experience of identity development, the second half of the theoretical framework 'identity renegotiation', along with possible selves, collective selves and social identities, and the experience of socialisation. It is important to consider how each of these will have been shaped by the enduring Covid-19 pandemic, particularly as interactions were carried out on unfamiliar platforms at a distance, individuals were working and studying in isolation, and the campus experience was mostly inaccessible.

Within the current research, identity is characterised as unfixed and multifaceted, a shifting and fluid facet of the self (Blume, 2015; James, Busher & Suttill, 2015). It is continuously reshaped by the narratives and experiences we have independently and with others (Marica, 2002). Identities are thought to consist of many beliefs, values, and behaviours, and these move in and out of the foreground based on the relationships we indulge in (Blume, 2010, 2015). This conception of identity has supported the exploration of postgraduate (PG) students, accounting for the multiplicity of roles pursued by each participant and the frequent horizontal transitions fulfilled in their day-to-day lives. The fluidity of identity for an individual in transition can spur on feelings of uncertainty, not uncommon in HE where students often find their participation is influenced by their spheres of experience (Scott et al., 2011). This corresponds with Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009: 46) who portray students as continuously fostering new and old selves as they commit to trying on traits (Marcia, 2002; Ibarra, 2003).

In the US (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009) and in Sweden (Alvesson, 2001), identity development is described as turbulent, suggesting movement and fluctuation. It moves between the personal and social dimensions of self, bringing internalised

experiences together with behaviours associated with external entities (Beech, 2011; Knez, 2016).

Transition can create conflict within oneself; as such, the individual might explore ways to modify their role or self-definition (Davies & Harré, 1990; Ibarra, 2003). The everyday permits circumstances that require individuals to adopt roles that disagree with their dominant belief systems (Van Sell, Brief & Schuler, 1981), these roles can cause uncertainty about which behaviours to pursue (Knez, 2016). However, Ibarra (2003: 59) has proposed that “[d]oing things—taking on new roles and projects—is one way to “try on” possible identities”. This can help to reshape identity as references from the new culture are integrated (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009; Ivins, 2017). Frames of reference stem from former roles, relationships and co-constructed perspectives (Marcia, 2002; McLean, 2012); however, replacing these references can put one at odds with assimilation into the new culture as they let go of familiar and stable ways of being (Amiot et al., 2010). This experience of departure may lead individuals to become vulnerable as distance forms between their felt culture or community. Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022: 72) support this claim, contending that, “One’s past experience is clearly a central component of identity and often determines how a person approaches a current transition.” Therefore, one’s emotional attachment to a particular role or culture may impress on willingness or determination to persevere in transition.

Should an adult learner struggle to adjust to a student identity because their professional identity seems more stable, difficulty with integration could arise posing possible marginalisation (Askham, 2008; Martin et al., 2014; Brunton & Buckley, 2020). Correspondingly, Moreira et al. (2019: 32), from Portugal, indicated that “individuals who identify as being a student are more likely to have the intention to engage in role-congruent student behaviors in order to reach desired future identities (to be whom they want to be)”. Absorbing the learnt experience of HE in Portugal, notably for mature students, is of significance for the UK as consideration is given to existing expertise, and tailored support for overcoming barriers to study. This suggests a link between the motivations of learners and the learning experience they hope to obtain.

2.8.1. Identity Development vs Ego Development

As previously defined, the current study conceptualises identity as fluid, changing, and multifaceted (Blume, 2015), shaped namely by our experiences and interactions with others. Thus, the personal is informed by the social. The behaviours, values, and beliefs that construct our portfolios of identity were once constructed themselves, through a series of trying on (Ibarra, 2003). This process is analysed through a developmental lens by Marcia (2002), who explains that identity development comprises the diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, and achievement stages. These depict varying degrees of commitment to exploring characteristics and traits; the final stage ‘achievement’ represents the identities or qualities that Blume (2015) contends are renegotiated or moved in and out of the foreground during interactions. Marcia’s framework illustrates the potential for identities to expand; one’s repertoire of identity characteristics can become more, influencing views about the self and others.

Notably, identity development and identity renegotiation are also distinct events. While development focuses on evolving the self, renegotiation considers the self in relation (Blume, 2015). The experience of development captures the construction of beliefs, views, and self-concept (Marcia, 2002), whereas renegotiation takes these qualities and explores their contribution to our various engagements (Blume, 2015).

Hence, identity development, using a social-constructivist lens, can be understood as the process of receiving social or cultural influence leading to a selection of established characteristics that one is identified by and identifies with, ultimately determining ‘who you are’.

The term ‘ego development’ as employed in the current study was taken from Schlossberg’s model of 4 S’s (2011), where the ego is sometimes considered a resource throughout transition (either as an asset or a liability). The term is used to describe a person’s level of maturity, their autonomy, and extent of desire for affirmation. The ego pertains to psychological growth and features within the psychological resources listed in the 4 S’s, along with outlook (optimism and self-efficacy), commitment and values, and spirituality and resilience (see Chapter 2: 2.2.2.1., Chapter 3: 3.9.2.).

Based on Schlossberg's model of 4 S's, the ego should be examined only if an individual presents it as an asset or liability, thus given the unique circumstances of participants, it is possible that the ego may not present as a prominent feature of transition (see Chapter 4: 4.3.).

This term bears evident connection with Erikson's developmental theory of ego development (1959), from who Schlossberg took influence. This is apparent in the model of 4 S's as consideration is given to both the social and the individual through examination of the *situation*, *self*, *support*, and *strategy*. Erikson's theory of ego development sees an individual embark on a path of maturation over eight stages (known also as developmental tasks), contemplating the social construction of development across the lifespan.

Erikson's (1959) eight stages of ego development include trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and integrity vs. despair. In the current study, participants re-learn about their roles in HE and adjust strands of identity to comprise student-like characteristics, they also begin to distinguish between existing and expected values and beliefs, as such, Erikson's fifth stage, 'identity vs. role confusion', offers a helpful lens through which to understand the psychological processes encountered as participants experience commitment or conflict in the returned-to setting. This choice corresponds with earlier work by Mitchell et al. (2021) who employed 'identity vs. role confusion' to explore identity resolution during adulthood and argue that the fifth stage has implications for the three stages that follow. They assert that, "Among the eight psychosocial stages, identity in particular is seen as performing a crucial integrative function for an individual's traits, needs, goals, abilities, and commitments, pulling together these aspects of the self into a coherent whole" (ibid.: 3).

The fifth stage, entitled 'identity vs. role confusion', is when the individual reflects on *who* they are. This is notable because it highlights the continuity of self-representation, as the timing of developmental tasks are shaped by individual circumstances (Marcia, 2002). Interestingly, Marcia's work on identity development

takes from Erikson's earlier work too. As Erikson points to 'resolution' for navigating the 'identity vs identity confusion' task, Marcia examines the navigation of this conflict by unpicking the experience of commitment and choice. The search for identification in the current study is of particular interest, as the participants negotiate who they are in the new setting, how they understand their role and the culture, and what the expectations of them are. The research also seeks to understand how these queries are influenced by existing commitments. Interesting still, is how the experience of answering these questions is influenced by remote study, the continuation of professional practices, and the on-going influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on their unique situations.

The ego is part of identity, but it is not identity. It correlates with one's psychological responses to the social world. While essentially the ego is influenced by understandings about the self in relation to the world, it differs from identity development as the latter refers to choices made by an individual about who they wish to be. In the current study, identity development can be observed where participants have chosen to take on professional roles, in which they have adopted the behaviours and values of the collective. Contrastingly, where the participants received feedback from their peers on their contribution to the study experience (largely influenced by existing traits), ego development occurred and was observed through coping behaviours; this may be an uplifting experience for some, while others may feel defensive or hurt. The experience of ego development is discussed at length in Chapter 5 (5.3.2.) following a presentation of related data in Chapter 4.

2.8.2. Identity Renegotiation: Blume

The current study has employed Blume's (2010, 2015) work on identity renegotiation to grasp an understanding of how individuals experience returning to HE during the Covid-19 pandemic, and cope with moving between different professional, social, and personal communities. This theory demonstrates the influence of discourse on the positioning or beliefs of individuals and how these are carried out in their social worlds (Blume, 2010).

“Identity renegotiation theory defines identities as interpersonal narratives rather than internal realities. Identities are described as continually changing, co-constructed by storytellers and audiences and susceptible to social power and influence.” (Blume, 2010: 103)

Blume suggests that identities are liable to change over the life-course because of on-going encounters with others, within which one questions their sense of self, through definition and perception. Through these interactions, new beliefs and understandings of the world are constructed, adding to one’s identity. Blume (1991 (US)) contends that during exchanges between self and other, identity narratives are formed, helping us to learn about who we are in relation to them. It is possible to have multiple conceptions of self in a single setting owing to the distinctive relationships encountered (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006). These shared spaces are brought to life through an exchange of cultural and social knowledge; interaction sits at the heart of negotiation, and it is through this process that we realise difference, recognise value, and that change occurs. Walsh and Gordon’s (2008) study of work identity in the US considers how roles are carried out, based on influential strands of identity and sense of membership; these identities might include organizational or occupational. This is insightful generally, for employee well-being and creating a sense of belonging within a collective. Consideration for this may impact performance and the authenticity of relationships.

Blume’s identity renegotiation counselling (IRC) practice claims that individuals are made up of dynamic mobile identities that dominate different situations (Blume, 2015). Their mobility indicates a capacity to adapt for different contexts and relationships. They may move in and out of the foreground as they are modified or fall away and can be replaced entirely as interactions and relationships are reshaped. Individuals are known to be selective about the facets of identity they expose for renegotiation, increasing their permeability; for instance, when a culture or belief is a profound part of who we think we are, we may protect this and ourselves from participating in relationships that make us vulnerable (Jackson II, 2002). Jackson II (2002) contends that identities are made up of tiers, some are shielded from the influence of others, while surface layers appear accessible and

less fixed. The strength of these facets of identity may be based on their longevity, their connection to others, or their association with a future self.

The literature reports on practices designed to socialise individuals into existing systems that do not embrace a diversity of values, leading individuals to conform to a dominant identity and model the agreed values of the space to avoid marginalisation, although this may be more difficult to achieve in a remote or asynchronous setting, where meaning is communicated in alternate modes. Where successful, this may foster person-environment-fit, promoting participation in the setting (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2007; Menzies & Baron, 2014; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018), however, issues can arise when individuals are made to choose between acceptance or exclusion.

Blume (2015) talks about language and communication being the source of co-constructed identities, explaining that our mutual judgement, belief, or agreement of a meaning guides how behaviour unfolds; Jackson II (2002) adds that these may also be informed by historical and cultural norms of the environment. Participation allows the individual to become part of meaning making (Blume, 2010; 2015; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). Co-created identities sometimes comprise clear values, behaviours, and norms, enabling the individuals to move in and out of the shared narrative with ease (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010), each time returning with knowledge of who they are in that situation (Jackson II, 2022). However, before this can happen agents of the experience are required to exchange, negotiate, and familiarise themselves with their agreed norms. Commitment to and authenticity of these identities can be examined through a better understanding of the individual's wider sphere of experience, this might include knowledge of what memberships one belongs to, how they share their time across pursuits, or what roles and demands they are required to carry out (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010).

Blume's (2010) IRC comprises four phases, this process offers participants guidance for reflections, observations and implementations. These are,

1-The participant observes the diversity of relationships that have influenced the shape of their growing and changing narrative. Notably, becoming aware of the flexible nature of identity based on different relationships is crucial, as is understanding that they will continue to evolve in relation to and in response to changing circumstances.

2-The second phase encourages the participant to engage with their identities while actively reflecting on and articulating their observations and experiences with 'social influence'.

3-As the participants acknowledge the effect of influence on the self, they are supported to manage said influence. The skills acquired in this stage enable the participant to consciously administer change to their identities, to be agentic in their relationships, and to open-mindedly negotiate. These relationships are negotiated through an exchange of knowledge and understanding, and through compromise, which can lead to stronger rapport.

4-The final stage of IRC supports the individual to probe and apply change; this experience is considered developmental. The changes actioned by the participants can be transitory or lasting – each one designed to support them to navigate their relationships.

When an individual re-situates, they may ask 'who can I be in this relationship?' (Blume, 2010; 2015). This renegotiation can occur in a consequential transition (Beach, 1999, 2003) as alternative resources are considered. This is answered through an on-going exchange between us and others, in which "we are constantly exchanging codes of personhood, worldview, indeed our identities" (Jackson II, 2002: 359). Renegotiation occurs as alternative understandings and perspectives are considered, and current beliefs are advanced or challenged.

Blume's (2010) work tears away from much of the literature on identity as it encompasses identity formation and progression as occurring within the collective, informed by a social-constructionist approach, thus advancing the work of Erikson (1968), where identity crisis is concerned.

2.8.3. Possible Selves

The transformational nature of identity is portrayed through 'possible selves', the versions of ourselves "...that we all carry around, in our hearts and minds, a whole cast of characters, the selves we hope to become, think we should become, or even fear becoming in the future" (Ibarra, 2003: 38). Markus and Nurius (1986) coined this concept using a cognitive perspective, suggesting that a possible self can stem from self-perceptions informed by earlier frames of reference, or the motivations for becoming a different version of oneself (ibid.). Changes to professional, social, and personal activity, offer new experiences and understandings helping to "narrow the gap between the imagined possible selves that exist only in our minds and the "real" alternatives that can be known only in the doing" (Ibarra, 2003: 58). When a possible self is 'felt' (Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009), it moves closer to fruition, as the presented self and self-concept merge (Kaufman & Feldman, 2004). This happens when the individual understands how to project and carry out their hoped-for self. Considering that much identity negotiation happens in social settings where a variety of influence exists, it is probable that "Because there are multiple agents, there is always the possibility of divergent views about the most desirable shape of collective passages" (Glaser & Strauss, 1971: 117). This is particularly relevant when considering remote practices during the Covid-19 pandemic, as the hopes or expectations of individuals returning to study may not have been met as they were forced into a remote situation, challenged to adjust in spaces filled with influences often associated with established identities.

In the current research, the worker gradually settled into the academic environment, observing the different practices and interactions between others mostly in a virtual setting. Academic staff might mirror these norms in their behaviour, while other social activities and responses to the institution might feature in the behaviour of students. These observations will offer a rich pool of influence, impressing on who the individual desires to be. Scott et al. (2014: 41) explained the process of "selecting, filtering, endorsing, rejecting, enhancing and discarding" possible characteristics which help form and refine branches of identity or versions of self. The actions of others within the institution may develop opportunities to learn, as

students begin to participate in the culture of the space (Brockmann, 2010). Selection of characteristics and practices can help with identification.

Some individuals are unprepared to let go of established identities and may wish to protect and continue with all visions of themselves (Blume, 2010). As Brockmann and Laurie (2016) explain in their research on apprenticeships, individuals often enter a space with preconceived self-perceptions which can both help and hamper their connections with the setting and the identities within. The decision to maintain existing qualities may create difficulty with adjusting to norms and expectations, whereas, accommodating the projected identities of the space may support the individual to try on possible selves (Ibarra, 2003; Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012).

2.8.4. Social Identity Theory

Across the UK and US, social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) has assisted explorations of individual motivations for becoming a member of a particular social group, and for defining oneself in terms of this group. Based on the social psychological approach, a social identity can be formed through socialisation where an individual takes on and is guided by the characteristics and values of a group presenting themselves in relation to others (Goffman, 1959; McQueen et al., 2009; Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009; Donze & Gunnes, 2018: 113). Participating in ongoing interactions and context-specific discourse can support an individual to reshape their identity and adjust to a collective, influencing inner-identity and self-perception (Watson, 2009; Amiot et al., 2010; Knights & Clarke, 2013). Slay and Smith (2011: 87) consider how adaptations to identity secure "...an individual's place in society by virtue of the relationships to others implied by the meanings individuals adopt for themselves". These social characteristics may already have existed within an individual but participation in the social group helped bring them into view (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006). This is confirmed by Walsh and Gordon (2008) who describe the process as social categorisation, social comparison, and self-enhancement. They contend that,

"...as a way to place themselves and others in social groupings, individuals engage in a continuous process of comparing themselves with others. By placing

themselves in particular groups, individuals place themselves out of other groups.” (ibid.: 16)

Research from the UK (Brown & Turner, 1979) corresponds with findings from Amsterdam (Ellemers, 1993), depicting how strands of self-concept may relate to different social groupings, revealing different mannerisms, interests, or skillsets, as one moves between memberships. The consistency of findings is helpful both for making generalisations and context-specific comparisons. Transition can lead individuals to feel as though they do not identify with any one group, however ‘multimembership’ (belonging to and identifying with many collectives) can be a strategy for coping with change (Cruwys et al., 2021), as different types of support may be required. This is evident in Brockmann and Laurie (2016: 236), who contend that when existing outside of social identities, generating a different identification can be an “equally powerful, social existence”.

From this standpoint, one’s sense of self can be considered two-pronged. Social identity theory suggests that individuals define themselves in terms of their unique singular self (who they are when they are alone), and by their membership with others (Hogg, Abrams & Brewer, 2017; Cruwys et al., 2021). Thus, individuals may action facets of their social identities to be perceived in certain ways (Ellemers, 1993).

It is possible then, that participants of the current research will connect to different branches of identity, such as who they perceive themselves to be at work, who they try to be at university, and who or how they are at home. Each aspect of identity can be equally authentic; understanding participation in these groups may offer insight into their self-definition, the impact of intergroup relations, and where they situate themselves and make meaning of this within society (Cruwys et al., 2021).

Following on from Social Identity Theory was Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT), discussed by Brewer (1991) in the American context, focusing on internal conflicts experienced during a pursuit of harmony in personal and social representations of self (Hogg, Abrams & Brewer, 2017). This social psychological theory depicts ongoing modifications to identity as one attempts to satisfy a desire for both

sameness (to fit and appear equal in a group) and distinctiveness (to appear significant to a group), and that measures of these can change as facets of identities become internalised.

In the current study, the returning learners may sense collective identity through a “constant dialogue with the communities” as sensed by McAlpine and Amundsen in their Canadian study (2009: 124), likely taking place remotely across university communications or social platforms, however any misalignment may lead to questioning their person-environment fit. Canada’s policy on multiculturalism is relevant here, posing helpful considerations for internationalisation and massification. They encourage inclusivity and belonging, of diverse and local cultures, incorporating underrepresented voices into education. Wrestling with internal readjustment (Bridges, 2011) can lead to feeling excluded from a culture (Ecclestone, 2007), while establishing shared qualities can enhance belonging and performance, as reported from Germany (Kraus, 2006), Canada (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009) and the UK (Brunton & Buckley, 2020). This follows Durkheim’s (Smith, 2014) belief about the importance of integration, in their work on social order and collective consciousness, depicting the success of collaborative work as individuals take on shared values and behaviours.

Moving away from a professional identity towards that of a student, may create “issues relating to position, recognition and power” (Askham, 2008: 90), however, in time, detachment from one context may help becoming established in another. At first, self-perception (Strangleman & Roberts, 1999) may hinder acculturation or membership, based on perceived proficiency in undertaking a role, thus distancing themselves from the community. How secure one feels in a particular identity, and how much they understand about who and how to be, can create difficulty with letting go, creating insecurity and additional discontinuities in transition. As outlined by Askham (2008) and Brunton and Buckley (2020), employing a work identity in an academic context can be a source of contention to other students, making visible the discrepancies between individuals; McQueen et al. (2009: 5) assert that

“[t]he transition to university will inevitably be affected by where one is transitioning from, the particular circumstances people find themselves in and the

ability or willingness of all agents (individual or institutional) to adapt. Joining the university (either as a student or member of staff) will involve more o[r] less adjustment to the dominant culture norms of an institution, in spite of inevitable variation in acceptance of these norms by staff and students.”

Adjustment can depend on how supported one feels to take on characteristics of a new identity – this could be by colleagues or peers (Martin, Lord & Warren-Smith, 2020). Martin, Lord and Warren-Smith (2020) explore the introduction of professional skills and training to higher education courses. This integration of knowledge from one domain to another brings learning to the periphery, a place where many of the population in the current research are situated, showing connection with consequential transition (Beach, 2003). They refer to “combining practical skills with theoretical knowledge, evidenced through their application in the workplace” (ibid.: 524), demonstrating the fluidity and interconnectedness of practice and identity. Knowledge of workplace identities can be fostered through engagement with course content and the apprenticeship (Brockmann, 2010) or internship community (Popov, 2023); however, this may conflict with an established student identity. The latter experiences can significantly impact identity; immersed in the setting, individuals observe the interconnectedness of distinctive practices, spurring on renegotiation of who and how they identify (ibid.). Identification might occur through interactions or opportunities to gather knowledge in and of the new setting (ibid.), though often this is informed by prior studies.

In HE, identity is informed by interactions with others across the institution and how these are made sense of; an understanding of what it means to be a student and how to be a student, is informed by the practices in the situation (Martin, Lord & Warren-Smith, 2020). Cotterall’s (2011) study of international students in Australia documents socialisation experiences, and how supervision and preparedness for study influenced this. The international aspect of this speaks to student expectations, coping mechanisms for studying abroad, and how practitioners can make space for interactions that enable students to come in from the periphery. Identification is fostered in different ways; the literature demonstrates how becoming undergraduate and postgraduate students is different (Bamber et al., 2019; Robb & Moffat, 2020) owing to expectations of students, and their participation in alternative memberships.

Cotterall's (2011) research on doctoral study, explains how access to a community of learners helps adjust to a role. Identity renegotiation during study can comprise many possible selves owing to the many strands of academic identity, including that of researcher, teacher, student, or facilitator (ibid.), this has been conceptualised as 'shifting' (Gillaspy & Hunter, 2023). Affirmation by the community supported the doctoral students to understand who they were becoming; further, Cruwys et al. (2021) suggested that the more certainty had about the collective identity, the greater the possibility for high levels of performance by students.

Individuals may not sense belonging when they encounter othering (Cotterall, 2011). Cotterall (2011) describes how this experience involves assigning an identity to a person by casting them a role (Beech, 2011), exercising power over them, based on preconceived ideas of who they are. This happens to PG students, as revealed in literature on PG assumptions. Students may have enrolled from minority backgrounds, taken unconventional paths to studying, be mature students, marginalised communities, and even traditional aged students, nevertheless, the experience of othering has no boundaries (ibid.). Similarly, students may be stereotyped by staff or peers, a form of discrimination known to influence performance and attainment (Jones & McConnell, 2023). This can hinder acculturation as the student negotiates outsider perceptions. As outlined in Beech (2011), the identity projected onto an individual can determine their accepted social identity, which may determine the interactions and reactions the individual encounters.

2.8.5. Socialisation

Socialisation within organisations can help manage heterogeneous groups working towards a shared aim; using a cognitive perspective, Donze and Gunnes (2018: 105) explained how performance standards can be met "through adherence to a social norm of effort". Socialisation can control the culture, governing employees' lives (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006). During socialisation one explores their position amongst members of an organisation (Furnham & Gunter, 1993; Coman, 2016), contemplating group behaviours which may lead to conforming. In the academy, a newcomer may have little idea of what is expected of them; thus, they may feel

disconnected and between possible selves (Gillaspy & Hunter, 2023). This can be influenced by the accessibility or availability of information, which may need to be exhibited in alternative ways based on mode of study. Donze and Gunnes (2018) suggest that socialisation can neutralise issues in diverse groups; the validation of commonalities can impact the attitudes of the group, thus enhancing their performance (ibid., 2018).

Greenfield (1985) reported from the US that socialisation involves technical and moral dimensions. Upon entering a new situation, there are roles and practices in play, these are technical dimensions. The moral dimensions concern how one takes on the norms of other actors in the new context (Armstrong, 2009). Based on this, it is thought that an individual will confront these dimensions as they process anticipatory socialisation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilisation (ibid.).

Socialisation differs from identity development, the latter often occurring more organically. Schachter and Marshall (2010) refer to knowing and intentionality as they consider the modification of identity. The process of socialisation is understood as happening to someone, with clear outcomes of this process in mind. In their work, the socialised individual is depicted as having little agency, and individuals refusing to be socialised are at greater risk of not fitting in (ibid.). This process bears connection with induction in education; the dominant practices and systems are conveyed during this introductory period, to demonstrate 'how things work here' (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016).

Returning students may need to encounter the technical dimensions of socialisation to understand the expectations of them, and to feel prepared to undertake academic tasks (Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Scott et al., 2014). Sutherland (2015) argued that the individual should surround themselves with people encountering similar experiences to allow the collective identity to influence them (Wenger, 1998). Further, Scott et al. (2014: 97-98) emphasise the significance of exercising competence in these practices to gain access to the learning experience.

Socialisation can be fostered through repeated interactions in virtual and physical environments, that support collectives to feel that they belong somewhere. However,

as discussed in Brown, Kirpal and Rauner (2007), the continuously reconfiguring landscapes of work and study puts the responsibility on participants to discover facets of practice with which they identify. In HE, collaborative spaces might include reading groups, group-study tasks, cafes, student societies, and bookable offices and rooms, although these experiences are likely to feel different in a remote environment. Opportunities for students and staff to congregate have been found to foster a long-term sense of academic identity (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Bownes et al., 2017), creating literal sites to associate with a way of being. By participating in these spaces, individuals may move in from the periphery (Robb & Moffat, 2020), acquiring information from all involved in the learning experience. On the contrary, virtual sites offer easy access to platforms for collaboration. Barros et al., (2023) suggest that these spaces protect identities associated with a role; they explain how the virtual space allows possible selves to be tried on without alternative aspects of their lived realities interfering (ibid.), here, individuals can congregate based on a commonality distinct from other spheres of experience.

Dutton, Roberts and Bednar (2010) described how the workplace was perceived as a noteworthy life domain in the US, suggesting that identification forged here can become a dominant identity (ibid: 265) with the potential to effect self-definition (Knez, 2016). Dominant identity characteristics can impact how individuals “conduct themselves and also contains a sense of what type of work they feel qualified to do” (Akehi, 2020: 3). Self-perception often connects with self-worth (Ibarra, 2003; Armstrong, 2009).

2.8.6. Summary

This section on identity has explored identity development, identity renegotiation, possible selves, social identity, and socialisation. The individual is considered in relation to their society, culture, and environment. In this research, identity is conceptualised as unfixed, highlighting the influence of the other on self-perception, self-definition, and the possible selves encountered. Blume (2010, 2015) considers the movement of identity characteristics, as they take prominence in different relationships; interactions and exchanges of beliefs determine who we are in relation to others. The notion of possible selves indicates that identities can be tried on, that

characteristics can be negotiated, and that our identity is informed by past and future visions of self.

The current research considers the influence of interactions with the academic community and existing support networks of participants, to understand how identity is reshaped, and how this might facilitate their return to study. By participating in multiple networks individuals protect themselves from the instability that often accompanies change, as they draw on different types of support. Based on how individuals position themselves in relation to others, connections with networks may become available; while the desire to be simultaneously the same and distinct can inform how identity is socially constructed, socialisation practices can also help with fitting in.

2.9. Community of practice

To explore transition and the experience of acculturation or integration into the academy during Covid-19, community of practice theory has been considered (Lave, 1988; Lave and Wenger, 1991), taken from the social cognitive approach. Collective identities can be nurtured through social activities, where “cognitive, normative and emotional connection” (Sirris, 2019: 3) binds identities together like “knowledge generating professional communities” (Popov, 2018: 99). Lave and Wenger (1991) contend that learning and culture are connected, and that participation in various communities gives meaning to experiences (Winn et al., 2006) - these meanings can stimulate an individual's motivations to participate (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Community of practice theory demonstrates the significance of social encounters like interaction and relationship building on learning, integration, and participation. Consistent with this, O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007: 315) state that,

“Success in an education system can be thought of as full participation—that is, individuals adopt and perform the valued practices of that community and in so doing contribute their own experience and modify practice and shift values.”

Taking the individuals in the current study, they may find that in-group activities offer considerable psychosocial support, helping to develop resilience and manage relationships within the setting or community (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). But what constitutes as ‘full participation’ might be achieved differently in a remote setting.

Wenger (2010) explained how community is developed through knowledge exchange, and that collaborative generation of meaning and understanding creates a collective identity. The experience of participation is not limited to the literal creation of knowledge, it also involves indirectly exchanging resources, and developing abstract representations of shared encounters, such as terms and concepts (Wenger, 2000). Cotterall's (2011) research on doctoral students explores individuals moving in from the periphery; they discuss the partnership of novices with experts and ‘old-timers’ (ibid.), who facilitate integration into the community. The doctoral

candidate's progression is characterised by taking on various roles, suggesting the possibility for 'multimembership', which may spur on fragments of collective identities to move across memberships into others. Notably, as doctoral students move from the periphery into more permanent academic roles, their transformation can be explored through Melucci's (1995) consideration for internal identities, expressed identities, and observed identities.

Theory on community of practice recognises the movement from part to full participation, exploring how immersion in and consideration for sociocultural influences facilitates this (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). 'Legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 39) is influenced by time and changes in the life course; level of engagement can determine one's influence within the collective (ibid.). Lave and Wenger (1991: 36) express how "[c]hanging locations and perspectives are part of actors' learning trajectories, developing identities, and forms of membership", emphasising the significance of on-going social interactions. While participation in different cultural and social worlds can be beneficial for the learner's breadth of perspectives, horizontal transitions between sites can also facilitate sharing knowledge across groups, and through negotiation helping to develop rich relationships and identities (see horizontal expertise (Popov, 2023)).

As can be seen in Martin et al. (2014: 201), individuals mediate the experience of becoming a member by looking to the expert role, asserting that "it is the responsibility of the lecturer to encourage a learning environment which engenders this engagement through learning communities and support". This activity reaffirms how studying continues beyond the boundaries of taught content, and that membership in a community can facilitate learning to take place (ibid.). Shepherd and Nelson's (2012) findings in the US however revealed that learning communities appear more effective with younger students, as adult learners assimilate less due to their infrequent attendance at social events on campus. Correspondingly, based on the adult learners' preference for interactions with members of staff (Lundberg, 2003), they may struggle with integrating into the student community; this can be owing to their perceived similarities in status with staff (such as, their age group or profession) (Aitken et al., 2022), or their self-definition compared to their student counterparts (Lundberg, 2003).

Schlossberg's (1989) work on marginality and mattering has explored feelings of support and recognition. They use a scale that analyses attention, importance, dependence, ego-extension, and appreciation (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). One might sense support through communication styles and how others notice things about them (ibid.), this might also include the way that institutional practices support individuals to fit into existing structures.

Existing literature points to flaws in the community of practice. It is probable that individuals may feel unable to fully-integrate when they encounter a lack of facilitation away from the periphery, they may feel under-valued, intimidated, or unwelcome, leading to partial-participation (Cotterall, 2011). The individual's inability to immerse themselves in the social learning experience may hamper their understanding of group norms and access to knowledge. This is consistent with Duff (2007) from the US, who explained how this restriction may be a result of unspoken power dynamics, something not explicitly recognised in Wenger's (2000, 2010) work; these dynamics may represent distinctions in gender, age, proficiency, or stage of career. Notably in the US, power may be conveyed through institutional hierarchies (roles/funding) or discipline (subject importance). Cotterall (2011) confirmed these shortcomings by identifying ways that the students' supervisors could have facilitated their integration, through access to support with writing publications and grant applications, as well as integration into their professional network, while Popov (2023) indicated that certain environments are not always conducive to learning or participation.

2.9.1. Multimembership

The concept 'multimembership' was given by Wenger (1998) to describe an individual's degree of participation across boundaries. They contend that individuals can be part of multiple communities of practice at any given time, facilitated by participation and reification; this featured heavily in the existing literature on PG study, as individuals returned to study with established roles and commitments that often determined their approach to study (Scott et al., 2011; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). It is possible too that the continuation of identity associated with

certain roles may have been influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic where practices were largely confined to the home or remote spaces, as reported by Couch, O'Sullivan and Malatzky (2021) who were challenged to fulfil their teaching practices at home, where other identity characteristics (like woman and mother) came to the fore. Participation is evident in how individuals act and interact, and where they situate themselves, whereas, reification takes place through objects and documents, perspectives and interpretations.

While belonging to certain memberships is not always obvious, markers exist to unearth connections; for instance, the choice of language used to demonstrate shared knowledge. Wenger (1998) explained how 'multimembership' can be observed through boundary objects (including physical artefacts, language use) as well as through brokering (the act of carrying out facets of one practice in an alternative space), leading memberships to grow across boundaries.

Earlier studies argue that the boundary is an important space for learning to occur, where individuals come together intentionally or spontaneously to reveal distinctive memberships to one another. These sites of exchange can create feelings of being on the inside of multiple communities, while others will argue that they are simultaneously on the outside of them, being marginalised. Multimembership is possible when individuals begin to assume the ideas and knowledge of different settings in addition to their own, impacting their identity and how they feel part of a particular group. Wenger (1998: 218) expressed that,

“multimembership is a critical source of learning because it forces an alignment of perspectives in the negotiation of an engaged identity. Identity then becomes a living bridge – the dynamic locus of alignment – the subject and the object of the work of reconciliation necessary to bring diverging perspectives together, understand them through each other, and find a way to engage them with one another”.

Wenger's (1998) quotation speaks to the experience of identity renegotiation, through the familiarisation of new knowledge and social or cultural norms. It connects with Beach's (1999) collateral transition (consequential transition), where

an individual moves between related contexts in a continuum; their participation and access to understanding may lead to a reconstruction of self, owing to a transformation of knowledge (ibid.).

In the current study, the experience of returning to higher education may bring some participants to a boundary space. This may be evident in individuals with continuing professional roles, who are required to sustain existing knowledge and practices while passing over the boundary to be immersed in a student role too. This experience of 'multimembership' may be apparent in their commitment to certain beliefs, values, and cultures. Because of this, and the diversity encountered within a PG cohort, the landscape of learners is often considered culturally plural (Berry, 1997). While some may feel that they are wholly committed and connected to each pursuit as they participate in it, others might experience only partial participation (Wenger, 2000). This can be because of certain rituals fulfilled by different members of an organisation, access to norms within a community, or the level of familiarity with values and behaviours (Bencherki & Snack, 2016). Rituals may be fixed to a particular identity, the extent to which these are carried out can determine the relationship with an organisation, institution, or community (ibid.). The style of interacting and language use is also often context-specific, as are tasks or activities carried out within collectives; these reinforce feelings of belonging as well as the continuation of a culture (Berry, 1997).

In the US, Dohrenwend and Smith (1962) portray acculturation as a merging of different cultures and group encounters; the outcome of coming together, or 'intercultural contact', is often the adjustment of one's behaviours, beliefs and values. Moreover, Berry (1997) illustrated that acculturation can be experienced by all involved in the merging of cultures. The literature depicts acculturation experienced at the group and individual levels, the latter impressing directly on the psychology of a person influencing the personal and cultural facets of identity (ibid.).

In the current research, a host of variables are likely to influence the experience of acculturation, including the new environment (remote or on-campus), community (peers or academic staff), support systems (organisational or institutional), practices, and roles. A gradual compliance to or negotiation with the new culture will facilitate

the internalisation of ways of being (Blume, 2010) and may create a 'multimembership' whereby an individual is perceived by different groups to be on the inside, participating and contributing more fully, with clear markers of identification.

Sometimes, individuals seek to re-establish themselves in the new setting. Based on Blume (2010, 2015), an individual might expose aspects of their identity for adjustment or culture shedding (Berry, 1992) leading to what Berry (1997) refers to as assimilation, this might occur when an individual wants to be perceived in a certain way or to connect with a particular role. Other rules and rituals may remain protected in preparation for a more compatible relationship, these might include personal culture and the preservation of traits. Berry (1997: 6) outlined how "individuals generally act in ways that correspond to cultural influences and expectations", suggesting that assuming characteristics and traits, may help the individual to feel more confident about participating, or else they risk becoming marginalised.

As demonstrated in Schultz's (1991) work on organisational culture in the Danish context, individuals can be part of different symbolic domains and different work settings simultaneously, simply requiring an awareness of the distinctions between behaviours and meanings. They state that "work settings provide opportunities for a social structure to be enacted, whereas the symbolic domains provide the social definitions and constraints making enactment possible" (ibid.: 489), thus presenting the multiple layers to identity, and their potential to be context-specific. To facilitate movements across contexts, horizontal expertise may provide information that helps with adjustment to the culture, which also develops creative ways to contribute. This is viewed as a circular transition within an organisation (ibid); the process is considered a temporary change exercising the fluidity of identity and emphasising the impact of socialisation on boundary crossing. The challenging nature of negotiating how to be in the distinctive contexts is also discussed by Engeström and Engeström (2003) who point to the need for knowledge regarding social rules and norms to move over boundaries. Considering the remote nature of many roles in contemporary society, the boundaries crossed may be metaphorical or only exist within certain tools that grant access to alternate roles; this might be a computer log

in, the resources required to complete tasks, or the behaviours and attitudes associated with a role.

2.9.2. Summary

This final section on ‘community of practice’ and ‘multimembership’ has explored notable contributions by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) to the study of identity, participation, and learning from the periphery. It’s relevance to the current study is evident through the exploration of collaborative activity, boundary crossing, and the participation in and influence from contrasting social worlds; in particular, this bears connection to participants with on-going roles in contrasting settings. The frequent horizontal transitions for these individuals demonstrate their experiences with participation and reification; these culturally plural individuals provide a ‘living bridge’ between settings, demonstrating the significance of sharing information, exchanging perspectives, and challenging interpretations, on respective practices.

2.10. Theoretical Framework: Schlossberg & Blume

The need for this study stems from a concern for the shortage of understanding about the experience of returning to postgraduate (PG) study from the workplace, and the scarcity of research documenting the Covid-19 pandemic. Research indicates that this deficiency in understanding can lead to poorly designed resources and support networks for PG students, creating further unforeseen challenges for those adjusting to a student role. The little awareness shown for the dynamic PG cohorts in higher education (HE) today, has constructed misleading assumptions about learners. Thus, in gaining insight into the return to PG study, and what this might look like during a global crisis, through a comprehensive review of contemporary literature and the current doctoral study, it may be possible to establish facets of the experience that influence transition and to uncover ways that universities and workplaces can design tailored support for prospective learners.

This section exhibits the theoretical framework in which critical thinking about Schlossberg's (2008) theory of transition and Blume's (2010) theory of identity renegotiation is presented. This framework has helped organise how the current study is designed, and how the research questions are addressed. While the main body of the literature review provided a rigorous consideration of Schlossberg and Blume's continued contributions to the fields of transition and identity in both psychological and educational landscapes, this section will further argue the suitability of their conceptualisations to explore the experience of returning to PG study during Covid-19.

The literature review presented scholarship on the experience of returning to study, experiences from the transition and identity landscapes, and further explored practices and processes happening within academic and workplace environments such as organisational culture, socialisation, and 'multimembership', occasionally along with scholarship situated within former or on-going pandemics. From this wide-ranging and critical engagement with literature, the theoretical framework was identified to represent my researcher positioning, assumptions and orientations, and informed how the research topic would be explored. Consideration for contributions

to the literature review and its wider theories of transition has led to the development of this framework, justifying its suitability for exploring the return to study during Covid-19. For instance, in 2.10.5. these wider theories explore cognitive, social cognitive, sociocultural, psychological, social psychological, developmental, transitional, and psychosocial perspectives, which has ensured that the chosen framework is theoretically grounded in complexities highlighted across the literature.

The theoretical framework situates the current study within existing research by drawing on two prominent scholars in the fields of transition and identity, highlighting what is known about the topic, and indicating why the contributions of the current study are significant to the field. The theoretical framework will help enhance the little existing literature on the return to PG studies from the workplace, PG student transition, the knowledge of adult, mature, and returning students, and higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.10.1. Schlossberg

The information required to complete the research comprised contextual and perceptual data, stemming from the participants' reflections on returning to study, homing in on their time in the workplace, departing the workplace, and joining HE; this mirrored Schlossberg's notion of moving in, moving through, and moving out (1981). Schlossberg's (1981) model of 4 S's has formerly been employed in scholarship to explore assets and liabilities of individuals in transition and has been deemed a valuable resource for understanding the multifaceted pursuit undertaken by adult learners as they return to study. As detailed earlier in this chapter (2.2.2.), Schlossberg's suitability for exploring transition during Covid-19 has become evident in recent research carried out across the UK and US.

The 4 S's model, which looks at the situation, self, support, and strategies available to an individual in transition, has been employed widely in scholarship in the US exploring transitions of returning learners (Karmelita, 2018) and non-traditional students (Neber, 2018), including male dropouts (Powers, 2010), veterans (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015), and those entering community college (Lazarowicz, 2015).

Schlossberg's theory of transition has also facilitated the examination of other life

stages including postsecondary education (Pendleton, 2007) and retirement (Schlossberg, 1989 (US)). Schlossberg utilises this model in their counselling practice to explore an array of life's transitions helping individuals to cope with job loss, divorce, and relocation, amongst other things (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022).

In the UK, Schlossberg's theory has been applied to explore education; Brown (2019) questions the experience of transition in year 7 students, Monaghan (2022) probes transitions of PG taught students, and Winter (2014) has researched transitions to state care in Northern Ireland. Based on the research, Schlossberg's work has played a significant role in unearthing knowledge about underrepresented populations, revealing how individual's circumstances influence their ability to persevere through transition. The model of 4 S's has helped to organise data and re-tell participant narratives, offering valuable explanations and interpretations (see Case Studies in 3.12., Chapter 4: Findings, and Appendix 13).

2.10.2. Blume

Blume's (1991) theory of identity renegotiation was born of the complex combination of social contexts and conflict processes, bearing resemblance to Schlossberg's theory on transition, as evidenced in their recent publication, stating that,

“Moving through a transition requires letting go of aspects of the self, letting go of former roles, and learning new roles. People moving through transitions inevitably must take stock as they renegotiate these roles”. (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022: 17)

By uniting these theories, the current research considered the impression of the collective, the co-constructed, socially situated experiences within the participant's stories. Blume's research explores the influence of interactions and relationships with others on identity, and how these lead the individuals' behaviours and self-perception to adjust within given circumstances. Based on this, I propose that it is likely that remote study with limited opportunity to develop relationships with the

academic community (for participants in the current study), may influence renegotiation. Blume states that,

“Identity renegotiation theory defines identities as interpersonal narratives rather than internal realities. Identities are described as continually changing, co-constructed by storytellers and audiences and susceptible to social power and influence.” (Blume, 2010: 103)

It can be interpreted then, that for students to adjust to the social and cultural norms of a student role, that they may require a network with who these interactions and knowledge exchanges may happen with. In this context, establishing spaces that achieve this remotely may be significant for how students sense identifying characteristics.

2.10.3. Contribution of Schlossberg & Blume to the research

I believe that by uniting Blume’s conception of identity renegotiation with Schlossberg’s model of 4 S’s, the role of support can be foregrounded; this facet of the model more closely examines the roles and memberships external to the individual and how external connections feed into transition, corresponding with Blume’s consideration for the co-creators of identity. This pairing of theories will help acknowledge the wider impact of the environment, society, and community, and how the co-constructions of identity, both emotional and social, play into transition. How these theories are situated within wider transition theories is outlined below (2.10.5.).

By including Blume (2010, 2015) in this study, I expand understanding of transition as both a solitary experience and a collective experience, recognising the impact of intervening others and the spaces we are connected to. This approach seeks to unveil the possibility for transition to be relational, to be determined by and co-constructed with others.

When considering Blume’s stages of Identity Renegotiation Counselling (IRC), similarities can be found with the research experience in the current study. These similarities include sharing reflections of experiences and relationships that draw on

the influence of unique settings and interactions, creating different illustrations of transition. This activity provided participants the opportunity to contemplate and interpret any adjustments faced throughout the return to study, and to consider the interpersonal nature of transition. As participants shared reflections with the researcher, they reflected on the social influence of others on their changing circumstances as they moved from online to offline study, and indeed from work to study. Over time, these diary entries (and the follow-up interview) captured their changing responses to their work and study situations, with reflections on how they had applied learnt skills and knowledge to their studies, and what newly acquired information they sought to cope with the change.

This theoretical framework has been assigned to the current study to address the research questions, to make sense of the data, and to offer an alternative model for exploring transition, concerning the return to higher education during a pandemic. While much of the data is interpreted in the context of transition and identity theory more broadly, Schlossberg's model of 4 S's is at the heart of the analysis, as a deductive strand has been added to the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The 4 S's became evident in the presentation of data, notably through domain summaries and theme titles.

2.10.4. Limitations of the theoretical framework

Challenges of the theoretical framework were overcome by bringing together Schlossberg and Blume's theories. For instance, Schlossberg's model of 4 S's offers only four lenses through which to explore transition, yet "lived experiences are not always so easily identified or neatly packaged" (Karmelita, 2016: 165). Blume's work considers the wider social, cultural, environmental surroundings of an individual as they support an exploration of identity; with the knowledge of what these factors might comprise, I found Schlossberg's 4 S's could be more widely interpreted. Employing the 4 S's as domain summaries in the presentation of data helped to organise connecting topics and experience, without messily presenting bursts of meaning.

I found it interesting to bring Schlossberg and Blume's practices of psychological counselling together because while Schlossberg's conception suggests that the

unique experiences of transition are affiliated with a competence in adapting and coping, Blume's work reports on the fluidity and mobility of identities, and how encounters with social others affect action. Together, there is much greater consideration for the events happening externally to the individual, which I believe is paramount for understanding the wider context in which the return to study happens and how it is experienced during a pandemic. The possibility for transition to occur is informed by earlier learning, former working situations, groups and individuals and their interactions, and much more.

The modifications that Schlossberg's work has encountered over several publications with colleagues show developments and refinement that acknowledge and connect with lived reality, rather than suggesting inconsistency. I argue that by employing their most recent conceptualisation of transition and the model of 4 S's, that my research has accounted for similar considerations taken in the present day (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022).

2.10.5. Psychosocial Perspective

Returning to postgraduate study from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic was explored through a psychosocial lens, using Schlossberg (2011) and Blume (2010) to support the examination of transition and identity renegotiation over an academic year. The discussion below explores the field of transition and identity through different lenses and concludes with a justification of why the psychosocial perspective was most suitable for this research. The perspectives listed below illustrate the connection of the current study to existing theories and the wider context, beginning with the cognitive perspective.

The **cognitive perspective** explores how individuals acquire and develop knowledge within existing understanding, to eventually assign meaning. Cognitivists are interested in internally organised information, and how this influences behaviours and beliefs; the connection between thought and action is significant.

Markus and Nurius' (1986) concept of 'possible selves' stems from this tradition, examining cognitive portrayals of self. Feelings about oneself create possible selves

and inspire one's responses to the world. The linear movement from one self to another is distinct for some participants in the current study, who carried out multiple roles, unable to discard identity traits; strands of professional identity may be kept owing to a foreseen return to work. This corresponds with Blume's (2010) belief that identities can co-exist and be actioned in different settings. For participants working and studying simultaneously, the opportunity to realise these identities authentically and move flexibly between them helped with navigating and balancing roles. While possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) acknowledges the significance of others in realising versions of self, as the individual senses conflict between self-definition and the perception of others, it does not address managing multiple selves at once.

Contrastingly, Donze and Gunnes (2018) considered socialisation from a cognitivist perspective (amongst other approaches), exploring how social knowledge is integrated, shaping actions. This concept considers how one's connection with their surroundings informs beliefs, behaviours, and perspectives. In the current research, characteristics of society and culture revealed how participants functioned in their roles, although social knowledge (norms, behaviours) felt insufficient for illustrating the extent of influence during transition. This did however portray the participants' connections to the culture of the academy. The current research argues that identity is fluid and changeable, a flexibility not always afforded by socialisation. Socialisation implies a degree of conformity and sameness, in this case, that the role of a student is fixed, contrary to my argument. Socialisation recognises characteristics of group settings, bypassing subjectivities and layers of identity that come alive during interactions (Blume, 2015). For this study, greater consideration for the two-way contribution of knowledge and resources is needed, to understand how individuals shape and are shaped by their support networks in different settings (Schlossberg, 2011).

The **social cognitive approach** shows how individuals shape and are shaped by their environment. This process reveals how one relates to and makes sense of the world, influencing their self-understanding. Exchanges between agents can explain how social knowledge sways actions and behaviours.

Jindal-Snape's (2023) multi-dimensional transition theory explores how transition is informed by social knowledge from simultaneous transitions across different spheres. This theory illustrates the messiness of transition but lacks structure to re-tell them. For instance, Jindal-Snape would argue that moving between the workplace and the university may trigger other transitions, but the extent to which these are part of the research story is not clearly defined. These additional experiences can complicate characterising transition. Different to Schlossberg's research on adults and adult learners, Jindal-Snape predominantly researches families and children.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) social cognitive theory 'community of practice' (CoP) also recognises the influence of social knowledge on behaviour and participation in certain contexts and communities. CoP largely explores how observations are made and modelled by individuals navigating identifying with different groups. CoP helped unpick relationship development by individuals in multiple roles as alternate strands of identity are employed, with social and cultural influence. The commitment to different values, behaviours, and social knowledge was reflected in how roles were fulfilled and how these spilled into different settings. This framework would more effectively explore a sample all experiencing professional and academic roles simultaneously, accounting for their contexts, members, and practices, illustrating "not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (Wenger, 1998: 4). The inconsistency across the current sample and the possibility for individuals not to identify with or adjust to academic culture made this framework unsuitable. Alternatively, Blume's (2015) theory of renegotiation allowed consideration for disidentification, and actions to change the meaning of the experience.

A **sociocultural perspective** explores the influence of society and culture on how and why behaviour develops. Most interesting is membership within certain communities, and the interactions displaying rules and norms governing development.

Beach's (1999) sociocultural 'consequential transition' illustrates the complex process of letting go of or developing behaviours, values, knowledge, and identity.

Notably, they consider changing relations between individual, activity, and situation in time and space (ibid.). This theory explores “how we experience continuity and transformation in becoming someone or something new” (Beach, 1999: 102), through four types of transition: lateral, collateral, encompassing, and mediational.

When implementing established knowledge or identity in a new setting, one risks changing its meaning or significance; these resources are a means for constructing knowledge and identity relevant to the new situation (Beach, 1999), correlating with Schlossberg’s (2011) coping mechanisms to manage change. This also connects with identity renegotiation (Blume, 2015), which illustrates how existing knowledge, traits, or qualities, are activated in response to an environment or interaction, creating opportunities for development. Documenting social and cultural influence is important for understanding consequential transitions, however the psychological was integral for understanding subjectivities of transition in the current study.

Zittoun’s (2006, 2009) sociocultural work on ruptures focuses on identity adjustment owing to fluctuations in social or cultural stability. Transition is observed through movement between environments and feelings about or development within the self, informed by social knowledge. This theory showed similarities to the Schlossberg and Blume pairing, exploring influences from the environmental, cultural, and social. They acknowledge cognitive and social resources and how these influence responses in new situations. The inconclusive nature of Zittoun’s transition limits the suitability of their work, which is common as many scholars indicate a continuum or non-linear process (see Schlossberg: moving in, through, out).

The **psychological perspective** helps makes sense of how the mind works and influences behaviour. Bridges’ (1991) psychological model of change explains that transition is an internal adjustment process, while change is something that individuals respond to (also reflected in Gale and Parker’s (2014) conception of ‘becoming’). This theory focuses on group behaviours within organisations and their impact on workplace output. The staged nature of Bridges’ conception (ending, neutral zone, new beginnings) differs from Schlossberg’s (moving in, through, and out) as it emphasises rigidity, linearity, and a sense of completeness. Instead, Schlossberg indicates that when an individual moves out, they are simultaneously

preparing to move in. That Bridges' (1991) work was designed for an organisational context indicates that it may be outcome or solution driven, where drawn out adjustment is not beneficial to organisational effectiveness. The need to resolve each of Bridges' stages overlooks the subjectivities and difficulties that individuals encounter during transition, unlike Schlossberg's counselling practice that intimately explores individual resources at length.

In contrast, the **social psychological approach** considers how the mind and setting together influence behaviour. It accounts for reactions to others, as alternative norms are employed; this can help explain how and why relationships are formed, by identifying connections.

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory can be used to unpick the rationale for intergroup behaviour. From this perspective, the significance of membership, identification, and sameness is observed, during adjustment to dominant norms. In the current study, social identity theory could explain individual commitment to adjustment, and its impact on their roles as student or employee. Desire for adjustment and relationships with peers may correlate with length of academic study, or familiarity with student identities. Unlike Blume's (2010) understanding of identity, a social identity feels more fixed. It does not allow for distinct aspects of identity to co-exist nor to make apparent different identity narratives, emphasising belonging, membership, and conforming.

In contrast, Optimal Distinctiveness theory (ODT) (Brewer, 1991), explains the need for sameness and difference simultaneously within social groups to achieve a social identity and sense of belonging. The likelihood of adopting a social identity is often owing to the distinctiveness of norms. Like Blume, the balance of traits can tip to meet the demands of a situation. ODT implies that 'fit' can be achieved by reflecting in-group characteristics, likely shaped by social knowledge, and established psychological resources (Schlossberg, 2011). The theory suggests that individuals control their adjustment to dominant traits, creating change, rather than their surroundings. Rather than feeling equal in a group owing to the influence of others, Blume's (2010) work explores the significance of difference in interactions to inform relationships.

The developmental perspective represents various stage theories, illustrating development by sequence, as in Erikson's (1959) theory of ego development (eight developmental tasks) and Marcia's (2002) four identity statuses. Commonly, stages pertain to age and context, although there is much dispute about the applicability of these as present day 'norms' evolve (Hoare, 2013). While sometimes stages are perceived as unfixed (Erikson, 1956), others are associated with gender norms or societal ideals and expectations. The developmental perspective frequently studies identity, adjustment, growth, and liminality. This has supported me to engage with "patterned changes in self-understanding, identity formation, social relationships, and worldview across the lifespan" (Newman & Newman, 2011: 22). Erikson's work is deliberated further in the psychosocial perspective below.

The **transition perspective** is represented here by Schlossberg (1981, 2011), who presents transition as anticipated, non-anticipated, non-event, and the sleeper. Schlossberg's model of 4 S's supports clients to identify assets and liabilities (coping resources) to navigate transition. Transition theories commonly describe change and often exist within developmental frameworks illustrating the interconnectedness of events, and the staged nature as sensed in Bridges' (1980) (ending, neutral zone, new beginnings), and Schlossberg (2008) (moving in, moving through, moving out) respectively.

An interdisciplinary **psychosocial perspective** frames the current research, informed by the approaches. This considers how behaviour and well-being are shaped by social and psychological influence, the relationships between the two, and what subjectivities mean for collectives (Taylor, 2017). This advises how behaviour is carried out alone and in company, influencing perceptions of self-in-relation (Fishbane, 2001). Stenner (2014: 209) offered the assumption "that every experience had by an 'inner world' has *something* to do with its 'outer world'", suggesting on-going exchanges between the spheres.

Psychosocial research explores identity, self, stress, community, social support, amongst other things, as though socially constituted (Taylor, 2017). These are often in-depth, small-scale studies (Jones, 2022). The approach contends that the

reciprocal nature of social and psychological spheres is integral to understanding experience (ibid.), thus supporting my detailed exploration of participant subjectivities and resources, without omitting insight from external influence.

The intricately connected psycho and social are evident in Erikson's (1968) earlier developmental work on the lifespan, where crisis stages are resolved considering social influence. His sequential psychosocial theory contextualises information pertaining to history, politics, and social structures, illustrating how views of self and self-in-relation, personal and social identities, and ego evolve. That Erikson's psychosocial stages are not fixed to times of life (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022), makes their study of identity increasingly applicable to understanding adults, particularly following the belief that identity never ceases to evolve (Erikson & Newton, 1973). While the current research has not employed Erikson's work to unpick meaning per se, his explanation of the psychosocial was highly informative.

The counselling practitioners, Schlossberg (1981, 2011) and Blume (2010, 2015), fulfilled the theoretical framework in the current study. Characteristics of their counselling styles felt paramount to the research process. To explore the experience of returning learners through a lengthy study, I needed to establish a trusting relationship to support participant engagement, so I honed interpersonal skills and flexibility (Burke & McKenna, 2018). I exhibited self-awareness, disclosing my positionality, my roles within the academy, and my relationship with the subject matter (Plummer, 2001b; Saldaña, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2019). I also acknowledged the challenging nature of returning to study during a pandemic through autobiographic excerpts (these were not shared with participants). Showing empathy encouraged participants to continue with the research (Mauthner, 1998; Hugill, 2012); this felt significant in the follow-up interviews where anecdotes were developed with the researcher (Zhang & Hennebry-Leung, 2023). These behaviours mirrored Schlossberg and Blume, whose backgrounds acknowledge the significance of narrative and context to understand behaviour, developing interventions, and changing meaning. For more on developing rapport, see 3.5.5.

Notably, Schlossberg and Blume explore the inseparability of individual and collective spheres to understand how identity and transition are affected. Both consider how responses to the world are simultaneously informed by the world. In their work with individuals and in group settings, the practitioners learn about resources that support coping (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984, 1989, 2011; Blume, 1991, 2010). Although Schlossberg encourages clients to consider the involvement of others in transition, Blume's relational approach helps individuals to understand who they are in relation to others, emphasising the socially constituted aspect. Together, the scholars reveal the bonds connecting individuals, context, and society.

The current study explored the interconnectedness of individuals with society and culture. Participants reflected on role adjustment, time and membership at work and at university, the communities and cultures encountered, and the support they received, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The data depicted participants' feelings about belonging, resilience, identification and connection, conflict, and doubt. Their subjectivities informed how transition occurred, and the mechanisms guiding behaviour. Schlossberg's 4 S's considered the social and the psychological factors of the data; the situation and strategies capture both, while the self appears predominantly psychological, and the support aspect presents the social. In tandem, Blume helped explore the participants' environments (on-campus, remotely, at work) and their relationship to them. This framework demonstrated the interconnectedness of society and self; Blume's acknowledgement of social and cultural experiences enriches Schlossberg's understanding of individuals, highlighting 'support'; this speaks to the presence and absence of structures, and their influence on transition and identity.

To conclude, Schlossberg's theory of transition can be considered through cognitive, developmental, and transitional lenses, with its roots in psychology. Her counselling practice focuses on understanding transition through individual difference, psychological resources, and well-being. That said, her acknowledgement of change, contextual factors, and the influence of others (through support) brings her work into the psychosocial domain, which has enabled the current study to explore experience more holistically with an awareness of the self-in-relation. Corresponding with this, Blume's theory of identity renegotiation is framed by the reciprocity of

psychology and society; his work emphasises the significance of interactions and responses, which inform who we are in relation. Schlossberg and Blume have been considered throughout this discussion alongside other theories of transition and identity to emphasise their suitability and the preference for attributes of the psychosocial to explore the return to study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This exploratory qualitative research set out to enrich understanding about returning to postgraduate (PG) study from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic. Investigating the impact of workplace experiences on returning, this research addresses existing conceptions of transition and identity, aiming to be theory-generative. The research was guided by two questions:

1. What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?
2. How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?

The fieldwork for the current research was carried out over the 2021-2022 academic year, while a preliminary study was undertaken during the pandemic in 2020-2021. This chapter critiques the considerations given to these two studies.

3.2. Overview of the main research (2021-2022)

The research population comprised a heterogeneous sample of full-time and part-time students on PG programmes at a research-intensive university during the Covid-19 pandemic. The main study involved nine PG students from across the eleven faculties, some of whom only partially participated in the research. Data was collected over one academic year, to illustrate the subjectivities of returning to study during a pandemic. While the research poses similarities to a longitudinal design, questions administered to participants throughout explored different variables, making it difficult to observe the impact of time.

Qualitative data was collected using three methods at three data collection points throughout the 2021-2022 academic year; methods included email diary entries, digital storytelling, and follow-up interviews. This in-depth data depicted unique perspectives and interpretations of transition (Butler-Kisber, 2017). These methods allowed a tailored data collection, which encouraged discussion, helping participants to feel at ease, and to establish trust, which was paramount owing to its durational nature (Genat, 2009; Greene, Burke & McKenna, 2018). Although the university began encouraging a gradual return to in-person provision in September 2021, data was collected remotely in the current study.

A social-constructivist ontology and an interpretive-constructivist epistemology helped with understanding subjective experiences within the current research (Gobo, 2008; Given, 2012), notably accounts of behaviour in context, society, time, and history. This positioning stemmed from hermeneutics, the study of interpretation (Schwandt, 2000; Gadamer, 2001; Given, 2012). Ensuing interpretive-constructivism granted the collaboration of knowledge through a holistic enquiry of the various realities (Schwandt, 2001; Alvermann and Mallozzi, 2010), as established through social construction.

The theoretical framework employed Schlossberg's theory of transition and model of 4 S's (Schlossberg, 2011; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022), formerly used to explore adult education and non-traditional learners. These have revealed much

about returning and mature learners globally, verifying its reliability in social and educational research, though little has been reported on individuals departing the workplace. This was paired with Blume's (2010, 2015) theory of identity renegotiation, which influenced the analysis of data in the current research. Blume's stance on identity meant examining the impact of social roles, relationships, and memberships, to create site-specific identities.

This chapter opens with the rationale for collecting qualitative data, addressing my positioning, and offering an outline of the research design. To follow, the sample and population, sampling method, and gaining access are described. The preliminary study (Campbell, 2024a) and its influence on the main research design is also detailed, along with an account of available provision from the host institution during the Covid-19 pandemic. Next, the research instruments are discussed, with justification for email diary entries, digital storytelling, and interviews; a timeline is provided highlighting stages of the fieldwork. The case study method was employed to retell participant narratives, as such this first analysis is offered. Following on, is Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis, clarifying how both deductive and inductive analysis was fulfilled for the Findings Chapter, which includes all participant data. A critique of ethical considerations draws upon guidelines by the British Educational Research Association (2018), and the Research Ethics Framework and Principles of Integrity (UCL, 2021d; UCL 2024c; UCL 2024d) set out by the host university. The chapter is summarised, limitations are addressed, and the proposed methods of dissemination are revealed.

This chapter closes with three full participant case studies, illustrating characteristics of transition. Demographic information is included: mode of study, gender, home/international student status, job roles, and duration between study. This information emerged from the email diaries and interviews, while the digital storytelling artefacts have been included to offer a holistic view of the return to study.

3.3. Positioning

3.3.1. Qualitative Research

The current research sought transparent reflections and unique 'points of view' of returning to study during the Covid-19 pandemic (Daley, 2004). Qualitative data supported authentic expression, to enable "exploring, examining, and describing people and their natural environments" (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001: 93).

The challenge of illustrating the experiences of individuals from different life stages with contrasting experiences, was drawing their voices into a single narrative (Sandelowski, 1998; Plummer, 2001a). An example of this is the autobiographical society which gives prominence to 'personal speech' (Plummer, 2001b; Squire et al., 2014) through 'collective autobiography' and thus 'collective storytelling' (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2013: 4). This is where one person (in this case, the researcher) provides narrative on behalf of many people. This narrative is multi-voiced (Plummer, 2001b; Lapadat, 2009; Fivush, 2013), polysemous even (Squire et al., 2014), shaped by the experiences of a group, "to create a more collective awareness of others" (Plummer, 2001b: 13). This type of narrative employs "the personal as a means to illuminate and explain wider social and cultural processes" (Tinkler, 2014: 2), and is effective for exploring gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Collective writing offers 'agency' to the overlooked, it creates space for empathy (Mauthner, 1998) and provides a "sense of communal grounding" (Saldaña, 2018: 4).

The current research compiles participant narratives to explore and characterise the return to study throughout Covid-19 (Moen, 2006). These comprise descriptions of the workplace, current situations in HE and remote study, role change, and identification of resources influencing transition (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022).

From the data, themes summarised the embedded knowledge (Daley, 2004), documenting transition and change. The vast qualitative data revealed patterns, generating characterisations, and a polyvocal narrative. The research captured day-

to-day experiences, reflections on interactions, locations, and people, amongst other things (Elliot, Holland & Thomson, 2008), portraying subjectivities of the life course (Ryder, 1965).

3.3.2. The Role of the Researcher

I used the autobiographic method early on to facilitate self-reflection, exploring my positioning and former roles, their potential to influence the current research, and the closeness to 'insider research'. This included my experience of shifting to remote provision during Covid-19. Hugill (2012: 29) explained how the autobiographical method acknowledges "the presence of the researchers in the research". As articulated in the Rationale (see Chapter 1: 1.3.), my interest in this topic stemmed from observing my peers' behaviours during master's study. I was intrigued by how their approach to study was informed by experiences from within and beyond the academy, and association with different roles and communities. I kept these earlier experiences in mind, because "biography has an influence on the topics we research and the way we go about doing research" (Hugill, 2012: 31).

The autobiographic method is a reflective tool in which "practitioners can critically analyse their professional lives" (Clements, 1999: 21) and understand "how the past shaped the author's present self-knowledge" (Tinkler, 2014: 3). Based on this, I reviewed experiences with transition from across my lifetime.

By addressing my assumptions and biases, which could impact data interpretation, I felt able to be honest, open-minded, and simultaneously critical. This corresponded with Braun and Clarke (2019) who contended that researchers should explore their relationship with the research and data when undertaking reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as in the current study. The researcher should also accept their unique experiences, resources, and subjectivities as tools for developing knowledge (ibid.; van Heugten, 2004).

Developing an exploratory excerpt of my own, I unpicked my interest in the topic and prepared to explore "self-in-relation to other" (Bullough Jr & Pinnegar, 2001: 15). This experience helped to 'deconstruct the familiar world' (van Heugten, 2004: 207).

I separated mine and the participants' subjectivities, so to value difference, amplify lesser-known voices (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Futing Liao, 2004), and to encounter the return to study from someone else's standpoint (McKee & Stuckler, 2016).

3.3.2.1. Doing Autobiography

Using Crossley's (2011: 7) guidance on narrative biography, I singled out transitions based on '8 key events': a peak experience, a nadir experience, a turning point, an earliest memory, an important childhood memory, an important adolescent memory, an important adult memory, and any other important memory. Crossley (2002) organises events and meaning according to time (Ricoeur, 1984), through this I intended to illustrate their influence on self-perception, roles, identities, and outlooks.

I first mapped experiences from across my life course (Begg, 2011), developing a timeline characterised by communities, activities, and contexts. Notably, these created short, detailed stories about my experiences as a student, teacher, facilitator, and researcher, revealing commonalities with the research population. These included student status (as undergraduate, postgraduate, mature and returning student), earlier employment, the hybrid identity (Bhabha, 2010), and that I had worked and studied throughout Covid-19. The reflections explored my experiences with change, revealing events and relationships that had impressed on transition (Clements, 1999), exposing the roles of social and cultural constructions. My eventual reflection on returning to study identified many transition characteristics, which prepared me for the diversity of meanings I might experience from my sample.

The adult years most closely connected with the current research, addressing identity and intimacy (Erikson, 1968, 1974), themes within included socialisation, acculturation, position, role, community, and liminality. The autobiographic excerpt (Appendix 12) comprises five of Crossley's themes. Their titles reflect the encounter. In developing autobiography, I also discovered different types of transition, as identified by Schlossberg (1981).

- *'Fri-ends'* [An early memory]

I recall changing secondary schools as we relocated to the countryside. This extract highlights the significance of timing and its influence on outlook, the experience of adjusting, and the importance of on-going support.

- *‘Letting go and letting in’* [A peak experience – a high point in your life story]
When I was offered a place to study at university, I felt shocked, delighted, and accepted. In a whirlwind of emotions, I left the family home for the first time and became part of a new institution. This excerpt speaks to triggers of change, its perceived duration, and my stage of life.
- *‘Unborn tadpoles’* [A nadir experience – a low point in your life story]
Completing a master’s degree felt like the tip of the iceberg, but there was a sharp drop waiting on the other side. I revisit the challenge of maintaining strands of identity as I returned home and searched for somewhere to belong. This was characterised by information seeking, commitment and determination, and hope.
- *‘Anticipation’* [A ‘Turning point’ – an episode where you underwent a significant change in your understanding of yourself]
After copious temporary roles, I returned to higher education and qualified as a lecturer to acquire some stability. Being a student again was liberating; despite my expectations of the setting, I felt at home, and I connected with peers. This account considers timing, gradual role adjustment and self-perception, and my choice to proactively embrace change.
- *‘Re-entry’* [An important adult memory – a memory that stands out from age 21 onwards]
This reflection describes the present day (around 2021/2022). The significance of the PhD is considered, along with the influence of Covid-19. This excerpt explores the perceived duration of change, fostering resilience, grappling with support networks, and approaches to cope with remote study, distant communities, and connecting with academic culture.

Clements (1999; 29) noted the importance of showing awareness for “looking back to the past through the eyes of today, rather than actually remembering what went on in the past”, highlighting how lived experiences alter understanding, as acquired knowledge gives meaning to past events.

3.3.2.2. Self-reflection to overcome bias

This activity supported me to address my closeness to the research population, the setting, and relationship with the research topic (Unluer, 2012). While the aim of this was to uncover potential bias, it became apparent that bias could positively and negatively influence the work.

The literature refers to biases as ‘blindspots’ (van Heugten, 2004; Unluer, 2012; Tsipursky, 2020) which can dominate data interpretation if not acknowledged, leading to information being overlooked, misinterpreted, or misassigned meaning. McKee and Stuckler (2016) explained how biases can lead to ‘anchoring’, “placing undue emphasis on unimportant, though salient aspects of the issue” (ibid.: 80). This can skew intended meaning, swaying the narrative. Problems with bias arise when researchers attribute value to things corresponding with their own beliefs or positionality (ibid.), misevaluating interactions or data can be harmful (Tsipursky, 2020). ‘Bracketing’ is a means of enhancing rigor and overcoming bias (Berkovic et al., 2020), where details about the influence of experiences and world views are disclosed (Begg, 2011). My awareness of commonalities with the research population increased transparency and accountability, along with “the credibility, integrity and trustworthiness of the research” (Hugill, 2012: 30).

The positive influence of bias included my rich understanding of the research setting and academic culture, which helped me to understand and be sensitive about the participants’ situations (Hugill, 2012). Having worked and studied at the host institution myself, I used this knowledge to contextualise the data, unpick the ‘implied’, and empathise or fill out silences (Unluer, 2012); the same could be said about studying remotely with the host university during the pandemic. Earlier experiences at master’s and MPhil level may also have helped develop rapport with participants (Berkovic et al., 2020), as commonalities were revealed. Hugill (2012:

29) illustrates my situation, stating “we are not dispassionate researchers on the outside looking in, but we are on the inside reflexively looking around”. This closeness and empathy drove my hope to enhance the return to study for learners, as I strived to connect knowledge about returning during a pandemic with institutional support and provision.

However, shared experiences may also present assumptions. Despite prior knowledge of and familiarity with returning to study, my recollection of encounters or sensations may not reflect the participants’. That much of their experience was influenced by technology, remote study, and a pandemic, speaks to the subjectivities of reflections. Further, the participants may also assume the researcher’s knowledge, leading them to under-reporting or misinterpreting experiences (Unluer, 2012). For instance, although I lived and studied through Covid-19, I did not return to study from a workplace during this time, meaning the circumstances of our shared experience are likely quite distinct.

The autobiographic excerpt supported me to think objectively about the participants’ experiences, isolating my account from theirs. Reflecting on transition and returning to study, I considered the extent to which my experiences informed the research questions and tasks (Berkovic et al., 2020), and whether existing biases were at play. Case studies helped to tell full and subjective stories, presenting complexities and nuances, without hand-picked (potentially biased) themes. This is considered by Carless and Douglas (2017: 1) who explain how,

“Working narratively allows researchers to learn from each participant’s position as expert on her/his own life, understanding and co-constructing meaning through a reciprocal, dialogical interaction”.

In terms of collecting data, throughout the interview I paid attention to my behaviours, reactions, and the extent of familiarity. To avoid assumptions about the data, follow-up questions granted access to their unique situations; these, along with dissemination of the findings chapter to participants, posed opportunity to check meaning and interpretation (Unluer, 2012).

This process clarified the rationale for this research, revealing distinct interpretations of experience influencing my interest in the subject (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Hugill, 2012). In Saldaña's (2018: 6) reflections on qualitative researching, they state that "You can't analyze others until you've analyzed yourself". (For more research on reflective practices including autobiography and autoethnography, see Campbell 2022, Campbell 2024b).

3.3.3. Storytelling

Storytellers sometimes find their accounts have been manipulated by hindsight bias (Fischhoff, 1975), where current knowledge intervenes with memories, creating a 'corrective' (ibid.). Kvernbeek (2013: 642) tells how "Time moves on, new events take place, and hence our stories about the past are in principle infinitely revisable". A memory can be distorted by 'temporal distance', as we look back with greater knowledge, through different lenses, setting the event in a wider context. Temporal distance refers to the time separating two events – the event being looked back on, and the process of looking back (Crossley, 2002).

Participants' accounts are often built into coherent narratives by a researcher, focusing on structure, content, or context (Squire et al., 2014). Moen (2006: 64) contends that,

"To understand a human being, her or his actions, thoughts, and reflections, you have to look at the environment, or the social, cultural, and institutional context in which the particular individual operates."

It remains the responsibility of the researcher to authentically retell a story, to "validate the knowledge of 'ordinary' people" (Fraser, 2004: 184). They must maintain a distance between the subject and meanings conveyed so not to revise the truth (Fine, 1994; Letherby, 2003; Lapadat, 2009). Fivush (2013: 13) explained in their work on memory and identity, that data must be interpreted "through the subjective lens of individual meaning-making", representing heterogeneous biographies.

3.4. Design

3.4.1. Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology

This study follows the social-constructivist ontological belief, claiming that reality is a result of interactions and activity between individuals in their various and changing social settings (Howe, 1998). This belief maintains that knowledge and truth correspond with the social environment, or the shared agreement or knowledge “bestowed upon it socially” (Hay, 2015: 100). As such, different constructions of collective knowledge exist between agents across contexts based on patterns in understanding (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

In 1.4.2., transition as a social construct is described. Throughout the life-course transition is experienced within and because of interactions within cultural or social settings, under the guise of identities and social norms (Schlosberg, 1981; Stauber, Walther & Settersten Jr., 2022). This portrays transition as relational, stemming from social practices, structures, or communities.

Taking the experience of returning to study from the workplace, this ontological belief indicates that truth is created in different environments for participants: their workplaces, the university campus, or in virtual spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic. These settings play host to different communities who construct and interpret reality in contrasting ways, but who agree on meaning within their shared language.

A social-constructivist ontology pairs well with an interpretive-constructivist epistemology, as pursued here. The latter contends that knowledge and truth are co-constructions in shared contexts (Howe, 1998). I believe that knowledge is created through interpretation of encounters within distinct environments where a common language exists (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This epistemology will help understand changes in meaning during participants’ return to higher education, as they encounter new environments, communities, roles, and activities within.

An interpretive-constructivist epistemology was employed to understand the subjectivity of human experience and behaviour, and its relation to context, the social world, time, and history. This approach is reliant on understanding the structures that individuals collectively exist within. This study of interpretation (Gadamer, 2001; Given, 2012) was guided by participants' realities, informed by social construction. This epistemology supports an inspection of the multifaceted influences of transition, taking context, society, and culture as examples.

The empirical approach is evident in the qualitative methodology chosen to explore the experience of transition. A range of methods have been used to understand the behaviours, beliefs, and experiences of participants. In the preliminary study, a focus group allowed the researcher to be actively involved, freely exploring meaning. Whereas in the main study, email diaries, digital story-telling, and interviews were employed over an academic year, which created in-depth meaningful data illustrating participants' lived experiences. Qualitative methodology requires reflexivity by the researcher who must consider their influence on the study (Hugill, 2012; McKee & Stuckler, 2016) (see 3.3.2.2.). To understand this, I developed autobiographic accounts exploring my own experiences with transition and identity (Crossley, 2002) (see section 3.3.2.1.).

This methodology supported participants to depict reality as they saw, related to, and understood it. Capturing subjectivities was important for understanding transition, and the distinctions between structures that guide communities and contexts in knowledge creation.

The theoretical orientation of this study is psychosocial. Together, Schlossberg (2011) and Blume's (2010) theories connect with Erikson's (Erikson & Newton, 1973; Hoare, 2013) conceptualisation of psychosocial, where the psychological and social impress upon each other equally in a continuum (see 2.10.5.); meaning the individual influences society as much as society influences the individual. The participants' connection to other groups, contexts, and identities are revealed through the two spheres. The dominant social aspect of the current ontology and epistemology is reflected in Blume. Participants in the current research experienced changed environments, peers, and practices, and shifting restrictions in response to

the Covid-19 pandemic, creating distinct experiences with knowledge creation and interpretation.

A psychosocial lens facilitated engagement with identity, self, support, and relationships within the alternating settings. The subjectivities of returning to study depicted transition within a wider frame. This qualitative exploration facilitated participant reflection on their unique settings and circumstances, and co-creation of meaning, exhibiting the interpretive-constructivist epistemology.

3.4.2. Research Methods & Timeline

To understand returning to study during the pandemic, I used three qualitative methods at different stages (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), to capture “a more complete picture” (Mittelmeier et al., 2021: 20): email diary entries, digital storytelling, and interviews. Similar to data and methodological triangulation (Creswell, 2003; Gill, Johnson & Clark, 2010; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mittelmeier et al., 2021), these methods helped clarify interpretations of experience, enriching the trustworthiness of knowledge (Patton, 2002; Hastings, 2012), and creating opportunity for member-checking (Hastings, 2012).

The qualitative data was spoken, visual, and written. Culshaw (2019: 276) argued that these “should not be kept separate, as they are inextricably linked”, indicating the potential for the artefacts to extend meaning, hence their inclusion in the case studies (3.12.).

Fig. 1 details the fieldwork plan.

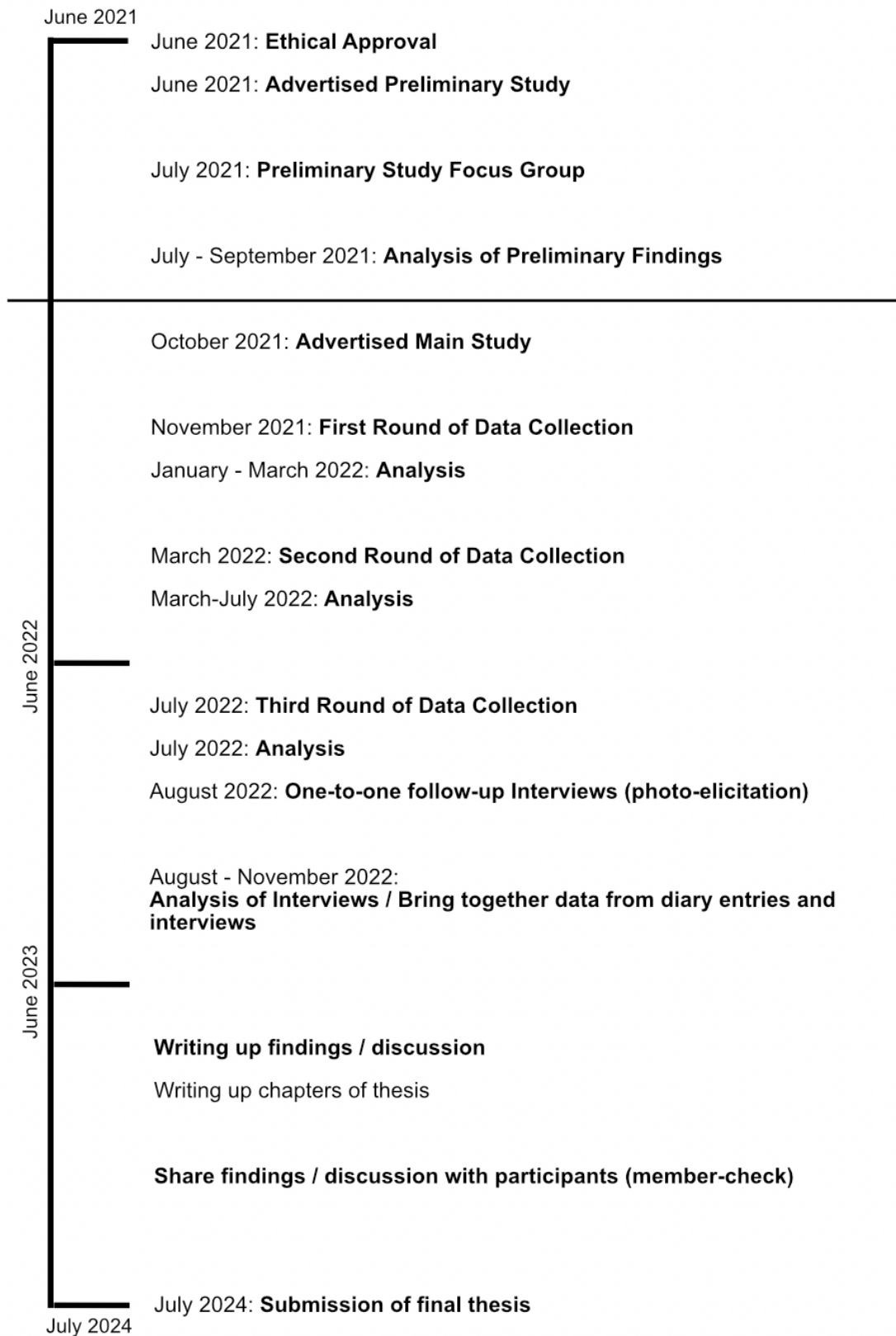


Fig. 1 – Research Project Timeline

3.5. Sampling / Participants

The research accessed a non-probability sample (O'Reilly, 2012; Yang, 2015) of full-time and part-time postgraduate (PG) students enrolled at a UK university. The inclusion criteria required that participants had been in employment for a minimum of one year and had completed an undergraduate degree or equivalent (from any university). A period in employment will likely have offered immersion in the rituals and practices of an organisation, distinguishing between the settings.

The host university has a large global PG network (see 3.5.1.). The eleven faculties comprise diverse programmes in various modes of study, including full-time, part-time, distance, modular or flexible, or short courses (UCL, 2024e). The PG population comprises master's courses and higher, like doctoral studies or postgraduate diplomas. Additionally, the student body is made up of continuing, returning, and first-time adult learners.

3.5.1. The host university

In the current study, a convenience sample was employed to select the host institution for the research, ultimately resulting in working with my affiliated university. This choice was largely owing to the Covid-19 pandemic which had created barriers to accessing and researching universities during this unprecedented time, as well as earlier insight obtained from my master's and preliminary study (3.5.2.) undertaken there. Due to the pandemic, all universities had abruptly resorted to remote provision to minimise disruption and protect against the spread of the virus, updating technologies, pedagogies, and information about supporting remote study (Littlejohn et al., 2021). The suitability of this setting was also reaffirmed by my understanding of the growing PG population, knowledge of support and provision available from professional and academic staff, and on-going experiences with remote study. My familiarity with the institution allowed me to advertise my affiliation with and ethical approval by the shared setting to gatekeepers, which helped overcome recruitment issues.

The chosen institution had a postgraduate body of almost 20,000 students, across over 700 programmes in 11 faculties. Across the institution, 50% of students are international, as are 34% of staff (UCL, 2024b). Like many other Russell Group universities, the research-driven culture inspires students to participate in, develop, and inform research, alongside world-leading practitioners fulfilling various academic roles within the setting. The significance of experiencing research during study is emphasised in its ethos, teaching students about 'doing' research, and how to "become active participants in the production of knowledge rather than passive recipients" (Russell Group, 2017: 1). Thus, I believed that students' interest and commitment to the current study would be greater, offering encounters with different research methods, critical engagement with reflections, and contribution to new knowledge. Plausibly, participating in this research might also have supported connection with the academic community during the characteristically distant time.

The diversity of the institution, helped by the Russell Group's resources to overcome barriers to study, might enrich the illustration of 'returning to study', depicting subjectivities and complexities associated with transition from different backgrounds. Current Russell Group initiatives explore the involvement of employers and workplaces in learning (Russell Group, 2024b). These partnerships involve accreditation and guidance for programmes, preparing students for industry or with discipline-specific knowledge. This bridging of organisations was interesting for the current research, where experiences spillover to inform students' return.

3.5.2. Preliminary study

Campbell, K. (2024a) 'Exploring Transition from the Workplace to Higher Education during Covid-19: Postgraduate Quality and Provision'. Higher Education Quarterly 79(1), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.70000>

A preliminary study was carried out to explore the current PG population, the research context, and how returning to study was influenced by Covid-19, this has since been published in Higher Education Quarterly (Campbell, 2024a). While the literature exhibited little knowledge about PG students returning to study, even less was available about the return during a pandemic.

I aimed to uncover key issues associated with returning to study, and whether these corresponded with the literature. Existing knowledge revealed assumptions about master's level academic competence, the barriers learners face, and how identity is negotiated.

Early on, the research base comprised literature on transition, identity (broadly speaking), and organisational culture. I had hoped that the preliminary study would confirm the significance of the larger doctoral study, while also identifying the tools required to interpret and create new knowledge.

What did it consist of?

An hour-long focus group was carried out on Zoom with participants from a single UK university, this was password protected. The participants reflected on experiences of transition, former and current organisational cultures, changing or developing identities, and the support structures encountered during their return to HE. Each participant had the opportunity to contribute to the group discussion (Peterson, 2013; Borgobello, Pierella & Pozzo, 2019); insight was born of the semi-structured questions and off-piste conversations between participants as they began to sense belonging (Capuzzi & Gross, 2002; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). The focus group was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Sample

The sample comprised five PG taught and research students from a single faculty at the university. To produce a holistic view of returning to study, the research was advertised to students of all study modes. All participants studied remotely due to Covid-19 lockdown measures (Wright, Steptoe & Fancourt, 2021), three of whom continued working simultaneously. The sample was both non-random and convenience, based on the suitability of the faculty programmes to the study, and the ease of communicating the research.

Pseudonym	Mode of study	Attended Focus Group?

Quinn	Full time	x
Alex	Full time	x
Rene	Part time	x
Jude	Full time	x
Gray	Full time	x

Table 2 – Preliminary Research Sample

x = attended

Advertising / Recruitment

With ethical approval, I advertised the preliminary research. This research was essential for understanding issues faced by PGs returning to study during the pandemic (Peterson, 2013; Yang, 2015). Participants were recruited using a poster, information sheet, and consent form, distributed to heads of department via email, who acted as gatekeepers (BERA, 2018).

Method: Focus Group

Qualitative data was gathered from a virtual focus group of five PG students, towards the end of the 2020-2021 academic year, following several nationwide lockdowns. The literature explains how group settings often produce reliable data as concepts develop through collaboration (Webb & Kevern, 2001), enabling clarity and honesty when participants feel supported. My knowledge of the population and relevant literature supported me to design and communicate accessible questions (Peterson, 2013).

The focus group explored returning to PG study during Covid-19 and resuming the student role. Given the on-going health and safety restrictions to protect against the spread, a remote focus group most efficiently brought students together; this overcame issues with distance, and fatigue stemming from methods like

questionnaires. This also provided opportunity to socialise and connect with peers during the solitary time.

The participants autonomously responded to open-ended semi-structured questions with anecdotes and listened to their peers' stories of transition. Their experiences of returning revealed connections between them, establishing sameness and belonging (Davies & Harré, 1990), lessening feelings of judgement. Building on one another's comments, they offered words of encouragement and emotional support (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022), instilling hope for an unfamiliar and uncertain journey (ibid).

Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022) describe 'membership' in group counselling, which was established through participant introductions, sharing workplace experiences and roles in HE. Identification can lead to feeling like "insiders rather than outsiders" (ibid: 236), supporting participants to feel at ease about opening up. The participants related to one another, demonstrating 'reflexive positioning' (Davies & Harré, 1990). This was noticeable as individuals reiterated their peers' points from their own perspectives creating a shared narrative; through gesticulations and oral acknowledgements, they revealed unspoken commonalities and empathy (Capuzzi & Gross, 2002) (See Appendix 11 for questions).

Safety and trust can be achieved through mindfulness of differences (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022), which can pertain to class, race, culture, gender, age, amongst other things. The diversity of experiences shared by participants mirrored the boundless characteristics of returning learners in the current landscape.

The participants used characteristics of language not easily identified in writing, like tone and volume, gesture, laughter, and pace. Peterson (2013: 4) reiterated that "[a] written word is often perceived differently from a spoken word", emphasising the significance of a focus group to support individuals in accentuating words or phrases, inserting questions, or creating impact. Words comprising many meanings can be clarified (Peterson, 2013), with participants offering profound meaning.

Method: Ethics

Participants were informed that the focus group would be recorded to accurately document data, and that direct quotations might be used in the thesis or subsequent publications (Campbell, 2024a).

I emphasised confidentiality to the participants, requesting that they refrain from discussing the content outside of the focus group. I was careful not to share the invitation to the focus group with anyone that had not consented to participating, which protected participant identities and avoided capturing data from anyone outside of the research. The recording was safely held in the university 'N-Drive'.

Each participant was given the opportunity to contribute to the discussion, helping them to feel respected and heard. The responsibility lay with me to facilitate considerate responses to and from participants. Blume (2010: 102) comments that “the professional seeks to intentionally align with each party at different times to provide support, to challenge, and to compensate for power imbalances”.

Analysis

The qualitative data was analysed in 2021, using a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021), including inductive and deductive levels (see 3.9.2.). The framework for the preliminary study comprised Schlossberg's theory of transition and Handy's model of organisational culture (1993). This focused on the influence of organisational culture on returning to HE, and the quality of support offered to students during this time.

Findings

Four themes summarised the return to study during Covid-19, illustrating unique experiences with transition, informed by Schlossberg's model of 4 S's (2011).

Theme 1: managing transition through transferable skills.

This explored how participants were influenced by previous or on-going workplace cultures. They built on knowledge about developing community and soft-skills to negotiate academic tasks and a student identity.

Theme 2: observations of organisational culture.

The participants considered how workplace relationships had influenced their role adjustment, how they had shaped their preparedness, and how they felt about other roles in the academy.

Theme 3: personalising the experience.

The participants' experiences with institutional practice was shaped by interactions with the academic community. They emphasised the value of feedback for adjustment and sensing norms of the role.

Theme 4: the influence of technology on teaching and learning.

The participants navigated remote study; they identified the support available during this isolating time. Notably, assumptions about students were revealed, regarding academic skills, digital literacy, and independent learning.

How did it inform the main study?

The focus group confirmed the need for further exploration of the PG experience, in terms of support for returning to study during Covid-19, and to understand how transition emerged, what it looked like for different students, and how they coped with it.

The preliminary data revealed that returning to study could be interpreted as returning to in-person study after a period of lockdown or returning to study after a prolonged period in work. The researcher should clarify this in the main study, while acknowledging the possibility for both given the time of data collection.

The focus group revealed that language choice could influence data when participants are unfamiliar with terminology. For instance, participants unfamiliar with the term 'organisational culture', may have felt restricted in their responses. In Borgobello, Pierella and Pozzo (2019: 10), they reflected that "[i]f the questions had been written with more detailed or popular language, unnecessary doubts could have been avoided". In the main study participants were asked about their working patterns and characteristics of their workplace instead, to illustrate their situation.

Although a focus group was effective for gathering participants during the Covid-19 pandemic, other methods would collect more and richer data representing the return over a longer period. The focus group was at times dominated by more confident participants, which may have taken time from others with equally valuable input, but who felt unable to add to the discussion. Dominant characters can influence discussion and how others communicate their experiences, distorting the authenticity of data; this can complicate data analysis when not all views are included. While group settings can foster belonging, they can also be intimidating for individuals who take longer to feel at ease with sharing experience. I wanted to provide opportunities for participants to reflect in their own time, in more comfortable ways (using written or creative means), and over a longer period. By staggering data collection points, participants could focus on specific topics without feeling burdened by the number of questions or tasks.

The preliminary research was informed broadly by theories of transition, organisational culture, and conceptions of identity. The focus group clarified which lines of enquiry would support this exploration, with consideration for how the new knowledge would be used. Thus, Schlossberg's theory of transition and Blume's theory of identity renegotiation framed the main study.

3.5.3. Participants (Main Study)

The sample was a mix of nine full and part-time PGs from across eleven faculties, though their programmes were not recorded. While most participants were master's students, two identified as first-year PhD candidates (MPhil). The research opportunity was disseminated via email by heads of departments and department administrators, due to the on-going pandemic. Upon consenting to participate, participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Table 3 – Sample Demographics

grey = not disclosed

Pseudonym	Mode of study	Gender	Home / International status	Job role	Gap between UG / PG studies
Emery	Full time	Female		Medical registrar / respiratory doctor	
Finley	Full time	Female	International	Magazine editor	6 years
Jessie	Full time	Male	International	High School Teacher / Librarian	2 years
Morgan	Full time	Male	Home	Recruitment resourcer	4 years
Arlo	Full time	Female	International	Policy Analyst	
Aubrey	Full time	Male	International	Lecturer / curriculum designer	1.5 years
Charlie	Part time	Female	Home	Design consultancy	6 years
Harley	Part time	Female	International	Agency worker	2 years
Hunter	Full time	Female	International		2 years

As the table illustrates, gaps in the data remain where home/international status, job role, and gap between studies are concerned. This is because participants were not directly asked about their demographics, but rather they volunteered this information to the study in their email diary entries and in the interview. This demographic information has helped to identify connections in the literature and between participant experiences, however as this was not a focus of the research questions,

there is limited depth available. Arguably, this has helped to protect participant identities.

Table 4 – Participant data submissions

x = completed

grey = not completed

Pseudonym	Participation	Email Diary Entry #1	Email Diary Entry #2	Email Diary Entry #3	Interview
Emery	Nov 2021	x			
Finley	Nov 2021 - Aug 2022	x	x	x	x
Jessie	Nov 2021 - March 2022	x	x		
Morgan	Nov 2021	x			
Arlo	Nov 2021 - Aug 2022	x	x	x	x
Aubrey	Nov 2021 - March 2022	x	x		
Charlie	Nov 2021 - March 2022	x	x		
Harley	Nov 2021 - July 2022	x	x	x	
Hunter	Nov 2021 - Aug 2022	x	x	x	x

Although I aimed to recruit 10-15 participants, the nine participants provided thick qualitative data, fulfilling the research purpose (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). Yang (2015: 43) explained how the “goal is to draw a sample of an optimal size that is big enough for representing the variation in the population”. The smaller sample enabled

engagement with data (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005; Saunders & Townsend, 2019) that revealed deeper meaning and divergencies less obvious in vast compiled data. Advantages of small samples include meeting objectives in less time, collecting data over longer periods, and building rapport with participants (O'Reilly, 2012; Saunders & Townsend, 2019). Rapport was developed using my knowledge of the population, showing my awareness of their commitments and time-constraints, the expectations of them, and the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.5.4. Access and Method

The gatekeepers were heads and administrators of faculties and departments, who were approached via email and issued an information sheet and poster advertisement (see Appendix 1 and 2) to disseminate among their cohorts via email.

The poster summarised the information sheet, stating the research purpose, the criteria for participation and what would be involved. There were three open-ended questions and a digital-storytelling task with each data collection (see Appendix 6, 7 and 8). Students were required to return a signed consent form via email prior to participation (see Appendix 4). They could ask questions about the research and were informed of their rights – they were reminded of these throughout the research in case their circumstances changed. I was assured of participants' technological competence and ability to participate in remote research, as they corresponded via email (Jones, 2019).

During the pandemic, emailing gatekeepers was the most efficient approach, facilitating a heterogeneous technique that ensured diversity (Saunders & Townsend, 2019). Responses from gatekeepers suggested that the research might be a valuable reflective and social experience for PGs predominately experiencing remote study. This approach was the safest, least time-consuming, and most financially viable option, allowing greater outreach (Borgobello, Pierella & Pozzo, 2019). Receiving the research opportunity from academic staff was preferable to an unfamiliar research student (*ibid.*) However, sending out unsolicited emails to academic staff might also have been inconvenient; thus, some staff chose not to circulate the opportunity, while others claimed it wasn't suitable for their cohort.

Snowball (chain) sampling (O'Reilly, 2012) was also used by gatekeepers sharing the opportunity across their PG programmes. This increased the outreach and recruitment of suitable individuals, although, this technique is not knowingly successful in long-term research (Geddes, Parker & Scott, 2018). Recruitment by unknown researchers often lacks personalisation, which can impact the researcher's ability to support participants' long-term commitment (Alaszewski, 2006; Jones & Woolley, 2015); personalisation may foster rapport, creating a comfortable environment for participants to communicate about the research.

To reduce the pressure of participating in a lengthy study, data submission dates were flexible. I offered encouragement during correspondence, but participants were also expected to motivate themselves to complete tasks.

3.5.5. Participant Limitations

Concerns about the small sample included the participants withdrawing from the research, and participants not providing full accounts of data, thus restricting available knowledge (Peat, 2011). This might occur if tasks become tiresome, or when reflections are condensed (*ibid.*; La Porte, Montoye & Caspersen, 1985). To overcome this, participants were offered a follow-up interview to discuss their earlier or incomplete submissions.

Participants were recruited from a single UK university limiting the sample. This may have been overcome by the university's global population, and by recruiting from across the eleven faculties. The Russell Group institution tells itself apart from other formal learning sites like post-92 universities for instance, reducing how representative participant narratives are.

I managed to develop rapport and trusting relationships remotely with participants despite the lack of in-person interaction. This was important to ensure the longevity of participant contributions to the research. When encouraging the submission of email diary entries, I would personalise emails by responding enthusiastically or empathetically to their unique responses, while also being patient when participants

requested extended deadlines owing to their varied circumstances. Being punctual with my responses was also an attempt to demonstrate their value to the research, the significance of their input was also reflected in my follow-up correspondence. Concerning the interviews, I tried not to be too formal, as we had spent a year corresponding about their personal experiences with returning to study; I hoped to show authenticity and reveal the connections we had. To ensure that the interview was a comfortable setting, I practiced using clear language and tried to tailor any follow-up questions to specific events they had mentioned. Despite wanting to appear enthusiastic about participant contributions, I prioritised listening, as such, I understood more and took time to construct thoughtful responses. However, I was concerned about the unfamiliarity of the participants and researcher, which likely influenced the interpretation of email correspondence. While I tried to personalise participants' emails without influencing their responses, their replies may have been informed by confidence with technology, language barriers, or interacting with a newcomer. The latter may have led to participants withholding reflections; however, the anonymous nature of the research can also create openness. To gather data on time, I sensitively reminded participants to complete their research tasks; although, an empathetic conversation about their situation might have been more inspiring. The speed of correspondence might have slowed the development of rapport as neither received instant reactions, also hampered by the absence of positive gestures, like nodding or smiling, known for presenting signs of care or respect (Dion Larivière, Crough & Eastwood, 2023). A short interview or informal conversation at the outset of the research may have impacted how the participants related to the study and the researcher, offering additional opportunities to ask questions and build confidence about the value of their contribution and how their data was being used.

3.5.6. University provision during 2021-2022

Across the university, students and staff alike hoped to return to campus to rebuild connections with the academic culture and community. While this was subject to change, much of the support and provision was designed with this prospect in mind. During 2020-2021 a remote learning experience was created in response to Covid-19, incorporating various technologies to avoid disruption; these included Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Moodle (the university VLE), and Blackboard Collaborate (UCL,

2021o). This experience developed teaching practice, as materials were redesigned for virtual spaces, and staff utilised new communication platforms.

In 2021, the university website housed resources for students and staff with information about induction activities, course structure, term dates, and support available academically and pastorally. While large events and lectures remained remote, small-scale meetings, tutorials, and study on campus could happen safely in-person; all campus visitors were advised to wear masks where possible (UCL, 2021i).

Webpages were dedicated to programme information, handbooks, and downloadable documents (details listed below). These also signposted students and staff towards webpages about changing health and safety guidelines for Covid-19. Students' webpages and the Student Enquiries Centre were reportedly most reliable.

The 2021-2022 term dates were:

Term 1: Monday 27 September 2021 to Friday 17 December 2021

Term 2: Monday 10 January 2022 to Friday 25 March 2022

Term 3: Monday 25 April 2022 to Friday 10 June 2022

Reading weeks

Monday 8 November 2021 and Monday 14 February 2022

During official university closure dates, postgraduate students could still access buildings using their ID card.

It is worth noting that although there are departments within the institution that continue to make links to this information accessible, several of the webpages used to inform this section have since been updated, as they are living documents, while others have become outdated and are no longer available.

3.5.6.1. Postgraduate Taught (master's)

Induction Activities

Continued concern about the Covid-19 pandemic meant that many social and academic resources and events remained online, in hybrid or blended modes, and as recordings, to accommodate remote and absent students. These resources were for postgraduate students generally, while others accommodated international students.

While some departments encouraged student participation in the 300 existing university societies with the student union, to explore resources developed by the libraries team, and to attend welcome fairs, others created cohort-specific induction events to support students coming together in person, like visiting exhibitions. Induction resources were also developed by established students, who shared their 'top tips', ways to develop relationships, immerse in study, and learn from one another (UCL, 2020b).

Welcome talks were often hosted by programme and module leads, and professional staff from well-being, careers, and programme administrators. These helped students become familiar with academic staff, clarify study expectations, and understand what teaching would look like (UCL, 2021a).

Welcome handbooks were accessible through programme Moodle pages (UCL, 2021l), capturing programme and module level information. General university webpages signposted towards support and wellbeing, the students union, student representatives, special exam arrangements, and the student centre. Information about staying in contact with the academic community was shared too, including student email, Moodle, Instagram, and X.

Course structure and Timetable

Given the changes to teaching and learning over the 2021-2022 academic year, FAQ webpages (UCL, 2025b) were developed to address concerns of students; these related to studying remotely, returning to the UK, contact for remote students, and accommodation. Prior to enrolling, students also had access to online timetables, and compulsory and optional modules required for a master's award.

There was differentiation between course structures dependent on programme content, however, master's study generally comprised three terms lasting a full calendar year (over two years for part-time students). Term one included induction week and a reading week, lasting twelve weeks. The second lasted eleven weeks. And in the summer term, students mostly worked independently on research projects or dissertations. Some courses required access to subject-specific facilities, or their research might correlate with timings.

There was an expectation that master's students would study for 45 weeks of the year. Handbooks suggested how students should manage their studies, indicating that 150 hours should be dedicated to each module, comprising independent study, teaching, seminars, and tutorials (UCL, 2019; UCL, 2021c; UCL, 2021e).

Sources of Support

Information about key programme members and maintaining these relationships was often located in handbooks, along with what to expect from them. This included contact details and office hours.

Students were assigned personal tutors who catered to academic and pastoral needs, including the study experience, professional development, and other concerns (UCL, 2025j). The personal tutor might also signpost students towards resources for mental health, financial assistance, information about visas, accommodation, interruptions and extenuating circumstances, and research-oriented activity.

Departments provided opportunities for students to communicate their experiences of study during 2021-2022, which helped staff to design appropriate support. This insight illustrated students' research arrangements, access to Wi-Fi or workspaces, and their mode of study or ability to meet deadlines.

The university careers team disseminated information about workshops and resources designed for academic and professional progression (UCL, 2021n; UCL, 2025i). They helped with CVs, interview preparation, applications, and sourcing

opportunities. They also offered guidance concerning further study and funding avenues.

Master's expectations were mostly communicated in the university code of conduct (UCL, 2024a). Students should familiarise themselves with the student code of conduct, university policies, and suitable behaviour. These included being respectful and complying with equal opportunities, being timely, attending classes or events, and following ethical and research guidelines. While the academic expectations were not evident, the values and culture of the setting was clear. Students were expected to fulfil these behaviours beyond the university too, acting as ambassadors.

Members of the university should recognise its diverse culture, showing care and respect, as discrimination is not tolerated. On campus, members should respect property, abide by health and safety guidelines, and follow rules of internet and equipment usage.

3.5.6.2. Postgraduate Research (MPhil/PhD)

Induction Activities

Research student cohort numbers were less consistent, as students enrolled at different times of the year; this meant running induction events in October, January, and May (online or on-campus), or relying on supervisors to welcome researchers to the institution. These consisted of introductions to key staff, essential resources within the faculty (including libraries, labs, research and ethics, or available equipment), and opportunities for students to meet one another. Experienced students were also sometimes involved, representing the Student Experience Committee, peer groups, or 'departmental peers' (UCL, 2021g).

Remote short-courses (UCL, 2021m) were available for Health and Safety and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Other online resources addressed student concerns about teaching and workload in 2021-2022, balancing study/life remotely, module registration, arriving in the UK (vaccinations/quarantines), and paid work or internships.

Academic information was available in handbooks, circulated in doctoral communications or on Moodle pages (UCL, 2020c; UCL, 2021f; UCL, 2025a). The handbook outlined the expectations of researchers, covering the integrity and quality forecasted of research studies, academic progression, and developing a thesis. There was guidance for handling complaints, bullying, harassment, and wellbeing, but also rules around copyright and plagiarism too. The Student Support and Wellbeing Pack was extensive (UCL, 2021j; UCL, 2025d), identifying useful contacts, locations, and resources for negotiating counselling, mobility difficulties, impairments, mental health, long-term health conditions, international study, placements abroad, parents/carers, religion, distance learning, mature learners, minority ethnic backgrounds, and LGBTQ+ (UCL, 2025h). A former PhD candidate had developed a document demystifying the PhD, revealing the realities and expectations of researchers (UCL, 2025f). They addressed overcoming loneliness and looking after yourself, how to get the most from supervision, becoming a researcher, and experiences with reading groups, conferences, and working as a postgraduate teaching assistant.

The inductions (UCL, 2021k) included activities supporting students to become familiar with their academic community. These included departmental quizzes, garden parties, Q&As, and lectures about making the most of London.

Course structure and Timetable

The structure of the MPhil and PhD varied across disciplines, ranging from expected attendance at seminar series or talks with visiting researchers, to seminars supporting academic development (methodology seminars and writing groups, for example) (UCL, 2021h).

Doctoral candidates attended advanced graduate training courses (UCL, 2025c), research training programme modules, the doctoral skills development programme, and documented these on the Research Log (UCL, 2025l). The Research Log is updated throughout the PhD and is submitted for review ahead of the MPhil upgrade and thesis submission.

The independence of PhD study is reflected in its limited structure and spread-out milestones. The first milestone is the MPhil upgrade – between 9-18 months or 12-24 months. This entails an oral presentation and written research report.

Student-supervisor relationship (UCL, 2025k) is expected to change over the PhD. In the first year, students undertake training and taught modules, attend regular supervisory meetings, meet low-stakes deadlines, and develop the Research Log. By the second year, supervision frequency is sustained, but students may work more independently. Students are also likely to have undertaken various ethics and GDPR training too. The third year focuses on student participation in conferences, publishing, writing the thesis and preparing for the viva. Communication with supervisors is often reduced, but supervisors are obligated to read a full final thesis. Supervisors may be required to support student applications for CRS (completing research status), collectively developing an examination entry, selecting examiners, and submitting the thesis.

PhD candidates will also develop skills relevant to their expertise, like giving presentations, publishing research, or working in certain conditions with equipment. These skills are worth training points documented on the Research Log.

Sources of Support

Throughout 2021-2022, some resources were made available online as videos and presentation slides. These recordings were often provided by programme leads, departmental tutors and committees, libraries and special collections, and the academic writing centre, so that students unable to return to campus felt included. Doctoral researchers could access university-wide resources developed by the Student Support Centre, including help with doctoral programmes, and Student Wellbeing and Support (UCL, 2025f).

Information about funding was available through administrative staff and university webpages. This covered tuition fees, funding for conferences, scholarships or fellowships, opening student bank accounts, and stipends.

The primary source of support for students was their supervisor, assigned to help identify key contacts and locations, and relevant groups or societies to enrich study.

The careers team provided information about the PhD journey, and how to prepare for 'what's next'. They identified expectations of researchers, including knowledge of the subject, awards/grants, and on-time completion, informed by case studies and graduate testimonials. Workshops and training programmes supported candidates with their career paths, identifying interests, developing CVs and applications, and online presence.

The doctoral community (UCL, 2025g) existed for peers to support peers, through regular academic and social events. Students were encouraged to join this during lockdown, to help overcome isolation and build connections.

3.5.6.3. Resources for staff

The guidance to staff about staying safe on campus during Covid-19 was much the same. Staff were advised to test for the virus before returning to campus to teach and were given guidance about staying at home. An interim 'return to campus' guide encouraged staff to participate on-campus 40% of the time (UCL, 2020a; UCL, 2025e).

The university ensured that teaching spaces were equipped for alternative modes, including hybrid and blended. While rooms had microphones, cameras, and necessary computer programmes, staff were also offered workshops and asynchronous resources for support (UCL, 2021b).

Platforms like Lecturecast, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams were used to include remote students. Through these, sessions could be recorded and shared thereafter; this was important for students encountering visa issues, returning to the UK, or in quarantine. Sometimes live sessions would be scheduled to accommodate different time zones.

3.6. Research instruments / Data collection

A literature review was compiled, noting gaps and debates within the field, focusing on transition within higher education (HE) and the workplace. Over the research, this increasingly included publications exploring Covid-19 in HE. The review acknowledged prominent themes and major theories about transition and identity. Databases including Scopus, Google Scholar, UCL Explore, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, ERIC and ScienceDirect were examined using key words and Boolean operators: identity, transition, adult learn*, acculture*, high* education*, return* learn*, work*, workplace. Many direct searches for publications also took place.

Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010: 264) explained that an "awareness of postgraduate students' histories, current experiences and aspirations is part of understanding the transition process", highlighting the significance of the current study, and informing the research design. The methods are discussed below.

3.6.1. Formulating Questions

Peterson (2013) described research questions as brief, relevant, unambiguous, specific, and objective, so to avoid confusion and misinterpretation (ibid.), ultimately enriching the value and detail of data. Researchers risk collecting unreliable data when meaning is unclear. Thus, the data may not represent the population as individuals struggle to contribute, while others' opinions prevail (Borgobello, Pierella & Pozzo, 2019). Focused questions can support participants to answer openly. Payne (1965: 417) explained how,

"the free-answer (question) is uninfluenced, it elicits a wide variety of responses, it makes a good introduction to a subject, it provides background for interpreting answers to other questions. It can be used to solicit suggestions, to obtain elaborations, to elicit reasons, to evaluate arguments, to explore knowledge and memory, and to classify respondents."

Prompts are often used to restore memories of events. Marincic and Belli (2006) employ 'sequential retrieval' which utilises language relating to timing and duration,

placing memories on a timeline (Stafford & Belli, 2011). The current research also stimulated reflection using retrieval mechanisms, using phrases like 'before enrolling', 'so far', 'current', 'prior' and 'during'.

3.6.2. Social Desirability

This illustrates unreliable information from participants, to "protect their self-image" (Gordon, 1987: 41). In the current study, despite participants' common roles, institutions, and level of study, false accounts of their return may have been provided to avoid judgement.

Gordon (1987) suggests that question wording can reduce social desirability, and that reflective questions might lessen the felt threat of some subjects. Similarly, Larson's (2019) work on self-reporting considers minimising participants' attempts at 'saving face', adding that participant anonymity and confidentiality is beneficial.

The absence of a researcher or other participants can still make participants feel self-aware (Jones, 2019). Day and Thatcher's (2009) research with diaries showed how participants sensed the researcher's interactions with their daily 'internal dialogue' (ibid: 256).

Correspondingly, Nederhof (1985: 269) reported that, "[a]s the social context changes during the experiment of interview, so may the effect of social desirability, and, in particular the other-deception component." In the current research, meaning developed in the email diaries might be modified in the interview dependent on rapport established (Scott, 1968). Jones (2019) explained how social desirability also occurs when participants fixate on what they believe to be relevant or what the researcher would like to hear. This is reiterated in Norum (2001: 11) who stated that "I came to realize I made decisions about what to tell and how to tell it, influenced by whom I planned to tell it to".

3.6.3. Diary Entries

In the main study, diary entries were collected remotely over the 2021-2022 academic year. These are usually dated submissions documenting reflections using

participants' voice (Alaszewski, 2021). Sometimes, guidance is offered about how and when to complete the diaries, with indication of topics (ibid.).

Participants submitted entries about returning to study during Covid-19 in November, March, and July. These granted access to reliable reflections on and representations of experience as it happened (Day & Thatcher, 2009; Jones, 2019). Radcliffe (2019: 7) explained how,

“the qualitative diary enables researchers to examine unfolding processes, within-person variations, and how individuals respond to changes in events or behaviours over time, therefore gaining rich insights into such regular fluctuations. In this way, they are able to capture context by demonstrating the impact of past experiences on subsequent experiences.”

Diaries capture moments in freeze-frames. These revealed experiences of change, with an environment or setting, the psychological impressions within the individual, or interactions and relationships participated in. These often-unobservable details are not easily captured by an on-looking researcher (Bloor & Wood, 2011; Jones, 2019; Radcliffe, 2019), thus, diaries clarified the meanings developed ‘everyday’ (Alaszewski, 2006; Radcliffe, 2019). Internal dialogue reported in diaries remains authentically the participant's, with minimal influence from the researcher (assuming minimal social desirability bias). Symbolic meaning can emerge through imagery, writing colour or font, or language choices. Charmaz (2004) discussed the impact of capitalising words and underlining phrases on interpretation.

Diary style also influences data production. Solicited diaries (Bell, 1998; Bolger, Davis & Rafaeli, 2003; Jones, 2019) like in the current research, are expected by participants, who are required to answer questions about returning to study within a given timeframe. Requesting responses is both signal and event contingent (Radcliffe, 2019); the researcher's correspondence signifies the need for data collection. The diaries comprised three open-ended questions, giving participants freedom over how much to disclose. Structure can be helpful for infrequent writers and those unfamiliar with the method (Radcliffe, 2013); I advised that participants write 150-300 words per question.

In the first round of data collection, seven of nine participants filled one A4 page of writing, while two wrote a page and a half, and some described their digital storytelling. These ranged from 331 words to 1,098. By the second round, data varied from half a page to a page and a half. In the third round the remaining four participants filled half to a full A4 page each.

Email reminders supported participants' timely diary completion, enhancing accuracy of data (Murray, 1995). Retrospective reporting can be problematic in lengthy research; phrases including 'memory recall', 'memory telescoping' and 'recall bias', describe over or under-reporting because of 'temporal distance' between experiencing and reporting an occurrence (Verbrugge, 1980; Jones, 2019).

The email diary is a necessary development in long-term and remote qualitative research methods "as the population becomes ever more mobile, and society 24/7-oriented" (Jones & Woolley, 2015: 2). The portable nature of technological devices (mobile phones and laptops) enables efficient diary recording throughout the day, during the commute, in cafes, or at work (Hagen et al., 2005; Jones, 2019). The portability of email diaries makes researchers' more available to participants, regardless of location or time-zone (Im & Chee, 2003), providing personalised support throughout (Alaszewski, 2006).

That said, the digital divide speaks to the discomfort this approach may cause for individuals less competent. Some individuals may have experienced an absence of technological resources leading to skill deficiency (Prensky, 2001; Jones, 2019), their lack of confidence may prevent voluntary participation in research (Beck, 2005). Email diaries can help collect data from global populations, overcoming the issue of distance. This is advantageous when funds are limited, and where the researcher wishes to access a wide sample (Jones, 2019).

I established good rapport with the participants through email diaries as I maintained contact without literally being present (Murray, 1995), which can enhance motivation and commitment to research (Radcliffe, 2019). This relationship is important in long-term studies, influencing commitment to research (Day & Thatcher, 2009), and

quality of data. Despite receiving prompts from the researcher (Jones, 2019), the participants maintained their autonomy to respond at their own pace (ibid.; Lakeman, 1997). By initiating contact I hoped to encourage reflection, reducing the backward-looking bias. I addressed this throughout, to avoid the 'first day effect' (Corti, 1993), response fatigue (Verbrugge, 1980), and backfilling (Piasecki et al., 2007). This was also an opportunity to check in and grant additional time to individuals when needed.

Mittelmeier et al. (2021: 20) discuss how,

“In higher education research, triangulating diaries with other methods has previously provided researchers access to more in-depth and well-rounded understandings of highly sensitive or personal research topics”.

Follow-up interviews can help to explore matter in more depth (Hakanurmi, Palonen & Murtonen, 2021), facilitating interpretations of data, and member-checking (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977; Plummer, 1983; Bloor & Wood, 2011; Radcliffe, 2019). However, simply ensuring that data is anonymised can be effective for gathering authentic data (Jones, 2019).

Reflective research can be valuable for participants (Hutchinson, Wilson & Skodol Wilson, 1994; Murray, 2003), providing space to direct thoughts and facilitate sense-making (Beck, 2005). The diary method allows participants to review their entries and 'coping strategies' to enrich understanding. This bears resemblance to double-loop learning (Argyris, 2003). This reflection style can be 'therapeutic' (Day & Thatcher, 2009), supporting participants to feel heard. Hutchinson, Wilson and Skodol Wilson's (1994: 162) participants “expressed feelings of relief that seems to come in part from having an engaged, accepting listener”. Their research on nursing discusses self-worth through rapport, which can ignite feelings of purpose, whether to assist the researcher, or as a person living a meaningful life. These findings were mirrored by Beck (2005), who recalled participants' gratitude for having a space to share their stories (Day & Thatcher, 2009).

3.6.4. Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling captures representations of experience. Employing different media, individuals communicate reflections and interpretations, using alternative and accessible ways to create and disseminate knowledge. Digital storytelling often incorporates technology (video, sound recordings, online tools) (Park, Forhan & Jones, 2021). These artefacts facilitate “community interaction, development, and empowerment” (Davey & Benjaminsen, 2021: 2), including the voices of underrepresented individuals exploring matters deeply and often collaboratively.

In the current study, participants created three artefacts to accompany their diary entries; these could include photographs, digital diagrams and charts, or drawings and animations. Each digital storytelling task explored a different facet of returning to study: organisational culture, identity transition, and support networks.

The primary rationale for employing this method derived from my prior experience with creative media. I was aware of my dual role, the “researcher as instrument” (Knowles & Cole, 2008: 61). The “instrument” being the “researcher-as-artist” (ibid.: 61); I employed this proficiency to enhance data interpretation (Gerstenblatt, 2013). Accepting my researcher responsibility (BERA, 2018), I was eager that participants understood the research and felt supported to communicate in a way that suited them. This corresponded with Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg’s (2022) argument that creative artefacts often capture meaning not easily conveyed in other communicative styles.

The visual submissions were explored through photo-elicitation during the follow-up interviews, which enabled a co-construction of latent and semantic meaning. Participants submitted between 1 and 3 artefacts, which are presented in the exploratory case studies (3.12), with additional artefacts in Appendix 13.

Visual data comprises visual metaphors and symbols not easily expressed using words (Weber, 2012; Gerstenblatt, 2013; Culshaw, 2019), likely influenced by participants’ social, cultural, and historical spheres (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Lister & Wells, 2011; Butler-Kisber, 2019). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 2) explained how,

“what is expressed in language through the choice between different word classes and clause structures, may, in visual communication, be expressed through the choice between different uses of colour or different compositional structures.”

The multi-modality of data represented ways of “knowing and understanding” (Klein & Agostinone-Wilson, 2012: 82). Hence, the participant, researcher, or audience, might translate these representations differently, altering meaning and significance (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Weber, 2012). Utilising mixed media aimed to help participants convey the subjectivities of experience (Gerstenblatt, 2013; Butler-Kisber, 2019; Mittelmeier et al., 2021); as justified by Reavey and Brown (2021: 101), who contend that “images in research may provide greater access to living contexts (space and environments), senses and feelings that make up our lived experience”.

Developing visual artefacts may be a welcomed change to commonly employed methods in academic discourse, arguably increasing accessibility to knowledge (Weber, 2012). Although for individuals lacking confidence, they may have felt challenged to convey information, or to perceive value in their data. Participants should be clear that their contribution “is not to create works of art but rather works of meaning” (Reavey & Brown, 2021: 116), offering unknown or formerly unreachable knowledge through their unique lens (Marshall, 2007; Weber, 2012).

Arguably, society is increasingly ocularcentric (Mitchell, 2011; Culshaw, 2019), thus a visual method would serve a culture that thrives off visual stimulus. Banks (2011: 138) reported that visual research “can address different audiences in quite different ways” explaining that “visual essays have the potential to be more appealing to students and to a wider, lay audience” (ibid: 144). Weber (2012: 7) supported this, stating that “[m]any people who would never read scholarly texts are willing to engage with photography displayed on a Web site or a documentary on television”. Presenting esoteric knowledge visually can open windows to understanding, using relatable language (Reavey & Brown, 2021).

This approach was felt to benefit the diverse student population of the current research, who had spent varying periods of time outside of academia; hence, making no assumptions about their earlier experiences with articulating lived experience in research conditions. As the study was drawn out over an entire academic year, considerable time had passed between events reported in the diary entries and eventually the interview. One notable benefit of the visual data was to support recall, as participants reflected on earlier anecdotal data. The visual data acted as a prompt, enabling deeper comprehension of the experience, particularly as they jointly interpreted experiences with the researcher. Separately, during data analysis, a fuller illustration of transition was created as visual and written qualitative data was combined, offering insight that may not have been easily articulated.

3.6.5. Interviews

The semi-structured interviews comprised reflective questions, predominantly about the digital storytelling artefacts enabling photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002). Two of three participants interviewed contributed three rounds of artefacts. The inclusion of artefacts creates space for the participant to consider its significance (Zhang & Hennebry-Leung, 2023). These socially and materially produced stimuli provide knowledge to dwell in, as researcher and participant offer interpretations based on assumptions and orientations (Fawns, 2021; Kahu & Picton, 2022). The importance of interviews stemmed from the belief that “[w]ithin any particular sociocultural environment, we may learn to associate certain visual images with certain meanings, but these are normally highly context dependent and often transient” (Banks, 2011: 9). Participants’ associations with or understandings of visuals may not have aligned with the researcher’s – thus, employing participant-driven photo-elicitation presented opportunity to achieve clarity and ensure that data was authentically represented. The artefacts depicted the return to study during Covid-19, which reminded participants of experiences felt at the time of data submission, minimising the loss of details (Fawns, 2022; Zhang & Hennebry-Leung, 2023).

Interviews were recorded online using Zoom, to ensure data accuracy. Upon transcribing them verbatim, they were deleted to protect participant identity. For interview structure and semi-structured open-ended questions, see Appendix 9. On

average, the three interviews lasted one hour, with time for final reflections at the end.

3.6.5.1. Photo-elicitation

Photo-elicitation uses visual stimuli as a catalyst for conversation (Kahu & Picton, 2022). The artefacts facilitate the interpretation of events, unearthing meaningful responses, and empowering participant voice as they convey experience through their unique lens (Fawns, 2021; Kahu & Picton, 2022; Zhang & Hennebry-Leung, 2023).

Photo-elicitation was employed in the current study to support collaborative interpretation of artefacts (Shortt, 2015; Butler-Kisber, 2019; Reavey and Brown, 2021). This activity resulted in photographer-led meaning attribution (Shortt, 2015) minimising misinterpretation. Reavey and Brown (2021) talked about understanding *with* rather than *of* the artefacts, mediating the creation of knowledge (Collier, 2004). Visual artefacts can help participants share “inside or emic perspectives” (Butler-Kisber, 2017: 24; Zhang & Hennebry-Leung, 2023) which the researcher alone cannot access.

Photo-elicitation offers agency to participants (Fawns, 2021; Kahu & Picton, 2022). The current research used participant-driven photo-elicitation, giving participants power over what they depicted and hence the content and direction of the interview. This can help achieve comfort, as participants actively establish the topics or boundaries of the interview, and they understand their role in the research. The balance of control can be co-managed (Zhang & Hennebry-Leung, 2023); participants have more control over language and meaning in the research, helping their voice to be heard.

The participants’ diary entries also featured in the interview. Zimmerman and Weider (1977) explored how this follow-up experience can be aided by the diary as a prompt. Reflecting on these entries, it was possible that a “reworking of the past” (Elliot, Holland & Thomson, 2008: 229) may occur, generating enriched meaning (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011) through hindsight bias.

3.6.6. Presenting the data

The qualitative data collected through email diary entries, digital storytelling, and interviews is first illustrated as exploratory case studies (3.8.3.). Three of these feature in the thesis (3.12.), a further three partial cases are in Appendix 13, and additional artefacts feature in Appendix 14. These cases draw on the entire dataset including the digital storytelling artefacts, to retell the stories and meanings within. Schlossberg's model of 4 S's (2011) was used to organise the data (situation, self, support, strategy), following a thematic narrative analysis (3.8.6.). The cases represent individual participants, and reiterate gender, home or international status, professional role, and length of time between degrees (see Table 3, 3.5.3.). Implications based on participant demographics are presented in the Conclusion (6.3.).

The Findings Chapter presents themed descriptions of the data with quotations from the participants, addressing the research questions. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) using inductive and deductive levels was undertaken to achieve this. Participant data is accompanied by their pseudonym and the method of data collection (diary entries and interviews).

The Discussion Chapter synthesises the data with existing scholarship, providing new insight into returning to PG study during Covid-19. Eight themes are taken from the Findings Chapter to address the research questions.

3.7. Fieldwork

3.7.1. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for the current research was confirmed in June 2021, prior to the MPhil Upgrade. This was essential for carrying out research within the institution, acknowledging that it corresponded with the Data Protection Policy and the British Education Research Association (2018) guidelines.

3.7.2. Advertising the study

Advertising the study during the pandemic was a drawn-out process of personalising emails to heads of faculty and departments across the host university, requesting the circulation of my research, along with a recruitment poster and information sheet (Appendix 1 and 2). Recruitment took place within a month, as participants had to complete enrolment in the 2021-22 academic year.

3.7.3. First round of data collection

This was obtained at the outset of the autumn term, as the university re-opened to in-person teaching. Collecting data early on, I hoped to document the entire return to study (Ryder, 1965; Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg, 2022). This gathered information about participants' situations, and reflections of the workplace, before temporal distance influenced the data (Marincic & Belli, 2006; Lapadat, 2009). Participants were asked three questions for their email diary entries and to complete one digital storytelling task (Appendix 6).

Participants were asked to identify a working pattern that matched their former or current undertaking in the workplace. A 'working pattern' has been defined in the current research as how "your contractual hours are split across the days of your working week" (Working patterns, 2022: 1), for instance, the order or length of time allotted to work duties. From this understanding, five descriptions were selected for use based on popularised terms (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Voydanoff, 1988; Reeves, Newling-Ward & Gissane, 2004; Hayman, 2009; Wright Jr, Bogan & Wyatt, 2013; Nea et al., 2015; Gupta et al., 2019).

Participants provided information about changes to working patterns and characteristics of their pattern. Based on responses, some hybrid terms were created, these included 'standard with flexible hours' and 'standard with shifts'.

3.7.4. Second round of data collection

Round two occurred partway through the participants' studies, just before university closure for the Easter Holidays. I hoped that participants would be entering a quieter period of study, affording time for tasks other than academic assignments. This took place before term three to avoid clashing with end of year assessments; I was mindful of potential withdrawals from the research owing to work overload (Peat, 2011; BERA, 2018). For the email diary questions and digital storytelling, see Appendix 7.

3.7.5. Third round of data collection

The final data collection took place in July 2022, concluding the diary entries and digital storytelling tasks. I suspected that the timing of this might be problematic for some participants because PG assessment occurs throughout the summer season. As predicted, there was a drop in responses, but an up-take of participants for interviews. I hoped that an interview later would be less stressful for participants already producing written work for other roles. The final round of diary entries and digital storytelling are in Appendix 8.

3.7.6. Follow-up Interviews

The individual interviews were held in August 2022. The aim was to carry out photo-elicitation, to clarify and co-construct meaning of the digital storytelling artefacts. There were three guiding questions for each artefact, giving the interview structure (Appendix 9). Collaborative reflection on returning to HE during the pandemic took place, and participants revisited the email diaries to add further detail. Questions and responses collected throughout the study were provided for participants as prompts (Reavey & Brown, 2021).

3.7.7. Analysis

The two analyses were drawn out over the study, these included the thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) (3.8.6.) for case studies and a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) (3.9.2.) for the collective findings, which were revisited at each round of data collection. Each stage had an inductive and deductive aspect; interpretations of data created labels and categories, prior to a critical synthesis with existing scholarship. After the third data collection and analysis, all data (and eventually the interview data) were compiled. This helped me become familiar with the narratives depicting the experience of returning to PG study over the unprecedented year. The analysis was supported by a framework comprising Schlossberg's theory of transition and model of 4 S's (1981), with Blume's theory of identity renegotiation (2010).

3.7.8. Write-up

Writing up the research spanned the MPhil/PhD, lasting four academic years. The preliminary research offered insight into PG study during the Covid-19 pandemic and informed the research design (see Figure 1). Upon gathering the final round of data in the main study, I drafted the literature review and methodology. The project timeline has mostly been adhered to, with the final thesis submitted in July 2024.

3.7.9. Member checking

Member-checking occurred during the interviews where participants explained the intended meanings of their digital storytelling submissions; adding or withdrawing details from tasks 1, 2, and 3 (Hastings, 2010; Shortt, 2015; Butler-Kisber, 2019). Upon completing the thesis, the Findings Chapter was shared with the participants; here, they commented on what had been written about them, so that I could reconsider meanings and make necessary edits.

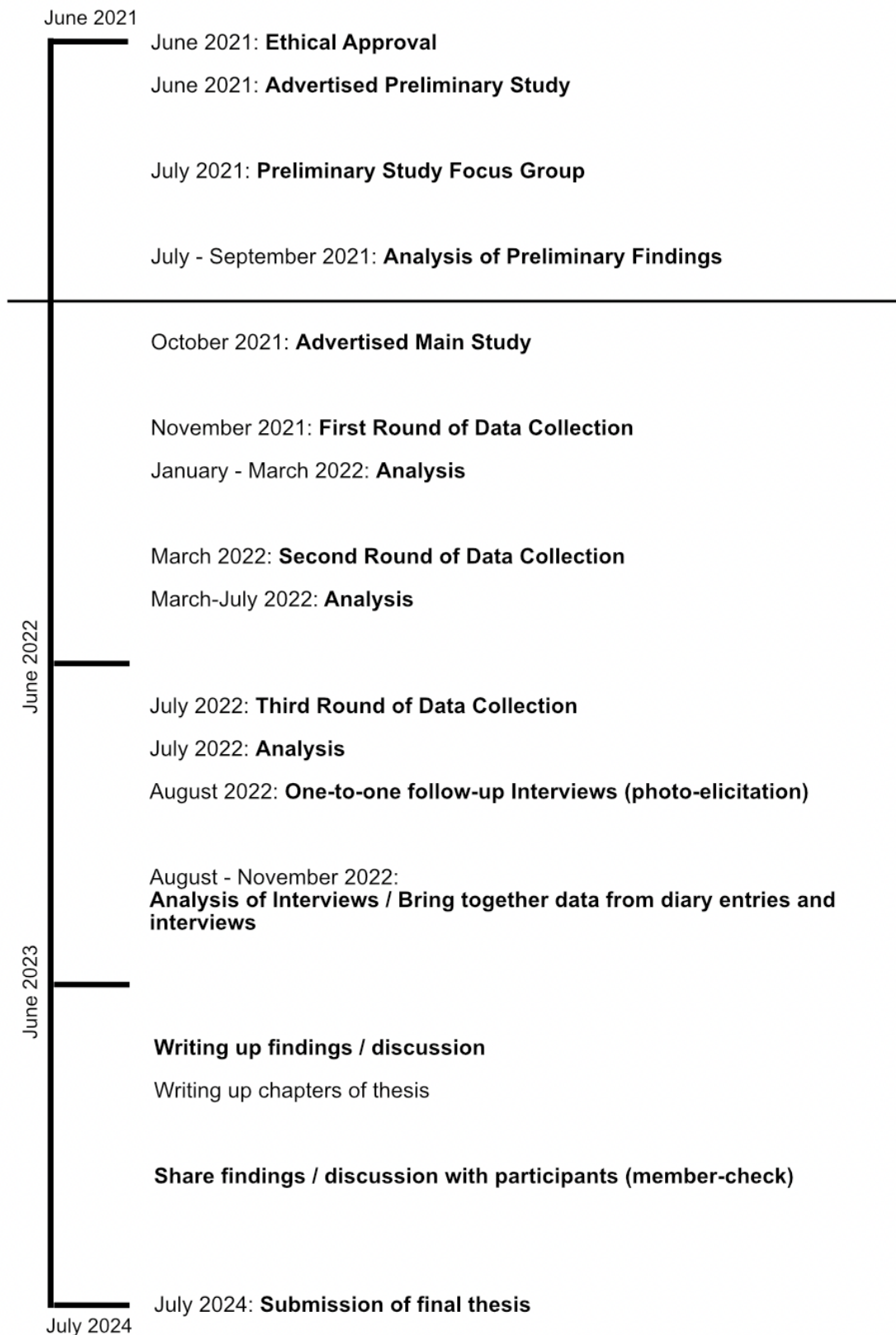


Fig. 2 – Research Project Timeline

3.8 Analysis: Case Studies

3.8.1. Using Case Study

To retell the experiences of returning to study during the pandemic, six exploratory case studies were compiled using qualitative data from the email diaries, digital storytelling, and interviews. Data was collected from nine participants at a single UK university, from November 2021 - August 2022. All participants were pursuing a postgraduate qualification; seven were master's, and two were first year PhD (master's in philosophy). Three full case studies are presented below in 3.12. (and 3 partial studies are in Appendix 13); for information about participants, refer to Table 3 (3.5.3.).

The case studies present in-depth understanding about returning to PG study during Covid-19 in real-life settings, as it happened. The participants documented poignant details about remote study and former work settings, along with interpretations of these experiences (Stake, 1995; Schinck, 2009). Arlo, Finley, and Hunter's cases below (3.12.) use data from the email diaries and the co-constructed meaning (Reavey & Brown, 2021) developed in the interviews.

By using case study I explored and developed individual cases that revealed the subjectivities of transition through storytelling. The process required in-depth exploration of the data, which supported interpretation of meaning from the small sample size. The narratives described unique events, highlighting understandings and perspectives, showing the diversity of participants. In bringing together all data entries for each case, an illustration of context was offered; this was important because participants' studies were both in-person and remote, and their unique circumstances (likely influencing the experience) were not accessible to the researcher. The data was discussed with relation to real-life settings, which indicated how participant experiences might fit into wider discussions about Covid-19, HE, and returning to study, adding evidence-informed understanding to existing scholarship, and informing possible implications for practice.

3.8.2. Defining Case Study

Case studies serve multiple purposes, addressing the *who*, *what*, *where*, *how*, and *why* questions (Yin, 2003), across disciplines including psychology, business, sociology, policy, and education (Yin, 2003; Crowe et al., 2011). Their presentation offers methodised narratives connecting experience, context, and meaning (Anderson et al., 2005), likely influenced by one another (Yin, 2003; Hoffman & Radojevich-Kelley, 2012). Case study in the context of this research is defined as,

“an empirical enquiry that

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003: 13)

In the context of my research, the ‘phenomenon’ is ‘returning to study’. Within this, I am also exploring the possibility for transition to occur, also a phenomenon, and how this is characterised by adult learners. The boundaries are less clear in the latter, as experiences are informed by a changing HE landscape and the uncertainties created by Covid-19, along with the many conceptions of transition employed across discourses.

Scholarship shows some fluidity in the characteristics of case study, notably regarding the detail and depth required (Tight, 2010), the small sample size (some argue a minimum sample of one subject) (Tight, 2010), connection to real-life contexts (Yin, 1989), explanatory nature (Stroecker, 1991; Anderson et al., 2005), and its means of organising data through patterns and structures (Mitchell, 1983; Verschuren, 2003).

Prominent scholars of case study methodology propose different designs. Stake (2005) outlined the intrinsic, instrumental, and collective or multiple case studies. These differ by their rationale and the number of cases supposed relevant for the study. Yin (1994) distinguishes between single and multiple case studies, explaining

their holistic or embedded nature, while acknowledging that they may be categorised as explanatory, descriptive, or exploratory (Anderson et al, 2005).

Historically, case studies composed accounts of a social unit, capturing individual details, contextual and social influence and relationships, and development of experience over time (Verschuren, 2003; Yin, 2003; Punch, 2005; Hoffman & Radojevich-Kelley, 2012). Schinck (2009) favours its focus on process, its lengthy and exploratory nature (Yin, 2003). Case studies can be informed by qualitative and quantitative research methods (Yin, 1989) to explore a phenomenon's relation to space and time (Tight, 2010). While various methods can enhance rigor (Rubin, 2017), internal validity (Crowe et al., 2011), and ensure a holistic view (ibid.), the interview stands out as “the main road to multiple realities” (Stake, 1995: 64). Interviews offer another layer to observed and written data, where participants can clarify, interpret, and describe experience (ibid.), like the current study. Analysing data for case studies, storytellers are afforded space to reflect and interpret; as Dolak (2000: 35) recalled on education activity, “we become aware of the meanings represented in actions”.

A challenge of developing case study is ensuring that all necessary and relevant data is included to enable an accurate representation of experience and to avoid bias. Misinterpretation and misrepresentation of a phenomenon or individual story can occur if behaviours and actions are explored separately to time, space, and social or cultural influence (Verschuren, 2003; Ponelis, 2015).

3.8.3. The Exploratory Multiple-case Study

The three cases in this chapter were inspired by Yin's (2003) exploratory and explanatory case study approaches, which helped to answer the research questions. An exploratory study addresses ‘*what*’ research questions (see RQ 1 below). Their exploratory nature gathers “propositions for further inquiry” (ibid: 6), building on existing knowledge in the literature by illustrating detailed accounts of lived experience (Ogawa & Malen, 1991). The explanatory approach adds a temporal element to the former case approach by asking ‘*how*’ (see RQ 2 below).

1. What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education? (exploratory study)
2. How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions? (explanatory study)

Together the cases can be “studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon, population or general condition” (Stake, 2005: 445). A holistic design revealed the participants’ patterns, subjectivities, and interdependencies (Anderson et al., 2005) of experience during their return. Sharing stories of multiple participants aimed to enhance robustness and reliability of data (Yin, 2003; Johanasson et al., 2024), rather than generalisability, although similarities identified may enhance conclusions drawn (Verschuren, 2003; Schinck, 2009); this was important given that the cases explored returning to PG study at a single UK university.

Participant data was analysed using a thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) (see Case Studies 3.12.) to compose the individual case studies, these were then analysed together using a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to reveal patterns of experience (see Chapter 4: Findings) (Ogawa & Malen, 1991). This process identified unique encounters characterising the experience during the unprecedented time, collecting “description and explanation of complex and entangled group attributes, patterns, structures of processes” (Verschuren, 2003: 137) (see also Hoffman & Radojevich-Kelley, 2012).

3.8.4. Narrative

The participants’ narratives on returning to study were shared with the research via a series of email diaries and later co-constructions with the researcher (Esin, 2011), which occurred through photo-elicitation of the digital storytelling artefacts during the follow-up interview. For an in-depth account of using photo-elicitation see 3.6.5.1., which demystifies the process of analysing visual data with participants during an interview. Participants were each asked to complete three digital storytelling tasks that would be collaboratively analysed with the researcher in the interview (see Appendix 6,7,8), Appendix 9 offers the structure of these conversations with

questions designed as prompts, and Appendix 15 illustrates the dialogue and data analysed using a thematic narrative analysis (3.8.6.) to form the case studies. The findings of the artefacts helped with building a holistic view of returning to study, and importantly, situated the data in social and cultural contexts that enriched meaning. The data captured representations of and interconnections with self, society, culture, time, and space, jointly illustrated through feelings and observations (Mattingly & Garo, 2000; Riessman, 2011). The case studies highlighted the personal and social processes influencing the participants' return to study. Taking the interpretivist-constructivist positioning of the research (see 3.2., 3.4.1.), I considered how context and relation influenced narrative (Esin, 2011). This is shaped by social experiences with other people, cultures, or events, revealing much about the shaping of identity (Earthy & Cronin, 2008).

3.8.5. Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is used across sociology, psychology, and education (Riessman, 2014), to explore biography, storytelling, autoethnography, amongst other things (Earthy & Cronin, 2008), using structural, thematic, and performative analytical models (Esin, 2011). Within these approaches the structure, content, and context should be considered together.

Stories exist within narratives, each situating meaning within a social or historical context. These should be rich descriptions of experiences by small samples, often using data collected from individuals at different times (Esin, 2011). In the current study, data was collected over one year and followed by an interview.

The suitability of narrative analysis to the case studies was informed by Braun and Clarke (2019: 591) who expressed “qualitative data analysis is about telling ‘stories’, about interpreting, and creating”, emphasising the researcher’s engagement with data. A narrative reveals an individual’s ‘version of reality’ (Bold, 2013).

Interpretations help to make sense of interactions, cultural references, and connections to time and place (Crossley, 2011). Narrative data can be vast yet organised (ibid.), not limited to writing, as such, stories can be unearthed from representational matter (Hyvärinen, 2008).

The current research seeks characteristics of change to explain transition, shaping participants' views of the world (Erikson, 1956; Reissman, 1993; Fraser, 2004). The case studies illustrate transition and the positioning of each subject in context.

While the email diary entries were requested at intervals to avoid participants forgetting about their experiences, in the interviews, participants were asked to revisit these instances and to address follow-up questions. Together, the participants and researcher discussed these accounts within the context of the research to make meaning (Moen, 2006). Notably, the digital storytelling artefacts captured a snapshot of a setting (photographs for example) and benefited from the participants' elaboration. The time and distance separating participants from events led to a retrospective reflection with richer understanding in the present day.

3.8.6. Thematic Narrative Analysis

The case studies within this research stem from a thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), using data from the email diaries, and the interviews which followed up data from across the year along with a process of photo-elicitation using the digital storytelling artefacts. Co-constructed meaning developed from the photo-elicitation contributed to the case studies. Appendix 15 presents the analysis of the co-constructed data, see also Table 8 (below) for example quotations taken from the participants' storytelling.

Structuring data thematically using Schlossberg's model of 4 S's facilitated access to understanding, as "[e]vents become meaningful because of their placement in a narrative" (Riessman, 2011: 16). This approach focuses on re-telling experience. Drawing on Riessman (2008), four steps are encountered before the presentation of categories (Table 8, and Appendix 15).

1. Data relevant to the research questions along with new insight is coded, mindful of contextual dimensions of the narrative.
2. Codes might reveal patterns to identify categories. These can be informed by theory using a deductive approach, like the use of Schlossberg (2011) in the

current study. There is no limit to categories that can be developed; text may be sorted into smaller parts for interpretation.

3. Coded excerpts are assigned to themes, revealing commonalities or subjectivities. In the current study, the participant's situation, self, support, and strategies is documented under each thematic category. Contextual and demographic information in the case studies prevented participants' unique experiences from becoming lost in the broader themes.
4. Themes re-tell and describe meaning developed from the initial narrative, rebuilding the whole (Esin, 2011: 108).

	Relevant data	Codes > patterns	Themes	Meaning
Example 1	“My partner and I always tell each other when something terrible happened.. We're just like, <i>What are you gonna do?</i> He's got to pick up the pieces and move on. And this is how I see the wall, even though it falls apart” (Interview).	pre-existing relationships, connection to home not disrupted / reliable	Support	The participant uses a visual metaphor of an old English stone wall to illustrate the process of developing networks / support. She is mindful of the continuity of her partner's support, the familiarity of their relationship and the significance of weathering transition together.
Example 2	“I am fully familiar with what I have done, I am familiar with this industry [...] And I am I'm good at ***** writing” (Interview)	Doubt > sought feedback Resilience / traits / control	Self	Reflecting on the distinctive writing styles of work and study contexts, the participant sensitively describes the unlearning required to meet academic expectations/norms. Their desire for feedback demonstrates their willingness, but they become doubtful by the absence of communication,

				guidance and affirmation.

Table 8 - Example of data interpretation (TNA)

3.8.7. The Case Studies

Following a thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), where Schlossberg's model of 4 S's (2011) was employed to organise data, case studies on returning to PG study during Covid-19 were created. This process involved identifying data relevant to the research questions with codes; forming categories of codes and labelling these; excerpts from categories were assigned to themes; and coherent narratives were presented through the themes. Inspired by case study format in Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022), individuals are introduced, followed by themed narrative content; the meaning of experience is conveyed through *Situation*, *Self*, *Support*, and *Strategy*. This structure portrays unique issues, highlighting coping mechanisms learnt or drawn upon.

The cases, both partial (Appendix 13) and full (3.12.), evidence different transitions encountered during the return to study (Schlossberg, 2011). Taking Schlossberg's conceptualisations, Morgan's non-anticipated transition led to culture shock, as he struggled to relate to peers; Hunter's non-event emerged as her expectations of student-staff relationships were challenged; Finley considered the norms of women in her culture revealing an anticipated transition; and Charlie experienced a sleeper transition as she gradually received affirmation from the academic community.

After carrying out the thematic narrative analysis and constructing the cases, a second analysis took place, this time to consider the collective experience of participants. A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021) comprising six steps was consequently undertaken (see 3.9. and 4.1.), completing Chapter 4: Findings. The initial thematic narrative analysis fulfilled the requirements of 'familiarisation' as posed by Braun and Clarke in the first stage of RTA. Both the

case studies and subsequent Findings Chapter are synthesised with relevant literature in Chapter 5: Discussion, addressing the research questions.

3.9. Analysis: Collective

3.9.1. Method of analysis

To explore returning to PG study throughout Covid-19, a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) inspected the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). This helped organise data collected over the academic year, ensuring a thorough analysis that would make the subjective experiences transparent. Braun and Clarke's (2019: 592) 'adventure' into meaning was flexible enough to capture these subjectivities, allowing interpretation and identification of themes (Byrne, 2022). This process enabled common ground to be revealed between participants (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021; Byrne, 2022), supported me to draw out 'patterns of meaning' (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2021), emphasising my subjective interpretation and "active role in knowledge production" (Byrne, 2022: 1393). Combining the narratives in the dataset, created themes based on commonalities and distinctions. These distinctions became apparent through the language, subject matter, and implied meanings (ibid.), demonstrating the significance of both semantic and latent meaning; descriptive meaning (semantic) and hidden meaning (latent) captured a holistic illustration of transition.

RTA helps "focus on the stories that people use to understand and describe aspects of their lives" (Robson & McCartan, 2016: 373). Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021) explained that since introducing thematic analysis (TA) in 2006, versions of the model have deviated from their proposed exploration of data. Revisiting TA, now RTA, they state that researcher assumptions and orientations should be articulated, as part of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Their revision of the analysis proved that presenting data is more complicated than selecting either a descriptive or conceptual and interpretive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

3.9.2. Reflexive Thematic Analysis in the current research

The analysis comprised the six stages of RTA, meaning that the findings included descriptions and interpretation of data. The Discussion Chapter synthesised the data with relevant scholarship, situated within the theoretical framework of Schlossberg

(2008, 2011) and Blume (2010, 2015). I embodied an experiential orientation, which entailed attempting to extract meaning from the data devoid of influence from the literature, allowing the authentic narratives to speak for themselves.

Schlossberg's model of 4 S's (2008) deductively examined the data, searching for assets and liabilities, and identifying the coping mechanisms used to reclaim control during transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Schlossberg's model of 4 S's provided decisive themes for the current research through which stories of transition could be retold. The 4 S's (situation, self, support, and strategy) functioned as domain summaries, to explore each facet of transition; these depicted a shared topic but not necessarily shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

'Coping resources' identified by Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022: 40) are listed below, depicting the characteristics of the 4 S's. These are presented by domain summary (S), followed by coping resource, which represents the full selection of available themes at the deductive level of analysis. Not all resources were selected as final themes in the current study (See Chapter 4: Findings, for final themes).

Domain Summary: Situation

Event or non-event characteristics

- *Trigger*
- *Timing*
- *Control*
- *Role Change*
- *Duration*
- *Previous Experience*
- *Concurrent Issues*
- *Assessment*

Domain Summary: Self

Personal Characteristics

- *Socioeconomic status*
- *Gender and Sexual Orientation*

- *Age and Stage of Life*
- *State of Health*
- *Ethnicity / Culture*

Psychological Resources

- *Ego development*
- *Outlook – Optimism and Self-Efficacy Beliefs*
- *Commitment and Values*
- *Spirituality and Resilience*

Domain Summary: Support

Social Support Types

- *Intimate*
- *Family Unit*
- *Friendship*
- *Network*
- *Institution*

Social Support Functions

Options

Domain Summary: Strategy

Coping Responses

Functions

Strategies

- *Information Seeking*
- *Direct Action*
- *Inhibition of action*

The analysis comprised deductive and inductive approaches, deductive meaning theoretically driven, while the inductive aspect explored “what is in the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2012: 59). Braun and Clarke (ibid.) contend that the researcher has preconceived understandings and thus it becomes difficult to claim that an analysis is exclusively inductive or deductive. RTA allowed themes to be “hypothesised based on a degree of familiarisation with the data” (Byrne, 2022: 1392), which helped create themes significant to the research questions; these themes were not

confirmed until inductive coding across the entire dataset was complete. Neither semantic nor latent codes were prioritised, ensuring a transparent portrayal of transition.

3.9.3. Carrying out Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021)

Braun and Clarke's (2019, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) has been contextualised within the current research, featuring examples of the codes and themes created.

Stage 1: Familiarisation

Following data collection and verbatim transcription, I first anonymised the data to protect participants' identities. Pseudonyms were assigned, and identifying words, terms, and imagery were removed from the dataset. Data omitted included names of supervisors and peers, and photography with building names and street signs. Data was not 'cleaned-up' initially, removing repetitions or fillers, as this may have hindered the tone or meaning of data, however, pauses and false-starts were not included in the final write-up to enhance readability (Morey Hawkins, 2018).

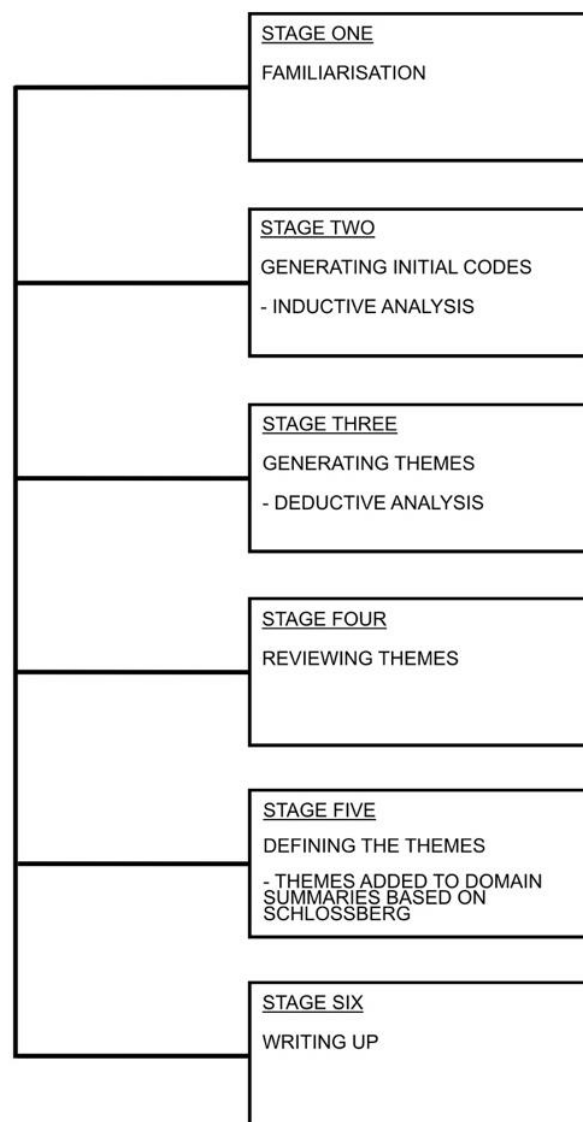


Fig. 3 - RTA Analysis Process – current research (based on Braun & Clarke, 2021)

I took notes while transcribing the interview data, and diary entries were quality checked during re-reads. During this, phrases and topics were highlighted line-by-

line, and connections were made. Revisiting the data, deeper critical understandings could be reached, broadening and my understanding of participants' experiences.

Stage 2: Generating Initial Codes

Participants' narratives were explored line-by-line; I identified semantic and latent codes inductively, labelling data relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Seemingly, researchers can document and store codes and their meanings in their own systematic way. In the current research, a text-based thematic map (Appendix 3) captured the connections and distinctions between codes and content. These highlighted explicit descriptions of events, along with interpretations of meaning.

Examples of codes used in the current research			
Role conflict	Flexibility	Adaptation	Reclaiming power
Independence	Community of Practice	Merging	Growth
Person-environment Fit	Outlook	Confidence	Reliance

Table 5 – Codes used in the current research

While some codes connected with the theoretical framework, others represented ideas and perceptions of participants. Braun and Clarke (2012) argued that researchers should first generously code any data appearing to address the research questions, as thoroughness will develop the researcher's grasp of data. To ensure consistency of codes, narratives analysed early on were revisited, afforded by the flexibility of RTA. An iterative approach to data analysis was implemented (to reflect and revisit), where stages of data collection were focused on.

Before generating themes to summarise the collective voice, the language and anecdotes within narratives were explored. As Gibbs (2012) explained, data is coded by recognising interpreted patterns – these were then grouped and given a descriptive label representing its interpretation (see Table 6).

Code / pattern	Descriptive label	Interpretation
Adaptation	Growing distance between returning to study / change in practice	Understands the different behaviours, skillsets, and knowledge required for different roles

Table 6 – Example of data interpretation (RTA)

The codes represented my interpretations and understandings of the data (Byrne, 2022). As part of the refining process, repeated or overlapping patterns (phrases, words, concepts, theory) (Gibbs, 2012; Robson & McCartan, 2016) with shared meaning were combined to retell part of the overall story (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Stage 3: Generating Themes

Based on Braun and Clarke (2019), Byrne (2022: 1393) reiterates that “themes are produced by organising codes around a relative core commonality”, thus I reviewed the codes to check for consistency. From here, codes were clustered and collapsed into themes; to achieve this, similarities, distinctions, topics and concepts were identified across codes. Most codes were assigned deductively, connecting with characteristics of Schlossberg’s 4 S’s, which developed a narrative addressing the research questions. These themes held “creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves” (Braun & Clarke, 2019: 594).

The themes told a coherent polyvocal story of returning to study. Consideration was given to how themes supported and extended the meaning of other themes, while comprising sufficient meaning to act alone (Braun & Clarke, 2012). While the vast number of themes initially spoke to the richness of the data, I soon realised that the clarity of the research was being compromised by the overwhelming complexity of themes. At this stage, themes were assigned to domain summaries, represented by Schlossberg’s 4 S’s: situation, self, support and strategy. The example below shows how data has been presented:

Domain summary: Situation (deductive) >

Theme: Role Change: Identity (deductive) >

Sub-theme: Trying On (inductive).

The domain summaries represented an overarching topic in the data (situation, self, support, strategy) exploring the return to study, within which themes and sub-themes were organised. Themes represented shared topics, communicating clear and connecting narratives, while the sub-themes conveyed shared meaning.

Examples of domain summaries, themes, and sub-themes			
Example 1 Domain Summary:	Situation		
Example 1 Theme:	Role change: Identity		
Example 1 Sub-themes:	Trying On	The Hangover Identity	Future Identity
Example 2 Domain Summary:	Self		
Example 2 Theme:	Commitment & Values		
Example 2 Sub-themes:	Identity Conflict	Re-shaping Identity	Transferable Behaviours

Table 7 – Examples of domain summaries, themes, and sub-themes

Stage 4: Reviewing Themes

Braun and Clarke (2012, 2019, 2021) ask the researcher to be sure about the distinctions between codes and themes, ensuring that themes employ sufficient data to address the research questions. A theme contributes insight and captures

important information. The richness of a theme is determined by the quantity and quality of data pertaining to it, and its focus and clarity.

Stage 5: Defining the Themes

The significance of final themes is addressed at the opening of each new theme, clarifying what to expect from the sub-themes within. Sub-themes elaborate on patterns and meaning, owing to explicit connections and their insight into a fuller story.

Themes should be confirmed by data and explained in full (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This helps portray participant narratives and their relationship to the research questions. In this study, these explanations comprised latent and semantic meaning, including codes (as discussed in Stage 2), each time defending the significance of the theme to the research question (Byrne, 2022).

Stage 6: Writing Up

The iterative process meant engaging deeply with the data, its meanings, and how it addressed the research questions, throughout. Braun and Clarke (2012) contend that as the researcher familiarises themselves with the data, writing about the data begins; meaning is being made, and the story told in response to the research question takes shape. In the current study, at each data collection, the analysis was started over; this helped establish coherence in my coding, and connection with the stories told over the academic year.

The findings exhibit prominent themes illustrating transition, representing commonalities and the experiences telling them apart. This meant that “the diversity of expressions of meaning” (Byrne, 2022: 1407) could be acknowledged. Themed narratives remained focused by using domain summaries (Schlossberg’s 4 S’s).

3.10. Ethics

Gatekeepers were provided an information sheet and poster advert to issue to their cohorts; these documents delivered clear and honest information about the research. The gatekeepers (heads of faculty and department) were integral for recruitment. By obtaining ethical approval (Appendix 10), the gatekeepers could be assured that the research was safe and ethically sound. These documents provided information about what to expect throughout the research, the participants' role within the research, the value of their input, and how data would be used (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001; BERA, 2018). Upon expressing an interest in participating, participants signed a form confirming their informed consent (Appendix 4). Information about the research was reiterated before the first data collection phase. I was available to participants throughout the study ensuring they understood their roles and rights (BERA, 2018), including but not limited to, their right to voluntary participation or to withdraw at any point, their right not to answer questions, and their right to choose whether direct quotations were included in the final research document (see Appendix 4 and 5). Respect for the participants was maintained as I abided by the rights set out, establishing trust (ibid.; Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001).

Long-term research may require consent to be sought on several occasions throughout. Elliot, Holland and Thomson (2008: 237) describe the "repeated consultation necessary at each new phase of data generation", reminding participants of their rights, and to check their ability to commit to the research. Hence, second consent forms were administered for the follow-up interview (Appendix 5). In the current research, the participants (PG students) were already producing many lengthy assignments within certain timeframes – this knowledge informed my flexibility with data submission dates, to relieve additional stress created by the extra commitment (BERA, 2018). If a participant failed to contribute their data after being reminded, I reminded them that they could retract their submissions if they should like and feel no further pressure to participate in the research if this was not possible.

The participants were assured of data anonymity, and that data would be confidential, in keeping with GDPR. All data collected underwent anonymisation and pseudonymisation (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001) so that individual data (such as mode of study or job title) could be used without exposing participant identities, and identifiable aspects of artefacts were excluded from the research. Participants provided digital typed email diaries, helping with readability and overcoming identification or misinterpretation of handwriting (BERA, 2018).

3.10.1. Research Methods - Ethics

The methods of data collection came with ethical deliberations. The email diary entries were anonymised to prevent identities being revealed. I provided timely responses to participants, thanking them for their input, and reminding them of the research timeline and their rights.

Participants were asked to avoid identifiable imagery in their digital storytelling submissions, such as faces, places, names or logos associated with an individual or organisation. Some participants requested clarification of the tasks, so I provided information upon request, though I reiterated that there was no obligation to complete a task if they didn't feel comfortable. This method was employed to support participants communicating in alternative ways, thus accommodating language or ability barriers.

Each participant was invited to interview after the final diary entry, but there was no obligation to accept. The predominant aim was to carry out photo-elicitation of artefacts, although it was also an opportunity to clarify meaning, and prevent interpretation bias. Participants were informed that the interview would be recorded and transcribed verbatim, to limit miscommunications or misunderstandings, and that from these, direct quotations might appear in the final research. I was careful not to share the invitation to the online Zoom interview with anyone that had not consented to participating, which helped protect the identity of participants and avoided capturing data from anyone outside of the research. The university 'N-Drive' was chosen as the safe location to hold the files.

This research was considered low risk because the population was adults, who were not asked to disclose any sensitive or personal data. Data shared by participants was treated with respect and care, as was existing research which was attributed to original authors. I agreed to contact my supervisor should any participant disclose information suggesting illegal activity, harm, or abuse.

Participants could read what was written about them in the thesis prior to the final submission, as member checking can ensure accuracy of meaning (Hastings, 2010).

The completed thesis was disseminated to supervisors, the exam board, and will hopefully be published as shorter articles. I aim to make the research available through open-access databases, and to use suitable language to communicate the knowledge effectively. The data is an honest representation of the findings and has not been 'sensationalised' (BERA, 2018). Lastly, prior to carrying out the research, I completed GDPR training, demonstrated familiarity with the Research Ethics framework and Principles of Integrity, and abided by the British Educational Research Association (ibid.) guidelines throughout.

3.11. Conclusions

This chapter described the considerations of the research design to answer:

1. What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?
2. How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?

The opening justifies the suitability of a long-term qualitative research design for this study. Reflecting on my positioning, I considered the role of the researcher and how autobiographical research would address my relationship to the sample. An overview of the ontological, epistemological, and theoretical orientation was offered, clarifying my positioning, and how data would be interpreted. Information about the sample was provided, along with insight into the host institution. The preliminary research is presented, with implications for the main study. A discussion of research methods and access follows, synthesised with scholarship on creative and qualitative methods. Ethics are addressed, clarifying alignment with guidelines set out by the institution and BERA.

3.11.1. Limitations

The anecdotal qualitative data took a long time to collect and analyse, as I did this manually. However, this can be overcome by transcription software. A schedule of analysis for the research enabled earlier sets of data to enrich the understandings of later accounts. Towards the end of the study, less data was submitted as participants' other commitments dominated, so I was flexible with deadlines to gather sufficient in-depth information from the participants.

The durational and remote nature of the current research throughout Covid-19 may have influenced engagement levels, but good rapport appeared beneficial to retention, through maintained trust and communication (BERA, 2018). Some participants left the research part-way, making the sample smaller. However, their willingness to participate in an interview instead filled the gap where data was absent.

Their disengagement may be owing to additional screen time and workload, or potential stress stemming from participation, particularly around assessment time (ibid); after each submission stage, I checked to see if participants were happy to continue.

A limitation of digital storytelling was the interpretive nature of the artefacts; images have myriad entry points, and objects and places have associations. These opened the research up to abstract ideas, adding layers of meaning, and consideration for the significance of what is and is not included in the artefact. Limiting participants' inclusion of identifiable elements may have hampered their narrative (Mitchell, 2013); this may be overcome by symbolic objects, or pixilating data during analysis. While I initially perceived more freedom in developing digital storytelling, some participants required further explanation about these, explaining that they did not understand the expectation or that the notion was too abstract to depict.

Finally, while interviews can be time-consuming, they can gather rich data. To do this effectively, I avoided leading language that might influence responses. The rapport established early on facilitated the interview experience.

3.11.2. Dissemination

The consent form offered participants the opportunity to read what was written about them prior to thesis submission. The completed thesis was shared with supervisors and the exam board. The knowledge unearthed from the current research shall be made accessible for future projects: through the university research depository and optimistically published as articles in relevant journals.

3.12 Case Studies

Arlo

Arlo was a first-year international PhD candidate, pursuing postgraduate studies in the UK after working as a government policy analyst. Her case comprises data from three email diaries, two submissions of digital storytelling, and a photo-elicitation interview. Her participation spanned November 2021 – August 2022.

Situation

Arlo returned to academia full-time while continuing her role as a policy analyst part-time, by fulfilling a standard with flexible hours working pattern. Reflecting on earlier learning, she explained that having a packed schedule in her previous work setting helped her to be productive and manage time constraints in her present setting (Interview).

Early on, she found relocating to the UK to study was challenging, having previously lived in a town where she was familiar with the space and people around her. Moving to London, Arlo reported that she “felt like completely lost, in a city that isn’t familiar to me”, which was made more complicated by “The staff and my department [...] they didn’t know the answers [...] nobody knew the answers of basic stuff”. While this experience was ‘disempowering’ and ‘frustrating’ she was reminded that “so far my life has been very easy”. Arlo admitted that having stayed in familiar spaces meant that she “didn’t grow as a result”; she implied that much of this was personal growth encountered outside of the PhD, and beyond the classroom (Interview).

Arlo also faced adjustment to academic culture and remote study in a new country. She claimed that, “My institution in ***** did things very differently than we do. So getting used to a whole new academic system” (Interview), which included studying in another language and navigating the disorganised nature of her department, which she believed “matured me a lot”. Her reflections also included comparisons with peers from home regarding the length of a PhD and the process of upgrading, the expectation that candidates attend classes, and the types of relationships built with supervisors. Arlo claimed that “upgrading was a reminder that I need to come in

quick and leave quickly”. A stark change she faced in the new situation was discovering that unlike in previous work and study roles, she no longer understood what was expected of her. This triggered her “trying to find things on my own and learning heuristically” (Interview).

Arlo’s partner had travelled to the UK to live with her and her dog. She claimed that remote work was improved by this, “it’s a lot more fun than being stuck in a cubicle” (Interview). The pair curated their environment to support them to focus on respective tasks (Interview); she commented that “my space really affects me [...] being able to work in a place where I curated the space makes me almost focus more”. Digital Storytelling.1 (DS.1) and Digital Storytelling.2 (DS.2) represent Arlo’s on-going work and study spaces (although she worked remotely during lockdown), these images represented two of the cultures she was a part of.



Digital Storytelling (DS) 1



Digital Storytelling (DS) 2

In DS.1 she reflected on the neutral colour scheme, the “sterile environment”, stating that “it’s not a very creative space”. But importantly, this space was also a shared space. The Post-it notes and printed artworks attempted to personalise the desk area, but “it’s not necessarily a representation of you [...] you’re trying to leave traces of yourself there”. Through Arlo’s decorative items, she managed the rules of the

space; by pinning up imagery with temporary fixings in her assigned area, she showed her awareness for how others interacted with the space. These artefacts offered talking points with colleagues; they reveal interests not so easily conveyed through one's role identity. The desk space itself is clear and welcoming, simultaneously indicating that order and organisation may be favoured in the space to benefit productivity. Contrastingly, DS.2 represented Arlo's true minimalist style, where she had full autonomy over the choice of objects, colours, and composition. These had implications for Arlo's outlook on her work tasks. She claimed it was important to be "surrounded by things that you love, things that make it happy", which was reflected in DS.1 as she input identity characteristics to shape her working behaviours.

DS.2 illustrated this autonomy, as Arlo preferred to be in control of her choices, and the things happening around her. Notably, the absence of a desk in her image speaks to the freedom and creativity she desired, and her involvement in decisions about effective ways of working. It also depicts the overlapping of roles she encountered, which was managed using a 'work computer' and a 'personal laptop'. When working remotely, demands were divided into morning (work-work) and afternoon (school work) tasks; however, occasional conflict was navigated by her self-management and organisational skills. This control was important because she claimed to be "always exhausted trying to balance school with part-time work" (Email diary). Despite this, Arlo claimed to have always had multiple jobs whilst being a student, so she was well-practiced in working within 'time constraints'. Her minimalist style has enabled her to develop a non-distracting environment, where she can approach tasks without the spillover of symbolic items; these appear to be assigned zones like the notebook and laptop in DS.2.

Arlo explained how feeling in control was also significant for her PG studies, claiming that she could guide her research without approval from others, unlike at work, which fostered her independence. She recalled the fixed hierarchy she had endured, "I was a policy analyst, and above me was my manager, and above her, a team manager" (Email diary) which limited her autonomy. The minimal temporal distance between former and current academic study enabled her to sustain knowledge of "the kind of routine I need to focus on my academic work" (Email diary), but remote study had

prevented the involvement she craved in the learning process (Interview). Arlo's knowledge of student characteristics may still have been available in strands of identity, ready for interactions with the academic community.

Self

Arlo's workplace behaviours positively influenced her adjustment to a student role. She integrated these to interpret course content and decode the expected traits of PG students. These skills exhibited her suitability to the role, influencing her self-belief. Arlo felt able to use and build on existing knowledge owing to earlier "first-hand experience", which appeared different from some peers. She explained how they often "had difficulty understanding" (Email diary), while Arlo applied her knowledge to abstract concepts. In addition to subject knowledge, Arlo demonstrated various organisational skills that she employed to her advantage, including "writing professional emails, cold calling, networking" (Email diary).

Becoming a student again meant navigating the financial precarity of student life, which shocked Arlo after experiencing the stability of a steady income. She relied on a scholarship for full-time students (Interview), suggesting that her 'multimembership' may have been by necessity. Arlo explained that she loses a portion of her funding through the exchange rate, as such, she takes up extra shifts over the weekends to cover expenses.

Correspondence with Arlo's supervisor addressed her 'multimembership', revealing the financial and structural barriers she experienced.

"...it's historically been a discipline that bourgeois people study. I do feel that it's very white for raw dominance in my department [...] I've come from a working-class background, and I do have to work, like my parents don't give me money to go to school or to pay my rent, so for her to say 'you should go part time because you have to work' to me was insensitive" (Interview).

Arlo's organisational competence was overlooked in a suggestion that part-time study would suit her circumstances better. Her supervisor's lack of confidence had a lasting impact on their relationship, influencing identification with the institution's

culture. This was hugely disappointing, as Arlo had persevered professionally and academically to become a PhD candidate. Her supervisor's lack of belief and upset response to Arlo's situation led to Arlo feeling increasingly on the outside of an already exclusive community of scholars within her department. Defending her choice, Arlo expressed that "I managed to do the same work as everyone else, because I can manage my time properly" (Interview). While this altercation had hampered her relationship with one supervisor, she didn't feel able to address this issue with her secondary supervisor; recognising the need for them to bring different perspectives to her research, and to "get on", Arlo decided not to let her personal upset influence her academic development.

Arlo felt strongly about the absence of the physical university campus, which she believed was integral to developing academic identity. To overthrow this issue, she participated in other aspects of the learning experience to meet people (Interview), for instance, she became a PG Student Representative which allowed her to get to know her cohort more intimately. Despite her efforts, these meetings often took place virtually, which "affected our bonds, and how close we got" (Interview).

The felt distance between Arlo and the campus was reinforced by university strikes, further limiting interactions with the academic community. This addition to remote study influenced Arlo's outlook on the situation. However, the use of technology introduced the flexibility to balance work and study, providing more opportunities to participate in events, to sense belonging, and to become familiar with PG provision. These repeat encounters helped clarify who and how to be in respective contexts.

Support

Returning to Arlo's turbulent relationship with her supervisor, she shared that,

"I love my department, but I do feel like the relationships between staff and students isn't great there [...] my own relationship with my supervisor isn't great, we barely meet once a month – I've actually never seen her in person" (Interview).

The literal distance between them led to an emotional distance, whereby Arlo sensed that she was “out of touch with my reality, and insensitive to my situation” (Interview). The remote aspect of their relationship impacted attempts at forging connection, likely owing to the formality of their interactions. As an international student learning about the norms of a new space, it is possible that this distance further isolated her.



Digital Storytelling (DS) 3

Arlo’s support structure during her return to study (see DS.3) was mostly depicted in a photograph of a wall made of rocks. This was her metaphor for “building up a new life” (Interview). In Arlo’s context, her transitional experiences involved meeting new people and consequently having new interactions, being in a new country and learning the norms and expectations of the space (within and beyond the institution), communicating in a second language, and recontextualising existing knowledge to manage her studies. Within the institution, she faced on-going adjustment to ways that her responsibilities were communicated, she also became increasingly independent as she sought academic and personal information, with no consistent support to rely on. This had previously been clearly sign-posted at work, with an established team of colleagues overseeing Arlo’s contribution. Reflecting on her on-going learning experience, she suggested,

“I don’t think the wall is ever complete. I think it’s a constant life process [...] collecting and assembling them means it’s a process [...] It’s like accumulation over time, and it’s never just one person who builds on it” (Interview).

Arlo commented on the stability the wall represents, and that from time to time it may require “maintenance and repair”. The symbolic structure represented her network of friends and significant relationships which had helped “build my character” (Interview) and demystified some of the aforementioned transitional experiences. Support provided by her partner was significant; Arlo linked the physicality of the wall to their shared enjoyment of the television series *The Sopranos* (1999).

“My partner and I always tell each other when something terrible happened.. We're just like, *What are you gonna do?* He's got to pick up the pieces and move on. And this is how I see the wall, even though it falls apart” (Interview).

Initially, Arlo’s primary support came from pre-existing relationships, notably her partner. She expressed that, “While friends and family provided some support virtually, it was nowhere as near as the emotional and financial support my partner could provide me” (Email diary). In-person support and human connection was paramount during her return, as opposed to sustained remote connections with home; Arlo’s partner was her connection to home, weathering change together.

DS.3 oozed the ‘Britishness’ she had tried to embrace, depicting the dry-stone wall surrounded by a patchwork of rolling green fields, an image deeply embedded in British culture. Historically, these walls divided land, an interesting metaphor for the transitional experiences Arlo encountered. These dry-stone boundaries may have represented the hurdles of transition, or her growth since moving away from home, each wall marking the distance travelled. The wall could also embody liminality, as Arlo undertook multiple roles (colleague and student), and considered the distinctive expectations and norms of these. Should the wall symbolise the contributions of others to transition, then it is likely similar to a boundary object (Wenger, 1998), where brokering takes place, enriching her perspectives and understanding of self. Coincidentally, the wall also characterised Arlo’s homeland, bringing a sense of familiarity to her experience. She described the building process and its materials.

“In ***** we have something similar [...] It's like coming from the Inuit tradition, and whenever you see rocks [...] then you go by the water, and you create this like alarm [...] the Inuit would like put by the water, so that fishermen could see that there was a village nearby” (Interview).

The wall, despite traditionally separating great expanses of space, helped Arlo to feel a closeness to home. This encounter was reminiscent of her many years living in just one place, the relationships she had forged with the environment, its cultures, and people, and the strands of identity that shaped how she was responding to the current transition.

Strategy

Upon returning to study, Arlo had become part of a large international community of students who she gradually made friends with and formed a support network. These friendships positively influenced transition, providing space to discuss unfamiliar aspects of living and studying in the UK. In becoming the Student Representative for her cohort, she felt more involved in the institution, creating opportunities for connection, revealing commonalities in their concerns about study.

“...we kind of realized that everyone in the cohort was facing similar issues, many of them were lost. A lot of them are international students coming to ***, so they felt like they were lacking support” (Interview).

Resources for prospective students had been discussed between Arlo and her head of department, to unpick PG expectations, and demystify academic tasks, such as developing ethics forms and applying for field work.

“In my previous experience in academia and also in work, it's always been very clear what was expected of me. What I need to do, where I need to go. I was never in a managerial position. I was always told what to do in my jobs and also in my school” (Interview).

Considering remote study during the Covid-19 pandemic, Arlo was extremely proactive in learning about her role in the academy and how to accomplish her demands. While this was mostly a heuristic experience, being a Student Representative helped her to understand the needs of her direct community, and to share these with staff to enhance hers, her peers', and prospective students' experiences. Notably, this provided her with a role that was established within the structure of the academy with clear duties, which contrasted with her student role.

Finley

Finley was an international master's student, studying full-time in the UK after working for six years in the media industry as a magazine editor. She contributed three rounds of email diaries and digital storytelling, and an interview. Her participation in the research spanned November 2021 – August 2022.

Situation

Finley had worked as a magazine editor where she fulfilled a demanding standard working pattern, characterised by writing tasks, meetings, and interviews. These were occasionally completed at night dependent on client's requests. Being a student again allowed Finley to “suspend for a while”, introducing new tasks and activities into her life (Email Diary). Although she was scheduled to work eight hours each day with clear expectations of her role, she often spent weekends and holidays catching up on tasks (Interview).



Digital Storytelling (DS) 4



Digital Storytelling (DS) 5

DS.4 depicts this intense time, with rows of partitioned desks, emphasising order and efficiency in her former office space. These private spaces segregated the colleagues from one another, preventing informal interactions and collaboration, and regulating the behaviours within their community. Their desk spaces literally had boundaries erected around them blocking lines of communication. The space was lit by artificial lighting, and decorated with posters of the magazine, with little personalisation from colleagues; these features transmitted messages ultimately shaping colleagues' attitudes. The hierarchical nature of the space was evident in its layout; Finley recalled that "the atmosphere in this office is quite depressing" (Interview), colleagues were reportedly governed by regulations controlling how they worked and what they produced. She explained how their writing "had to obey some criteria" (Interview), indicating, much like the office aesthetic, that a unified standard was expected.

Contrastingly, re-enrolling as a student meant regaining her independence and autonomy, claiming that the role change represented 'happiness' (Email Diary) and 'freedom' (Interview). In DS.5 Finley shared a photograph of her university library. While the angle of the image is somewhat offset, representing the disorientating nature of study during the uncertainties of Covid-19, the focal point of the image, guided by long lines of ceiling, carpet, and shelves, create a tunnel suggesting the distance between her former and current identities. That said, Finley continued to be drawn to spaces where she could work in a solitary manner, so that amongst the visible structures and architecture of the space, she could control her performance. This suggestion speaks to the lasting influence of context on individual behaviours.

'Independence' was illustrated in DS.4 and DS.5, as each desk was separated from the next, isolating the students and workers. These images speak to the cultures of their respective contexts, notably that the assumed tasks of the space did not require interaction, or that connection with others was not essential for sensing fit.

Finley believed that students should be accountable for their development in academia, corresponding with the independent nature of PG study, and the resistance of collaboration she was used to in the workplace. However, she soon discovered that being independent involved sourcing information about student

expectations that she had not encountered before. In adjusting to PG study, Finley's attempts at becoming autonomous were very gradual owing to the absence of information available about her role, which pointed to the assumed skills of PGs. A later comment on feedback highlighted her desire for confirmation that she was meeting the requirements of the role.

Gradually, subtle connections between old and new practices supported her adjustment, indicating that identity renegotiation was taking place. Similarities perceived across the two contexts, involved gathering information, analysis, and dissemination (DS.6). Finley's feelings about identity were predominantly attributed to her experiences with tasks and responding to each process.

Task aim → analyze aim → collect information → analyze information →
assuming draft → peer review → formative feedback → modify draft →
summative feedback → recall the task aim.

Digital Storytelling (DS) 6

In DS.6, Finley illustrated her earlier work cycle, which we discussed considering a PG role, revealing that identity renegotiation was taking place. She observed that her former role was "quite similar with what I have learned in the educational assessment programme" (Interview). Her professional identity comprised attitudes and behaviours that enabled her to complete tasks amounting to publishable writing. In bringing these skills to her new role and grasping her newfound expectations and demands of a student, she began negotiating how to be in relation to the setting and how to respond to other participants. This process first required Finley to observe and learn about the new context, and the social influence on this and PG roles. Understanding how social influence shaped her studies and who she was expected to be, she felt able to build on existing knowledge and strands of identity.

Of the tasks she had formerly mastered, 'peer review' was most different in the academic setting. Finley and her peers were required to contribute to remote forums, which provided opportunity to become closer to a student identity. However, she

believed that most of her cohort assigned little significance to this activity because it wasn't graded. Finley indicated that her positive view of this space was inspired by the engagement of her tutors who would interact with them here.

Finley's experience writing for media had not entirely prepared her for the academic experience. Feedback on assignments created conflicting feelings about formerly accepted writing styles, as they no longer felt culturally suitable (Interview). She claimed that tutors had characterised her assignments as "too descriptive" and uncritical (Interview).

A notable distinction between her experience of feedback at work and at university, was how the *writing* was considered rather than the *writer*, influencing her relationship with the academic community.

"...they only gave the feedback just really based on what you have done not based on who you are [...] they just gave you the suggestions or instructions according to your assignment [...] they do not criticize you as a person."
(Interview)

Despite Finley's preference for constructive feedback in academia, as opposed to persistent (and sometimes personal) comments at work, she became frustrated by its slow delivery. She reported that, "feedback frequency is not as much as what they taught us [...] she even leave me a totally one month and did not respond to my email" (Interview). Earlier experiences of formal study shaped Finley's expectations; she recalled "more interaction with your students, you had to give instant and meaningful feedback" (Interview).

Self

Adjusting to academic practice, Finley faced institutional and cultural barriers. As an international student, she often referred to accepted norms for women of her age from her homeland (prioritising marriage and a family), and the internal conflict this created for her about pursuing higher learning (Email diary). She explained how "students are only responsible for themselves [...] They do not have to consider other things, such as leaders, salary and family. Their main 'job' is study" (Email

diary). The perceived risk that she took to study, likely influenced the expectations that she had of others involved in shaping her return. While she appeared very committed to the pursuit, she found the limited interactions with her academic community created doubt, hampering her mental health. The institutional barriers mostly pertained to the rigidity of staff communication, who were often not available to address Finley's concerns; she claimed that "responsibility for students is a rare quality" (Email diary). She was worried about how uncertain she felt about the role, and how few opportunities she had to confide in peers or staff. She believed this impacted the development of academic traits, like knowledge of language and critical thinking skills, which contrasted considerably to the expectations of her former professional practice.

While Finley had initially hoped to recontextualise knowledge from the workplace, in reality, she found that there was considerable unlearning to be done. This can also be understood as a process of negotiation, as new ideas and influences are absorbed while others fall away, to respond to a task. She described her writing at work as 'vivid' and 'descriptive' (Email Diary), but that this did not satisfy the academic expectation. Doubt emerged as she explained that, "I am fully familiar with what I have done, I am familiar with this industry" (Interview). Finley was able to maintain some self-belief by building on a selection of existing skills (DS.6), but she continued to assess the suitability of others. She was proactive in seeking feedback on her assignments, which conveyed her determination to regain control of the trying situation. Although she was unclear about how to develop criticality, Finley developed traits that enabled her to complete assignments on time.

Support

Finley predominantly relied on her partner for support as she returned to study. They weathered transition together, as he related to her circumstances and understood that PG study was uncommon for women from her culture at her time of life. Finley expressed the emotional impact of pushing back against cultural expectations, but that despite this, her partner encouraged her to persevere with her academic career, boosting her self-esteem. From her partner, Finley acquired affirmation and care, positively influencing transition. Their continued presence in Finley's life provided the emotional security she sought, as she faced uncertainty upon returning to study. This

also reduced feelings of isolation as they created space for her to feel heard as she communicated concerns.



Digital Storytelling (DS) 7

In a comparison with the characters in DS.7, Finley reflected on the adventures she had with her partner. The characters “explore the world together, no matter, it is in the water or outside the water [...] They just keep curious” (Interview). The characters’ ability to explore both land and sea represents Finley’s life inside and outside academia. Regardless of context, she emphasised that her partner is always there. Like the characters, Finley’s husband was her best friend, suggesting that their partnership was loyal and reliable. In a brief reflection on her childhood (hence the young people in DS.7), Finley considered her lasting search for stability, which she appears to have found.

Frustratingly, the felt distance between Finley, her peers, and academic staff, meant that she struggled to grasp information about PG norms in the UK and fulfilling academic practice. Having left the workplace entirely, she leant on her partner to overcome the absence of institutional support.

The lack of feedback from her tutor prevented Finley from understanding how she was doing, and how to adapt existing skills to fulfil academic tasks. However, she

drew on the importance of peer review for developing publishable writing to acquire commentary and reactions on her academic assignments; she addressed her need for interaction by posting to the module forums, which simultaneously granted her access to the community. Otherwise, the exclusion Finley felt had created feelings of uncertainty about the PG role and her participation in the academic community.

Strategy

By drawing on workplace behaviours, Finley felt able to manage and complete various academic tasks in good time, which supported her to modify any stressful situations she faced.

“I still keep to finish my work as soon as possible. My experience to deal with work is, dividing them into small part, and finish them step by step, one by one. It will reduce my pressure when facing lots of assignments.” (Email Diary)

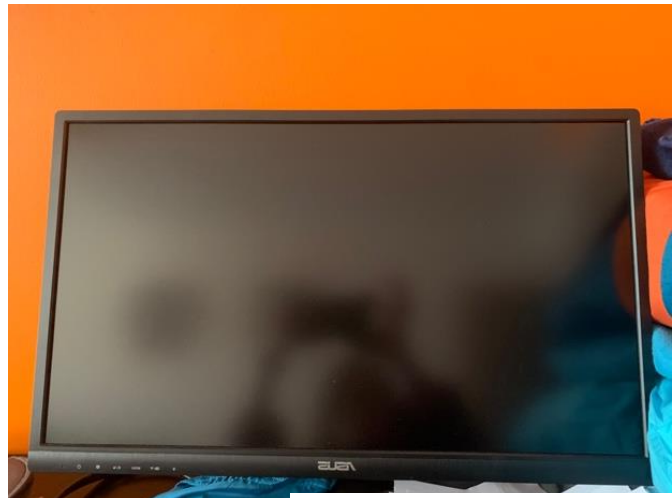
She felt able to reduce feelings of overwhelm by working through assignments in reasonable portions, which was a practical way to sense achievement without feeling daunted about meeting the poorly communicated expectations of PG students.

Hunter

Hunter was a full-time international student in the UK. She had previously worked in a professional role remotely for two years, influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Her case study comprises data from three submissions of email diaries and digital storytelling tasks, and an interview. Hunter's participation spanned November 2021 – August 2022.

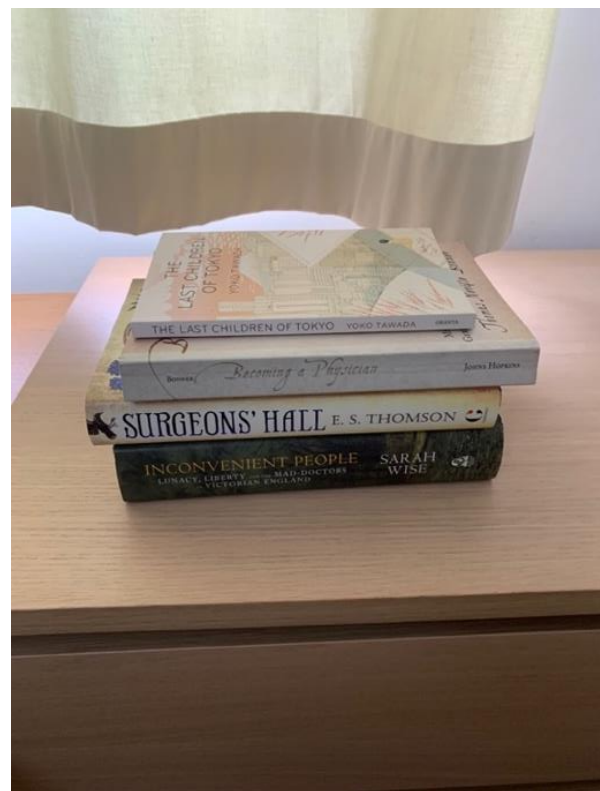
Situation

Hunter's former corporate role comprised a standard working pattern with additional shifts, which proved overbearing. She felt liberated as she reclaimed control over her time and energy back at university, after a two-year break.



Digital Storytelling (DS) 8

Artefacts DS.8 and DS.9 depicted objects that Hunter associated with her work (DS.8) and academic roles (DS.9). During lockdown, Hunter's employers provided equipment to avoid disruption to work (see screen in DS.8). While this enabled her to carry out work tasks and communicate with ease, the large screen created an obstacle in an already established environment, showing how easily role contagion can occur as demands spill into alternative spaces. The object's presence was a constant reminder that she was connected to another community, however it was a stranger to its surroundings, leading the values of the organisational culture it represents



Digital Storytelling (DS) 9

with other traits. This experience depicts the mobile nature of her work identity, and its ability to be reshaped for alternative contexts. Contrastingly, a neat stack of books portrayed Hunter's academic identity (DS.9), their subject matter exposing her interests. Working from home, Hunter attempted to separate strands of identity in the confined space; the composition of books suggests that she was protecting this new strand of identity, as it stood away from other influence and symbolic objects. Isolating these representative objects illustrates their importance to Hunter; they are made vulnerable by the significance they have for a future version of self (Jackson II, 2002).

Studying remotely had become the norm when Hunter returned, as Covid-19 guidelines continued to be rolled out. Initially, she stayed with her family during lockdown but soon returned to the UK to intermittently visit her office. Previous experience of working from home supported her to be just as productive as she would have been in the office (Email diary). As such, she expressed no interest in hurrying back to campus and spoke positively of the institutional efforts to support her studies. She claimed that "The blended learning approach has allowed me to live a full academic experience" (Email diary), which was made easier by staff using remote platforms like Zoom to communicate and teach, and lecture recordings which reduced the stress of rigid timetables. Institutional resources provided more than academic guidance, as Hunter reported the efficiency of their counselling services which helped with adjusting to PG study.

Formerly, Hunter encountered additional shifts which were distributed randomly on weekends throughout the year, making it difficult to organise plans around work; a sense of powerlessness was conveyed, as the workplace withheld her autonomy. Upon returning to study, she celebrated a newfound stability and sense of control by reporting that, "I felt I have a place, and I felt good" (Interview).

As Hunter settled into the PG role, she explored subjects of significance to her, without feeling rushed and pressured. Her earlier fondness for school and university was awakened as she "found it very easy to assimilate into ***'s culture, as I have always felt at home in an academic environment" (Email diary). She recalled identifying with the values of the institution, "with a culture that challenges the *status*

quo, promotes free thought and intellectual development and helps me grow as an individual” (Email diary). Hunter felt as though her contributions were sometimes recognised by academic staff in taught sessions; this appreciation gave her academic practice meaning and purpose, connecting her with the community. An earlier struggle to relate to colleagues in the workplace was overshadowed by her affiliation with the academy, whose values centred on a pursuit of knowledge and creativity, and respect for and inclusion of others.

Self

Characteristics of the high-stress corporate environment had informed how Hunter undertook academic tasks. She maintained high expectations of herself and placed considerable value on study outcomes. While this appeared motivating, she regularly compared herself to peers.

Although Hunter was not always confident about employing her expertise in her studies, she discovered that some existing skillsets (time management, organisation, multitasking) worked to her advantage. She drew on these to “juggle modules and their assessments with getting started with my dissertation” (Email diary) as well as her application to study abroad.

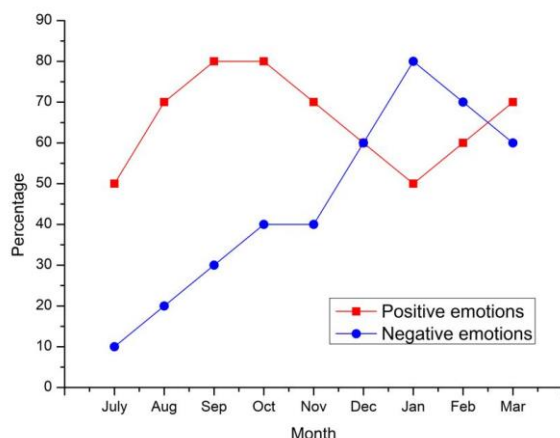
Hunter’s workplace traits influenced her expectations of academic staff. She explained the importance of time management and communication in her former role, and why she assumed the same significance in academia too. Hunter attributed the absence of information about relationship expectations to poor organisational skills within the academic setting.

Initially, the limited interactions Hunter encountered created doubt about her role in the academic community. She felt like an imposter as she lacked feedback to understand how she was doing. In time, she viewed PG study as a process and gradually developed a network of peers who shared her insecurities. In discovering that many of her peers were also overwhelmed by the situation, Hunter felt reassured, as they understood her reaction to the experience (Interview).

Support

At the start of term, the university's 'student psychological and counselling services' had profound implications for Hunter's studies as they supported her to manage anxiety through six weeks of free Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). While Hunter was anxious about the start of term, she admitted that her mood had also been influenced by the pandemic, and her overwhelming doubt about various assignments that led her to ask, "Am I doing a good job?" (Interview). These experiences created an emotional rollercoaster; however she felt increasingly confident about applying understanding she had reached with her counsellor to cope with PG studies, enabling her to persevere without further intervention.

Mood tracker July (when I received my acceptance letter from UCL) to March



As part of the current study, Hunter developed this chart (DS.10) to depict the range of moods experienced throughout her studies, from accepting an offer to study up to data submission. She claimed that "it was the best way to show the journey of the ups and downs" (Interview).

Digital Storytelling (DS) 10

Looking at the timeline on DS.10, the felt duration of transition is illustrated, as is her progress amidst change. Reflecting on the patterns of 'negative emotions', she recalled "I've got to do something about this before it gets worse, and it impacts my studies" (Interview). As detailed, the two lines portray distinctive emotions encountered, some corresponding with 'demanding' deadlines from the university, while others with the stress of changing regulations regarding remote practices and staying safe. Hunter's negative emotions crept up gradually despite her excitement about PG studies. Around November the counselling sessions concluded, and in December restrictions with Covid-19 became complicated again. Her negativity reached a high in January when she submitted multiple assignments and had begun applying strategies from the therapy on her own. Eventually, as Covid-19 restrictions

calmed down and the forthcoming dissertation unit emerged, Hunter began looking forward to the future.

Hunter was also determined to experience learning in different contexts; she explained having previously worked and lived across Europe, enrolled for PG studies in the UK, and was preparing for a placement abroad once travel restrictions had been lifted. The placement abroad was initiated by a visiting lecturer during her PG studies. She recalled how, “That whole meeting just started making me feel very excited [...] I had an idea for my dissertation” (Interview).

Hunter treasured working with relatable academic staff and those who represented the diverse student population. She observed shared interests and values in the lecturer, which overthrew earlier bouts of doubt as she sensed affirmation and enhanced self-efficacy.



Digital Storytelling (DS) 11

“I'd always thought about doing a PhD. People would tell me, ‘yeah, you're smart. You should do it’. But it was like she was someone who really has specific ideas and plans for me. So, she really wants it. It's not just me imagining [...] She actually wants it, and she knows what she's talking about. It was a confirmation of Yes, I belong here”. (Interview)

“I got to see her as someone who's been through things in life, and she's persevered, and she's independent. And she's curious about the world and all those traits. I really look up to.” (Interview)

DS.11 is an image of Hunter’s host institution (the flags have been blurred to protect identification). Hunter felt an intense emotional connection whilst on placement, claiming that “her institution was also my institution” (Interview), revealing another negotiated branch of identity. The supervisor and their supervisees had created a network around Hunter during her visit, taking her to the beach, to meet friends, and

offering academic support. This profoundly impacted her PG studies as the growth of a peer support network was delayed by remote study and in-group differences across her programme (Interview). On her programme in the UK, while remote study had slowed friendships, Hunter explained that initially being in a city surrounded by strangers was also very isolating (Interview), “it’s not easy to feel at home, because everyone’s always on the move”.

Strategy

Hunter borrowed attitudes from her former work culture to manage PG demands, including competitiveness and pace (time-management), previously acquired for promotion (Email diary). She acknowledged that being accepted at her institution was a competitive process, which likely prevented her disassociation from these traits. As her studies progressed, Hunter’s attitude, while negatively affecting how she perceived herself alongside peers, ultimately helped avoid risk-taking, so that she could navigate independent study, complete multiple assignments, and rest too.

Most of Hunter’s PG studies were remote, facilitated by technology. Despite issues with developing community in virtual spaces, Hunter expressed managing to receive a “full academic experience, while remaining relatively safe in largely unsafe times” (Email Diary). Class recordings supported participation, which reduced the pressure to align with rigid schedules, particularly when falling ill (Email diary). Her studies became more inclusive as remote resources offered opportunity for all learners to feel involved, and to find their own ways to engage amidst the disruptive circumstances. Creating a communal space for synchronous and asynchronous participation likely influenced any sense of belonging and mattering Hunter felt.

3.12.1. Conclusive Summary of Cases

Situation

From the case studies, the participants illustrated their experience of role change. They felt relieved of workplace pressures and embedded hierarchies and appreciated being associated with shared institutional values now. This was significant for Hunter who felt she more closely identified with academic culture, having been unable to relate to colleagues. The significance of regaining control in how and when they worked suggested that returning to study was a timely change, as conveyed by Finley who had left an all-encompassing work schedule, in search of 'happiness' and 'freedom'.

The participants were mostly positive about returning to study, owing to fond memories of academia. Their connection to student roles portrayed degrees of preparedness and expectation. While Hunter spoke of her love for education and awareness of useful skillsets, and Arlo reflected on the closeness of former studies which helped her to realign, Finley considered the differences in professional and academic practices which complicated her adjustment. Notably, the lasting impact of Finley's workplace behaviours influenced her approach to study, including her feelings about student accountability, and the need for on-going feedback.

Remote work and study was manageable because the participants had mostly experienced this before; Hunter explained how she was equally productive at home. In DS.8 and DS.9 she presented symbolic objects that represented different facets of identity; her work equipment illustrated the mobility of her work identity, while her university books appeared to be a protected future identity. At home, some participants had continued support from partners and the autonomy to curate an environment conducive to their needs, these positively influenced their outlook. This was particularly evident in Arlo's narrative, who benefited from leaving traces of self in the space.

Throughout transition, their assessments were mixed. Barriers to learning were created by studying in a second language, and misaligned expectations of the setting; Arlo recalled feeling disempowered and unprepared as she faced a new

academic system. Additionally, Finley felt stressed by the lack of communication with peers and staff, which influenced the felt duration of transition and her knowledge of how she was progressing. Contrastingly, Hunter transformed existing knowledge which enabled her to build on behaviours and skills from the workplace.

Self

In their own ways, the participants transformed knowledge and behaviours from the workplace to the institution. Arlo and Hunter demonstrated how these predominantly helped with organising time, prioritising tasks, and being independent, rather than with critical academic tasks (like writing), as Finley found. Arlo carried a strong self-belief, while Hunter had high expectations of herself, leading to constant comparison with peers. Separately, Finley was required to relearn how to complete certain academic tasks, as she learnt that her writing style did not satisfy the academic expectation. That said, her willing to adopt new skills to understand the role better demonstrated resilience.

While the participants showed commitment to being a student again, the misalignment of behaviours observed in staff, created bouts of doubt. These attitudes spilled over from the workplace, leading Hunter to question the organisational competence of staff based on her knowledge of workplace responsibility, while Finley was drawn to the significance of communication within the community structure. More regular feedback was expected, along with opportunities to interact with peers, and consistent support from supervisors. The absence of these excluded them from understanding what was expected, hampering their self-efficacy.

Where gaps emerged in their understanding of PG study, the participants committed to other institutional roles to understand the community better and to rebuild a network. These groups gradually formed the stability the participants sought, helping them to feel more in control of their responses to transition. Arlo explained how becoming a PG Student Representative brought her closer to the culture of the institution, as well as her peers. The role helped her to understand what others within her department were experiencing, and how she might support staff to adjust resources that demystified aspects of returning.

Support

The participants struggled to rely on the institution for support, as they sensed conflicting beliefs at times with staff, a failure to deliver clear expectations across their studies, and a lack of time and funding within certain departments to invest in disciplinary communities. To overcome this, they independently learnt about the culture and norms of the space, albeit remotely.

There were exceptions however, as Hunter recalled the significance of institutional counselling facilities that were accessible and effective early in her studies. Her turbulent return to study, influenced by the pandemic and personal insecurities, was modified by learnt techniques and coping mechanisms that altered how she responded to her role and the assignments within. Where the institutional community was missing, Hunter valued visiting lecturers, who provided the affirmation she sought, and helped her to feel represented. This had profound implications for her outlook on academic tasks and how she felt about herself in the academy.

Arlo was not as fortunate with her supervisory experience. She felt that her supervisor was insensitive about her situation, as a student that had to work to fund study, and that the few meetings they had really impacted how she identified with the academic community. Because of this, she reflected on her continued efforts to rebuild a community; DS.3 illustrates Arlo's attempts at merging the British-ness she now encountered with traditions from home (see 3.12.: Arlo, for further explanation).

Existing personal relationships were strongest for the participants, who valued the on-going support of their partners. This in-person support offered continuity and familiarity, and importantly for some, a connection to home.

Finley's self-belief during her return was largely impacted by her stage of life. She explained how returning to study as a woman of her age in her culture was quite unusual, but that with the support of her partner she felt able to weather the push back of cultural expectations. While Finley speaks of returning to study as an opportunity, this is not without acknowledgement of risk, justifying her determination to thrive in the setting.

Strategy

To modify the situation and reduce the stress of transition, the participants discovered ways to identify with the institution. They engaged with other roles and schemes, like being a Student Representative (Arlo) or carrying out research abroad (Hunter). Notably, Arlo leant into the international community at the institution, which helped her to normalise concerns about both living in the UK and studying in a new environment, as well as collectively interpreting PG resources and demystifying 'how things are done'. The commonalities she shared with peers reduced feelings of overwhelm and enriched her sense of mattering as she felt understood.

To bridge professional and academic identities, the participants passed information over boundaries, feeding existing skillsets into the academy to accomplish new tasks and to comprehend new knowledge. This transformation of resources allowed them to avoid risk-taking, and to recognise and assign value to existing knowledge and versions of self. This was important for Finley who defended her years of experience as a writer but found herself adapting skills to meet academic expectations.

Hunter's studies benefited from her earlier experiences with working from home, which enabled her to structure time and space to suit demands. This, and dominant attitudes borrowed from work, had helped her adjustment to independent study. She found that continued remote study during the pandemic also supported her participation as she spent less time commuting and could contribute to her studies asynchronously and synchronously.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the current research based on the nine participants' reflections on returning to postgraduate study during the Covid-19 pandemic. The data is taken from the email diary entries and follow-up interviews and is identified by participant name and method. The digital storytelling artefacts feature in the participant case studies (3.12.). The relevance of data to the research questions is presented through thematically organised narratives, which are subsequently synthesised with literature in Chapter 5: Discussion.

The research questions and purpose are reiterated below:

1. What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?
2. How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?

This exploratory research aims to enrich knowledge of PG learners within higher education (HE), as they return to study from the workplace during an unprecedented pandemic. Existing scholarship reveals a dearth of information about transition at PG level, which is unsurprising given earlier claims of neglect towards the PG population (1994 Group, 2012).

A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021) was undertaken across the entire qualitative dataset, using a theoretical framework comprising Schlossberg's theory of transition and model of 4 S's (2008) and Blume's theory of identity renegotiation (2010) (see 2.10.).

This chapter presents patterns and subjectivities of returning to study during this time, assigning meaning to all participants' voices. The findings are structured using Schlossberg's (2008) model of 4 S's: situation, self, support, or strategy. These key

themes are referred to as domain summaries (Braun & Clark, 2019), organising the data into a coherent and holistic whole, orienting the reader.

To reiterate the role of each S in Schlossberg's work (2008), a summary is provided below.

Situation –

Assessing 'situation' involves consideration for the influence of circumstances on transition. Timeliness is explored, along with triggers for the encounter, perceived control, and stress caused by this, amongst other things.

Self –

Internal qualities including psychological resources and/or personal characteristics are considered. These include ego development (levels of maturity, reliance on affirmation, or autonomy), the participant's outlook, and behaviours carried out during transition. Individual-level data comprises demographic information like age, gender, occupation.

Support –

Support can be fixed or in flux, it might change or be disrupted. Support takes many forms; some receive emotional support, while others rely on practical support like childcare or financial help. Support can be a single person, a group, community, family, or an organisation.

Strategy –

These are actions implemented to influence the situation, to change how something is experienced. Strategies might change the meaning of transition or address the stress it produces.

The themes identified within each 'S' stemmed from the deductive analysis, while sub-themes from the inductive analysis identified concepts within. This is detailed in 3.9.1. An example of this is:

Domain summary: Situation (deductive) >

Theme: Role Change: Identity (deductive) >

Sub-theme: Trying On (inductive).

Throughout the RTA, I meandered through six stages (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021); (1) familiarisation, (2) generating initial themes, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining themes, and (6) writing up. The inductive analysis followed the first and second phases of RTA. From there, themes aligning with Schlossberg's (2008, 2011) coping resources were generated. For an in-depth account of the analytical procedure, see 3.9.

The themes are presented in an illustrative manner, with semantic and latent narration, taken from the inductive and deductive analysis. Each theme is first defined, capturing understandings of the data, supported by relevant quotations. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

4.2. Situation

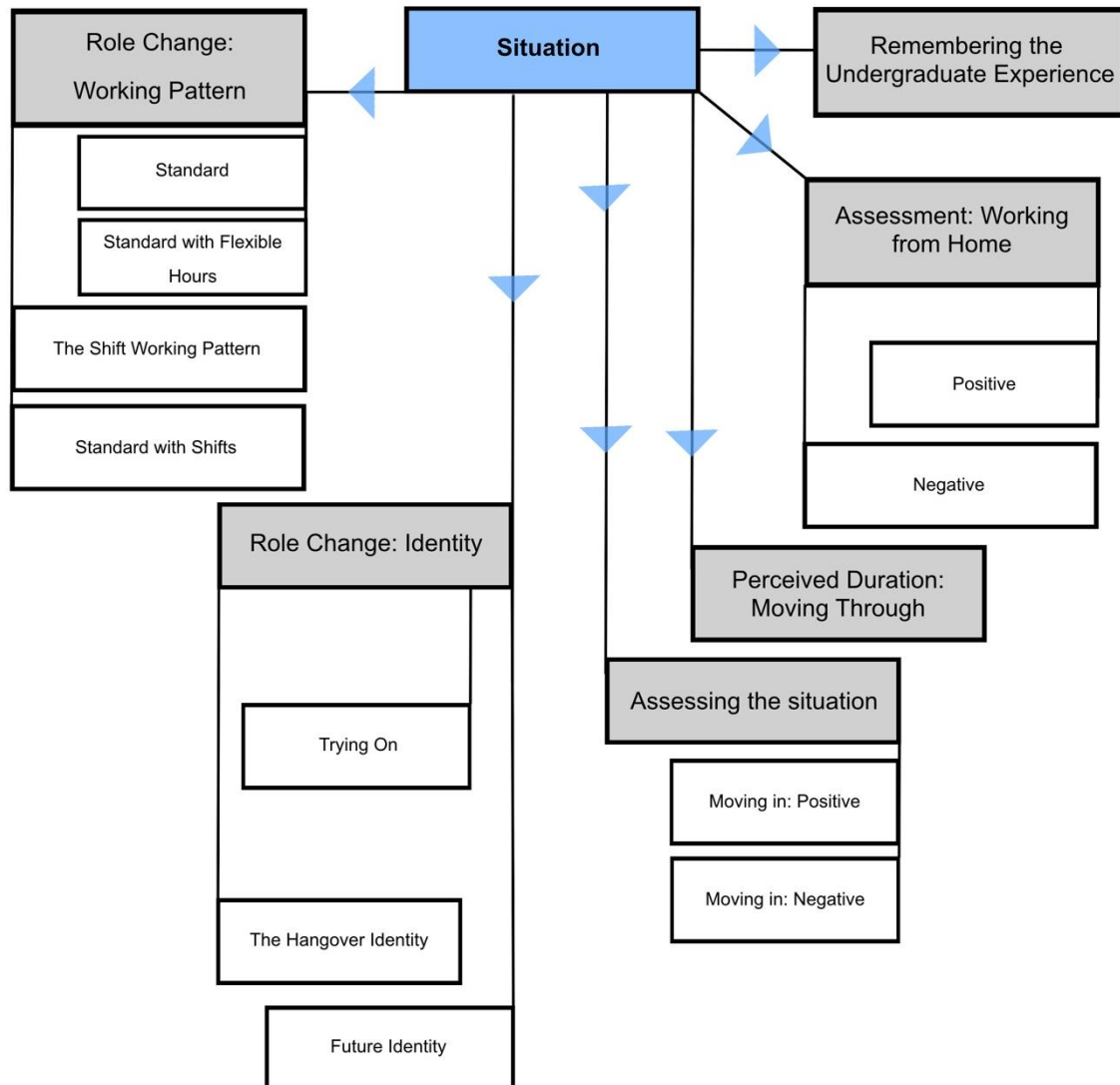


Fig. 4 – Findings: Themes and sub-themes pertaining to participants' situations

4.2.1. Situation – Role change: Working pattern

This theme explores some participants' former (and on-going) working hours and routines from the workplace. The loss of these working patterns appeared freeing, as restrictions were lifted, providing more time and opportunities for study.

The current research defines a working pattern by hours worked in a week, and in what sequence. Previously, some participants felt unable to pursue PG study owing to working pattern demands, which limited their agency and investment in additional engagements.

“I had been working predominantly shift work and I have enjoyed that now I can work from home and can slightly flex my time. Not working weekends and being able to plan more than few months in advance is also a huge change in lifestyle. Which for now is very novel.” (Emery: Email Diary)

Emery's working pattern had prevented her from planning a future; she explained how drastic changes to her working pattern would be required to balance studying, as her “days were very busy with limited spare time”. The overbearing nature of work, and desire to study, was also recalled by Hunter.

“I feel like now my life doesn't revolve around one single aspect, when previously it essentially revolved around work, either because of performance goals or crazy shifts that took up most of my time.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

“Despite spending many hours reading for classes, I feel I have more time to do and think about other things and that I'm not too tired to do or think about them, which wasn't the case before.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

Hunter's excerpts showed how work constraints spilled over into other areas of her life, taking control of any leftover time and energy. Similarly, Finley illustrated the relief of parting from an all-consuming practice.

“It gives me the opportunity to suspend for a while [...] work is not a funny thing, there are many things you have to deal with, just like endless meeting, communicating with colleague and so on [...] I could not remember how many late nights I still work in the office.” (Finley: Email Diary)

The following sub-themes are based on participants’ common working patterns. Seven participants shared a pattern with another participant, these were ‘standard’, and ‘standard with flexible hours’. While the remaining two participants identified with the ‘shift working pattern’ and ‘standard with shifts’. Within these, various roles are identified along with characteristics of the working patterns.

Patterns in the data revealed much about the participants’ lives prior to their return to study, alluding to ways that working patterns influenced participants’ daily lives, and how established rituals and behaviours continued to play out during PG study.

4.2.1.1. Situation – Role Change: Working Pattern – Standard

Finley, Jessie, and Morgan shared their contrasting professional roles, illustrating the adjustments they were making. Finley’s narrative described regaining control by becoming more independent, while Morgan implemented established behaviours to achieve self-discipline in the new setting. Not only distinct in their content, but the roles also presented different routines and rituals. The consistent responsibilities and demands of the participants showed their understanding of expectations placed on them.

“[T]his magazine requires all the journalist sit in the office from 9 to 5:30 pm, Monday to Friday. Of course, if you have to interview someone, you can apply an out-interview to your leader. The normal work time seems only 8 hours a day.” (Finley: Email Diary)

“Working as a librarian and “research workshop” teacher in an integrated school centre (ages 3-18).

Routine: Early in the morning taking the school bus and picking up children and teenagers. The trip takes around 40 minutes. Taking care of the kids on the way

to school. Special attention to smaller kids aged 3-4. After that mixed schedule of classes and library work. Classes in computer lab with kids aged 14-17 where I assist them on their research project. Library time dedicating to book organizing, addition of new collections book recommendations and stands. Lunch break on the middle of the day. Way back home on the bus, also taking care of the pupils.” (Jessie: Email Diary)

“Standard Work – Monday to Friday 08:30 to 17:30. My previous role was a recruitment resourcer for an SME business who worked with the Public Sector to provide interim IT contractors for various projects, programmes, and local authority system upgrades.” (Morgan: Email Diary)

Their roles had characteristics in common; these included encountering rigid itineraries on consecutive days during assigned hours, showing knowledge of the organisational practice and ‘how things are done here’, demonstrating clearly defined responsibilities, and awareness of their purpose and position within the workplace.

Despite the uniformity of these experiences, Finley also disclosed sometimes working “from early morning to late night” (Email Diary). She explained that she would adapt her practice when impacted by the working hours of others, emphasising her lack of autonomy. Despite the existing routine, the boundaries appeared movable by others, creating a sense of powerlessness and thus compliance.

4.2.1.2. Situation – Role Change: Working Pattern – Standard with Flexible Hours

Similarly, Arlo, Aubrey, Charlie, and Harley had also undertaken distinctive roles. The participants’ diverse work experiences were illustrated in their descriptions of context or organisation, role or position, and arrangement of working hours. The fluid nature of ‘flexible hours’ pointed to wide-ranging considerations given to balance pursuits.

“Standard work (Mon-Fri, 10-7). I worked for an Internet online education company in ****. We worked relatively standard hours, from 10 am to 12 pm, 2 pm to 7 pm, and a 2-hour lunch break at noon.” (Aubrey: Email Diary)

“My working pattern in my previous work role was standard -- from 8am to 4pm most days, sometimes 9am to 5pm. My manager was flexible on hours, as long as I worked a total of 7.5 hours per day.

Before joining ***, I worked for the ***** Government, so the organisational structure was very stratified. I was a policy analyst, and above me was my manager, and above her, a team manager.” (Arlo: Email Diary)

Participants commented on organisational structures, hierarchies and allotted responsibilities, along with the regulations accommodating different types of workers. During the current study Harley was also an agency worker, taking on temporary assignments at different organisations in changing roles. Harley detailed how this supported her to commit to alternative roles.

“This type of work requires to be quite flexible with the clients’ requirements, so everyone was very accommodating with my application to *** and even offered help and recommendation letters. When I was negotiating the contract for my new job (May 2021) I already had the offer to study at *** so my managers had agreed to be flexible with my time spent at university.” (Harley: Email Diary)

Harley added that in response to Covid-19 some organisations had become more flexible, showing consideration for its possible impact on workers.

“When I have started at the company it was Standard pattern – 9am to 5:30pm Monday to Friday. However, in the light of COVID-19 pandemic Flexible working has been implemented. The pattern still involved Monday to Friday but hours could be flexible.” (Harley: Email Diary)

“One change since the pandemic would be that we watch out for each other a bit more, making sure people are supported and not over-working” (Charlie: Email Diary)

These excerpts demonstrated the care shown by organisational cultures during this time. Charlie discussed the “recognition of other students’ needs and commitments” as unprecedented challenges influenced professional and private lives, most of which were taking place remotely. Organisational values and culture was transmitted through colleagues, influencing behaviours and relationships of workers too.

Flexibility was significant for participants like Charlie who continued to work during her part-time PG studies, although flexi-time systems appeared to be accommodated more by the workplace than the university, indicating employers’ awareness for colleagues’ needs and a willingness to provide support. Similarly, Aubrey reported that,

“Compared to many companies that have strict requirements for working hours, we do not need to punch in and record time at work, and our hours are relatively flexible, so we are free to arrange our working hours as long as we accomplish our assignments efficiently and effectively within the timetable.” (Aubrey: Email Diary)

Unlike other participants in this study, Aubrey recalled the trusting relationship between the organisation and employee. In his situation, the rules of the organisation were given, and individuals were accountable for their performance. This may have influenced his adjustment to independent practice in the academy. These experiences fostered his professional relationships, creating feelings of respect and value. Both Aubrey and Charlie’s reflections indicated that quality hours were favoured over quantity.

“Employees are generally required to be online between 10-4 (UK time) – which allows for meetings and regular contactable hours – we then make up the required number of hours around that (35 hours total for full-time). This works well as we’re a consultancy and are sometimes required to work very late or very early for deadlines and international client calls (needing to accommodate different time zones).” (Charlie: Email Diary)

Some participants autonomously structured their work, maintaining connection with and meeting the demands of their respective organisations. The flexible nature of the pattern was often mutually beneficial for the employer and employee, as reports of financial pressures and time constraints appeared in the data.

“Even before the pandemic we had a flexible approach to working hours and were able to work from home whenever we wanted. Most employees worked from home at least once a week to avoid the commute (to reduce cost, time, stress, exposure to pollution and promote a more sustainable approach to working).”
(Charlie: Email Diary)

Charlie also disclosed a preference for working at unconventional times of the day to maintain productivity.

“I’m very much not a morning person, so prefer to work later into the evening/night. I find it quieter and less distracting, as most people are offline and I can get longer stretches on ‘heads-down’, uninterrupted time.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

For Charlie, the physical work environment was not essential for task completion, and she did not rely on being amongst colleagues for identification. This approach indicated feelings of trust and allegiance in her professional relationships.

Throughout the year the flexible patterns shifted for some participants, who responded to seasonal adjustments.

“I generally tend to begin work at around 10am and will work until 6pm, but sometimes until 3am – depending on requirements. I sometimes take extended breaks/periods of non-working time in the afternoon to facilitate ‘life admin’ – such as doctors/bank appointments and outside exercise in the winter (when it gets dark early).” (Charlie: Email Diary)

“Prior to pandemic, the company has already had similar scheme in place, for example ‘Summer hours’ where you could do extra hours earlier in the week and finish earlier on Friday to enjoy the nice weather.” (Harley: Email Diary)

The participants’ continuing professional roles alongside study were facilitated by communication across settings, which helped to organise competing demands, as explained through Charlie’s use of a shared calendar. Charlie’s openness about the student role to her colleagues prevented role conflict, any clashing events, and hampering relationships. Hence, a positive spillover could occur, as she felt “able to speak both languages, use both skillsets and benefit from the experience and fluency with both” (Email Diary).

4.2.1.3. Situation – Role Change: Working Pattern – The Shift Working Pattern

From Emery’s descriptions, this pattern was primarily characterised by the notion of being on call. Where there is a continuous demand for a service, like Emery’s participation in a medical profession, workers often trade posts to ensure that duties are fulfilled. Emery indicated that although there were frequently staff on hand to enable this, there generally were not enough colleagues working simultaneously to manage the workload.

Her reflections conveyed familiarity with temporary routines, stating that,

“...my rota normally worked around a pattern of 6-12 weeks with on call shifts (long days, nights or weekends) and some regular day shifts.” (Emery: Email Diary)

“I was obviously a very small part of this organisation but often worked within relatively close-knit departments. However, I have been quite transitory in different jobs, as a training registrar the longest I have worked at a single hospital is 1 year and then you move on to the next. This means you often cannot implement much change to the organisation and have to adapt quickly.” (Emery: Email Diary)

“I rarely worked independently and was always working within a team. Often I was managing a team of people on busy shifts. We were often stretched for staff, time and resources.” (Emery: Email Diary)

Emery adapted promptly to interim schedules, each time changing colleagues, community, and setting, highlighting the inconsistencies tolerated within the pattern. Through intermittent acclimatisation, Emery was accustomed to modifying her behaviours to fit in; this former experience may have informed how she adjusted to new communities and established new relationships in the academy.

4.2.1.4. Situation – Role Change: Working Pattern – Standard with Shifts

Hunter’s description deviated from the standard, as she was required to complete work during blocks of weekdays with additional shifts over weekends; she explained that shift allocation was ‘random’.

“For 12 months my job was essentially standard work with some shift working. I worked Monday to Friday plus a day of the weekend per month. Shifts were either 7-4, 8-5 or 9-6.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

“Then for two months I worked in shifts at another company (after five weeks of training). Shift patterns were random, so I could have Tuesday off, work the days after and then only have Sunday off, for instance.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

“The schedule management team tried to keep the same time shift throughout the whole week [...] Working six days in a row wasn’t allowed, neither were we allowed to work with a gap of less than 11 hours between shifts.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

The complicated dominating shift schedule took over Hunter’s time, making it difficult to plan life outside work, likely impacting her autonomy. Upon returning to HE, she reported feeling like “more than a number on any performance record” (Email Diary), illustrating the lasting impression of her working pattern, that left Hunter with little control over her situation. At university, Hunter reported that “I felt I have a place,

and I felt good” (Interview), as she sensed she was acknowledged, she had value, and she could choose how she participated.

4.2.2. Situation – Role Change: Identity

The participants struggled to take on characteristics of a PG student role or student identity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their attempts to take on new traits, led to others falling away. However, these characteristics indicated norms of the role, clarifying poorly communicated expectations, thus reducing the stress of the situation.

The participants' situations revealed their role changes: from worker, colleague or employee, to student, and at times, both. This adjustment is presented through three sub-themes, 'trying on' as in to sense the characteristics of an identity, 'the hangover identity' representing the lasting qualities of identity, and 'future identity' meaning an identity that one is adjusting to or preparing for.

Adjusting to academic practice and a student identity ignited feelings of uncertainty and a lack of confidence; grappling with the expectations of PG study predominantly remotely, led the participants to draw on workplace knowledge to cope. This showed the liminality they felt, moving between roles. As the participants departed a working role and reached for a student role – they were simultaneously both and neither.

The participants' experiences in the workplace informed how they navigated becoming a student in positive and negative ways. While some participants contributed alternative viewpoints to classroom conversations, others sensed a misalignment of study motivations with peers, which conflicted with their assumption that peers would approach PG study with a similar level of professionalism.

4.2.2.1. Situation – Role Change: Identity – Trying On

This first sub-theme represents the participants' experiences of becoming a student, where they used workplace knowledge to carry out a PG student role. The recent memory of work drove some of them to make comparisons between the positions.

“I have found the switch from being someone who had quite a lot of responsibility for both patients and other team members to being a much more junior member of the research group quite a change to adjust to.” (Emery: Email Diary)

“I am much less sure of what I am doing and having to try and pick up completely new skills such as laboratory work. I often feel very inexperienced in my current role.” (Emery: Email Diary)

Charlie confidently contributed ‘real-world’ knowledge to classes. This continued reference indicated how she held on to strands of identity, distinguishing her from peers. Integrating existing knowledge this way, presented her identity to the cohort for renegotiation. Eventual positive feedback from peers on her expertise encouraged Charlie’s continued input and helped with interpreting student roles.

“I often share anecdotes and examples of experiences I have had/am having in my work life when I feel they may be relevant to topics we are discussing in seminars etc. I share stories about how certain industries work [...] examples of new methodologies I have used in industry to conduct research [...] I often share these in contrast to what is generally proposed or accepted as an academic approach.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

At times, Charlie imparted knowledge exhibiting her professional proficiency, a behaviour not observed in her peers.

As some participants distinguished between former and current roles, they became consumed by facets of academic practice that felt unfamiliar. Adjusting to institutional language was challenging for some as they interpreted information and study materials. This corresponded with literature reporting the obscurity surrounding autonomy, criticality, and independent practice.

The reality of returning to study created dissatisfaction and fatigue for some participants, who found the PG role to have little in common with their professional practices.

“It has been challenging – in a positive way. I’ve been describing it to people as ‘using another part of my brain’ to what I use in my work/personal life. I find myself speaking differently and feeling tired in a different way. Initially, it felt quite

tiring and a bit overwhelming on top of working full-time. I felt quite drained, physically and mentally, and I described it to friends as 'like after you go swimming and feel like you've used muscles you don't use in day-to-day life'."

(Charlie: Email Diary)

Charlie's excerpt detailed the unlearning of being and doing she had encountered, consciously pushing against known norms to break habits and to understand institutional practices.

"I had no idea what to expect going back to university after having 2 years long break. Especially because my BSc was in Neuroscience and my MSc is in Bioscience Entrepreneurship, so the nature of the degree is very different and develops completely different skills. So far, it has been disappointing because of how used to am I to the professional environment." (Harley: Email Diary)

The absence of information about PG student roles made some participants feel unprepared for study. As Harley recalled, distinctions between programme design and levels of study mystified the expectations of the university. This led to participants feeling unsure about applying existing knowledge or skills in the academic setting, as resources during transition.

Finley and Jessie expected to be accountable for their development in the academy, corresponding with the independent nature of PG study. However, the absence of clear expectations made taking ownership difficult.

"...nobody will push you unless you want to do something if you are a student."

(Finley: Email Diary)

"There are barely any similarities with working in regard of being to university - completely different thing, it's like no real schedules at university, not real, like at work." (Jessie: Email Diary)

These comments reflect the assumed level of autonomy at PG study, where individuals are motivated, disciplined, and organised learners, who can work independently of staff.

4.2.2.2. Situation – Role Change: Identity – The Hangover Identity

This sub-theme addresses how strands of the worker identity influenced the participants' approach to academic study and developing community. It is possible that the overspill of identity was influenced by remote work and study, owing to restrictions in place during the pandemic.

Some participants struggled to separate their expertise and working traits from who they were trying to be at university, displacing their former self and creating distance between their peers. While offering knowledge of the field was viewed as positive behaviour by participants, this division influenced how they felt perceived. This outlook was thought to stem from participants' implied stage of life, and their self-perception.

“I am also conscious that I am almost always the only person in the room to have conducted commercial research with people, so seek to offer my input as a way to inform and expose fellow students, so they might know the industry better – especially when considering where their careers are headed.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

“Teamwork is a very important aspect of my professional job and I am very used to producing content/presentations in fast pace but with extremely high standard. Working on group projects at uni is very opposite (especially for the non-graded assignments). Instead of having only motivated individuals as team members, here I experience a blend of characters: from very ‘on-it’ always prepared students to zero effort individuals.” (Harley: Email Diary)

Both excerpts show Charlie and Harley's assumptions about peers. They illustrate the perceived significance of their knowledge and behaviour for the development of others, overshadowing the experiences of their cohort. The participants appeared to

implement these behaviours to reclaim structure, a sense of purpose, and to feel part of the meaning created in the setting, amidst the uncertainty. It was thought that these contributions were based on what participants wished they had known, and how they wanted to be perceived, particularly by academic staff.

As the student role was adopted, connections between old and new practices supported the participants' adjustment, enabling identity renegotiation. Finley explained the perceived similarity of completing tasks across contexts, stating, "You have to read a lot of materials and then give your judgment and your opinion, and then share it with peers and tutor." (Email Diary)

Jessie's former teaching role supported him to understand how teaching and learning happened within the university, managing his responses.

"...the organizational culture in my last work was more hierarchical and has made me more aware of the little conflicts and nuances that there may be in my own department in ***. Also, the experience of working has made me more disciplined and less critical in general towards the institution. [...] I understand better the teaching role, and this makes me to have a less heated opinion on the teaching quality." (Jessie: Email Diary)

Separately, Jessie commented on the lasting psychological impact of his former practice which contributed to his "tendency to stress" (Email Diary) over university work. This profoundly influenced his outlook on adjusting to a PG role.

4.2.2.3. Situation – Role Change: Identity – Future Identity

The participants' understanding of the student role and how they carried this out, was described using comparisons with previous working situations.

Returning to study mostly provided happiness and relief. It was a chance to encounter meaningful practice and deep learning. This was drastically different from their workplaces, which were reportedly fast-paced, urgent, and responsibility ridden.

“It’s been a relief to move back to academia and take a break from the corporate environment and high-stress jobs. Although I often have the sense of urgency [...], it feels healthy to be in a more laidback environment, where investigating matters deeply is valued over rushing through a dozen tasks.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

“Studying as a student is quite different. The main purpose is to acquire as more knowledge as you can, and do not have to deal with other things which will bother you a lot. It gives you more time to focus on one thing.” (Finley: Email Diary)

The changed pace allowed the participants to be immersed in their studies. They described engaging in tasks of significance, working in supportive conditions, feeling relieved of organisational responsibilities, and becoming accountable and autonomous individuals. Finley’s return was also about developing her wellbeing and happiness, which likely influenced her outlook on the experience, and gains made in the new role.

“Overall, as a student is much happier than at work. It could be less responsibility as a student. [...] Students are only responsible for themselves. They have the choice to say no. They do not have to consider other things, such as leaders, salary and family. Their mainly ‘job’ is study. Thus, they have more chances to try the things they are really interested in.” (Finley: Email Diary)

Becoming a student again, was a familiar state for some participants, although the remote nature of study created some uncertainty. Some facets of the academy had created shock after time spent as a professional; Arlo described the ‘financial precarity’ associated with her university experience, which at this stage in life triggered more uncertainty.

“I do not have the luxury of having a stable income. I have to look at the prices at the store, and I always order the cheapest item at the restaurant. At 26, I am just as poor as I was at 18! I have to tell myself that it will pay off in the long run.” (Arlo: Email Diary)

“My experience as a student has been up and down. Sometimes I wonder if I made the right decision to return to school. I am always exhausted trying to balance school with part-time work.” (Arlo: Email Diary)

Arlo uses ‘investment’ as a metaphor to balance the conflict she felt about the financial repercussions of choosing to study again; this describes the temporary situation, the price to pay, and perceived value of her hoped-for self.

The academic community triggered culture shock in the participants as they calculated how to ‘fit in’ to the exclusive space. Venturing beyond one’s community, network, or class, can create culture shock. Morgan demonstrated the impact of shock on his felt suitability to the setting.

“Throughout undergrad most of my friends were from a similar working-class background and it was the same in the workplace. Now I’m more settled in it doesn’t bother me as much and I’ve greatly enjoyed the diversity of *** meeting people (despite being a bit older than most of my fellow students) I would never usually encounter elsewhere. Still, it was hard to shake off the impression that this level of education historically hasn’t been designed for people who come from my background.” (Morgan: Email Diary)

Morgan’s identification as a mature student “from a working-class background”, disconnected him from peers. Unable to sense how he would fit into the academic community illustrated imposter syndrome. This can stem from feeling undeserving of a role or being in a setting, unqualified in a particular position, or in Morgan’s case, unable to see themselves mirrored in their peers or surroundings, alienating them. Morgan’s lack of representation made it difficult to connect with the academy and become resituated. His understanding of higher education historically being for specific demographics, points to on-going barriers to participation, which is problematic considering the continued diversification and widening participation of PG study.

Charlie also felt different from her peers owing to her prior professional roles, influencing her study approach. Despite these distinctions, repeated interactions with peers helped her to renegotiate how and who to be.

4.2.3. Situation – Assessing the situation

The participants' assessment of becoming part of the academy during the pandemic was mixed, as evidenced in the following sub-themes. However, notably they claimed to have more control over their time and interests, and greater suitability to the pursuit of study.

The narratives comprised words like 'thrived', 'opportunity', and 'autonomy' to describe the distinctions between their roles. Several participants reinforced the timeliness of their return which facilitated adjustment, revealing triggers for their departure or former encounters with education. However, the narratives were not without acknowledgement for the positive contributions of the workplace to the personal and professional development of the participants.

"I have not really felt lost or concerned about the unstructured time that I know is often a concern when starting a PHD. I do wonder if this will change as time goes on and I may miss the structure of my previous work." (Emery: Email Diary)

"I enjoyed my previous job because it helped me become more mature and consider things more thoroughly and critically." (Aubrey: Email Diary)

"It's been 6 years since I graduated from my undergraduate degree and I have taught in higher education (part-time) in that time, but it's nice to be back on 'the other side' of the learning." (Charlie: Email Diary)

The participants' indicated that the formal structures at work contributed to their development and learning during that time. There was also a sense that the participants felt more agentic as they departed former ways of being and knowing.

4.2.3.1. Situation – Assessing the Situation – Moving In: Positive

Many of the participants approached their return to study positively, despite the uncertainty triggered by the pandemic. For some this was helped by their love for education, as discovered during their undergraduate studies. The participants also

reflected on regaining control of their time; they were mindful of how this shaped their consideration of additional pursuits.

“So far I have enjoyed the change from the workplace to higher education. The main thing that has changed for me is the autonomy over my work and working pattern.” (Emery: Email Diary)

“...being a student again makes me feel like I have control over my work. I don't need 13 signatures to make a decision on the direction of my PhD thesis. It's refreshing.” (Arlo: Email Diary)

The autonomy gained in their student roles allowed them to take control of their performance, make choices, and become more responsible for the work they were producing. This was depicted as an ‘opportunity’ - an investment in their future, their lifelong learning, and self-fulfilment.

“I value the opportunity to study full-time now. Because I can learn the expertise of my favourite field in a more detailed and comprehensive way, without the pressure of work. I will cherish this learning opportunity to prepare myself more fully for my future career.” (Aubrey: Email Diary)

“...once I found my feet readjusting to the world of academia it is a far more rewarding type of work taking in topics and subjects that you are truly passionate about” (Morgan: Email Diary)

The experiences were personalised as students indulged in study of their choice, influencing their feelings about how the return was unfolding. Aubrey and Morgan appeared motivated to participate and draw upon assets to develop their interest.

“I enjoyed the role as a student currently after the working experience because I found that I could concentrate on my studies and my interested fields deeply and comprehensively rather than thinking about different working assignments and relationship issues.” (Aubrey: Email Diary)

“The reason I left my old role was feeling of stagnation and not wanting to take on a Sales role and going back to Education has certainly been a refreshing experience.” (Morgan: Email Diary)

Hunter’s earlier encounters with education set her expectation for transition.

“In the past school was an environment where I thrived and felt I was doing something meaningful. It’s made me very happy to see that sensation hasn’t changed. I found it very easy to assimilate into ***’s culture, as I have always felt at home in an academic environment.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

Hunter’s adjustment to the PG role was likely informed by her recently obtained understanding of higher education, concentrating transition. Similarly, Arlo’s adjustment was helped by the minimal temporal distance from previous study; she expressed managing the academic workload and what she felt was expected of her. Others however may have had to seek out relevant information not readily available to them.

“Since I was an MA student not too long ago, being a student is still fresh in my mind. The transition was fairly easy. I know the kind of routine I need to focus on my academic work.” (Arlo: Email Diary)

Some participants indicated having regained a sense of purpose, something they misplaced at work. Hunter shared “I feel much more appreciated as a student than I ever did at work” (Email Diary). She conveyed the significance of feeling valued and recognised as an individual contributor, while recognising the importance of interconnection too. This appeared largely owing to the absence of affinity with her colleagues.

“I think it’s true most people lose their sense of purpose and perspective once they step into the corporate world. Most big corporations, like the ones I worked for, have a very cliquey and cultish mentality, which they have to encourage, because that’s the only way they’re able to retain staff.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

Hunter's reflections point to the significance of mattering. Feeling seen and cared about likely impressed on how determined she felt to persevere, as well as her dedication to and affiliation with the student role.

4.2.3.2. Situation – Assessing the situation – Moving in: Negative

Departing the workplace, some participants had expectations of the university and their studies. These led to a negative outlook, informed by intermittent interactions with peers and academic staff, and remote study.

Harley indicated that she struggled with the poor organisation of courses and modules, which created issues with time management, planning, and organising workloads.

“Another aspect that causes me difficulties is *** organisation. Having been used to professional environment, the contrast with teachers and admin teams is huge. Timetable and group organisation has been always late and with mistakes. [...] the part-time group has not been organised [...] we are thrown into full time cohort and share the same timetable and deadlines. [...] Considering how much the degree costs me, this has been very disappointing.” (Harley: Email Diary)

The misinformed schedule led to uncertainty and lost opportunities to participate in learning, which was problematic for part-time students attempting to juggle competing demands.

Harley's traits separated her from peers, but she remained unwilling to negotiate. Her motivation to participate in group work declined because of poor interactions, leading to disengagement and a reluctance to collaborate.

“Now, approaching the end of the term, I got used to it [...] Only because I am being strategic with how much effort I put in certain assignments (for example – if the project is non-graded it is not worth my effort to try to motivate someone who clearly doesn't want to do it). For the individual assignments, I do feel I am being

way more productive comparing to my BSc. I produce content way faster and to a higher standard.” (Harley: Email Diary)

In addition to limited conducive interactions with peers, Harley explained how as an international student, she sometimes encountered language barriers in the classroom.

“I don’t come originally from the UK so I have also felt as the outsider here. Despite coming from the European country, I always felt UK is a bit different, and it was a tough transition at first. I have started this degree having lived here for 5 years already and being used to the teaching system as I have done my bachelors at ***. I feel the cultural differences affect the experience at the university and somewhat the learning. Coming to the UK, you need to have some level of English, usually at C level. However, the British English has so many local variants, including accents and phrases characteristic for regions that till this day I find myself not understanding certain references or wording. Attending international degree at unis like ***, I feel the teachers should pay more attention to the choice of words and making sure they speak clearly. In the past, it has stopped me from asking questions because I was afraid of not understanding the answer. Nowadays it doesn’t happen to me but I can see it being a problem for others.” (Harley: Email Diary)

Harley argued that greater focus on communication within pedagogy is required to overcome barriers to understanding for international students. She illustrated the assumption that students would fit in to the classroom community and discussion without any consideration for adjustments required. That these interactions prevented her from participating is notable for PG provision, particularly as cohorts continue to diversify. Despite Harley’s experience with culture shock upon arriving in the UK five years prior, little investment has been made to support individuals participating in study for short periods of time.

Jessie found blended study particularly disappointing, which was used because of the pandemic. This inspired reflection on his earlier experiences with remote teaching and learning.

“...although I was also working like in a blended environment, it was actually only my students because I was a teacher that were taking blended classes. I was a teacher teaching them and I didn't have to be online someday [...] It was difficult to recognise and I saw my students like I thought about my students in school when they had to approach the blended thing.” (Jessie: Email Diary)

Jessie's remote PG studies helped him understand his former students' situation better, as he recalled being their teacher. As he attempted to become more involved in his studies and build connections, he sensed the challenges his pupils had faced.

4.2.4. Situation – Perceived Duration: Moving Through

The perceived duration of transition was informed by the expectations (set out at work) and uncertainties (often pandemic related) the participants felt. The reality of returning to study caused confusion, but they weren't without hope, so they sought clarity. The participants also encountered doubt and disbelief, which could only be relieved by perseverance.

'Time' was referred to in different ways throughout the research. Jessie struggled to keep track of time during his studies, while Charlie claimed that in time she would achieve balance between her roles, whereas Arlo considered her continued commitment to education in the longer term.

The confusion and disorientation depicted by Jessie created a drawn-out transition. Jessie's excerpt illustrated the notion of time passing them by, where he stood apart from the new situation, looking in from the periphery.

"I have not entirely processed my job loss and I have the feeling that my master studies are happening too fast [...] my sense of time is acting weirdly during this last months, and I have the feeling that I have been here for two weeks, when actually its already November." (Jessie: Email Diary)

Jessie held on to strands of his work identity; the return to study had given him little time to grieve a former self, creating difficulty with connecting to the PG student role. This may have triggered a liminal state, as he felt unable to identify a vision of an academic self. This adjustment may have been stressful and overwhelming in the unfamiliar situation.

"It felt easier after the first few weeks, once I was 'in the swing' of it. You learn the rhythms and patterns of study and how to structure the other aspects of your working and personal life around it. For instance, I have a seminar on Thursday morning, for which there's usually an hour of lectures to watch, 3-4 papers to read and a group discussion & activity to organise before midday on the Wednesday before. I learnt that watching the lectures and doing the pre-reading on a Sunday was best for me and then having the group discussion about it on a Tuesday

afternoon tends to fit the other students on the module too, so I try not to schedule work commitments on a Tuesday afternoon.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

In time, Charlie adapted to balance her roles, this was helped by familiarisation with academic practice, the behaviour and responses of peers, and grasping the expectations of her commitments. Learning about the norms of the role, enabled Charlie’s student identity to develop, supporting ‘multimembership’.

Some participants struggled to adjust as classes were cancelled due to university strikes.

“...my anxiety was reinforced with the series of teacher strikes this year. If I continue to work in academia, I may never escape this feeling of financial precarity and exhaustion.” (Arlo: Email Diary)

Students faced less class time with peers (in-person and remotely), limited communication with staff, and increased independent study, which may have hampered acculturation. Beyond the immediate impact of the strikes, Arlo considered her participation in academia in the future, drawing out her assessment of the situation.

4.2.5. Situation – Assessment: Working from Home

The participants experienced remote study upon returning to HE during the Covid-19 pandemic, as such, they shared the perceived benefits and barriers. Assessments of working from home were mixed. Despite the necessary migration to remote study during the pandemic, for some, this involuntary change limited the control felt over their pursuit, likely conflicting with expectations of the experience.

The experience of remote learning was tantamount to working from home, for some participants. Others had encountered a remote working style prior to the government guidelines implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was telling of how they managed, prepared for, and responded to the situation. For participants continuing to work alongside study, this provided flexibility to meet the competing demands. Counter to this, several participants determined that the virtual experience hindered opportunities to connect with others and contribute during classes.

“Although I think it’s important for the university experience for students to be on campus, reality is we’re still living in abnormal times. The blended learning approach has allowed me to live a full academic experience, while remaining relatively safe in largely unsafe times.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

“...I didn’t like the idea of having to return to an office five days a week, when the pandemic had proven it was possible to work just as efficiently from home.”
(Hunter: Email Diary)

Some participants were sympathetic of the ‘abnormal times’, which were beyond the control of any individual or university. They understood the practicalities of the blended mode and recognised the university’s attempts to avoid disruption to study.

4.2.5.1. Situation – Assessment: Working from Home – Positive

The benefits of studying remotely were significant to those continuing their working roles, supporting the ‘multimembership’ of some participants, reducing levels of exclusion from their pursuits.

“Blended study made it easier for me to join classes as I didn’t have to take time off work to commute.” (Harley: Email Diary)

“The blended approach has been HUGEY useful. My schedule doesn’t always allow for travel time between work meetings and university commitments, so having the option to almost always join sessions remotely has been incredibly useful.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

Remote study helped the students achieve a better work-life balance, supporting them to address their unique needs, and demands of their memberships. In this study, ‘multimembership’ could mean being a student and a colleague/worker; it is also possible that the participants were ‘multimembers’ of families, friendships, or societies, adding to roles and demands taken on.

Technology supported the participants to cope with conflicting tasks, like concerns about financial precarity and losing time moving between contexts. Fundamentally, it aimed to avoid disruption to learning, keeping it inclusive, considering the lived realities of students.

Some participants felt able to identify with their student role despite the absence of a physical campus. The ability to switch between roles and identity characteristics remotely benefitted students whose study was reliant on work.

4.2.5.2. Situation – Assessment: Working from Home – Negative

Contrary to the positive feedback on remote study, some participants recalled limited opportunity for discussion, interaction, and community building.

Harley said, “it made it more difficult to meet classmates” (Email Diary), indicating her reliance on the physical campus for bringing people together, connecting with the academic community, forming bonds and relationships. This also speaks to facilitation in virtual spaces, and how competent or prepared staff were to encourage this. Similarly, Jessie reported, “it breaks the engagement with people and professors” (Email Diary). The virtual environment was simultaneously separate from

and situated within home and work due to the pandemic, but also from the university. It blurred boundaries, roles, and tasks, with the potential to merge identities too. In virtual spaces, the responsibility to interact with others was moved to the participants, although this was not always achievable given the structure of sessions.

“I felt I lost a lot of conversations [...] I faced a lot of very cold social and human experiences because of the blended. I felt lonely at some points and pointless at some point.” (Jessie: Email Diary)

Arlo claimed that her role and tasks were situated; former experiences with the university campus influenced her engagement with studies. This challenged the participants to apply themselves in different ways.

“I do feel that I am learning a lot less when I am not forced to go into class every week. I dream of my undergrad, pre-covid life, when I had to go to class every day and felt so much more involved in the learning process.” (Arlo: Email Diary)

The limited opportunities to use new knowledge in online settings impressed on how Jessie interacted with the subject and his peers. This highlighted the limitations of the environment on social aspects of study. He suggested “...let's focus on the discussion, the environment, a lot of things that goes just with the content, you know.” (Email Diary)

Issues with technical equipment created barriers to remote study, literally breaking engagement. Charlie relied on technology for immersion in multiple commitments, demonstrating the inclusive and exclusive potential of the digital classroom.

“Technical glitches cause issues, but the dynamic in digital classrooms is also very different. It's kind of limited, communication isn't as free-flowing. There aren't the nice nuances of more 'real' human interaction – such as nodding at each other, catching someone rolling their eyes, side glances at personal jokes etc. Digital classrooms feel more formal and less well-rounded as an experience. I feel that these social learning factors felt us to know each other better, build relationships (extra important when the university stresses that networking is a

top reason for doing a post-grad qualification), and cement knowledge (it's difficult to discern different learnings when you're sat at home, in the same place all the time – movement helps us to differentiate and remember)." (Charlie: Email Diary)

Like Arlo, Charlie also associated knowledge with environments. Exchanging information with peers helped solidify understanding of taught content. Charlie indicated that by moving between spaces and altering the interactions held within, she could call to action different characteristics of her identities and roles; this captured activity in neatly assigned boundaries.

The students struggled getting to know peers and interacting with their academic community, as the digital classroom lacked opportunities for casual and authentic connections. The participants wanted to respond and react to one another, rather than simply receiving knowledge imparted by staff.

4.2.6. Situation – Remembering the Undergraduate Experience

The participants reflected on earlier experiences with HE, revealing how this had informed their expectations of returning to study, and studying during Covid-19. This exhibited the participants' preparedness for the change, and the resources they drew on to cope.

“...my work in undergraduate level was still to a decent standard but I worked in much more sporadic fashion in fits and starts whereas for my master's I have no trouble fully setting up a daily schedule, keeping to a healthy sleeping pattern during the week etc. which I feel has been greatly beneficial.” (Morgan: Email Diary)

Morgan maintained a framework for structuring time that he previously lacked during his undergraduate degree. This helped with organising workloads and feeling in control, allowing him to compartmentalise pursuits. This was conducive to the independent academic practice he faced which blurred boundaries. Arlo also found that the temporal closeness of studying enabled her to sustain knowledge of the institutional practice, helping her to structure time too.

“Since I was an MA student not too long ago, being a student is still fresh in my mind. The transition was fairly easy. I know the kind of routine I need to focus on my academic work.” (Arlo: Email Diary)

The evolving demographic of students influenced Morgan's feelings about participating in his studies and relating to peers. While he sensed the benefits of studying with students “I would never usually encounter”, there was initial difficulty in settling in. Morgan claimed that, “Throughout undergrad most of my friends were from a similar working-class background and it was the same in the workplace” (Email Diary). This noticeably impacted his feelings about sharing an experience with them.

4.3. Self

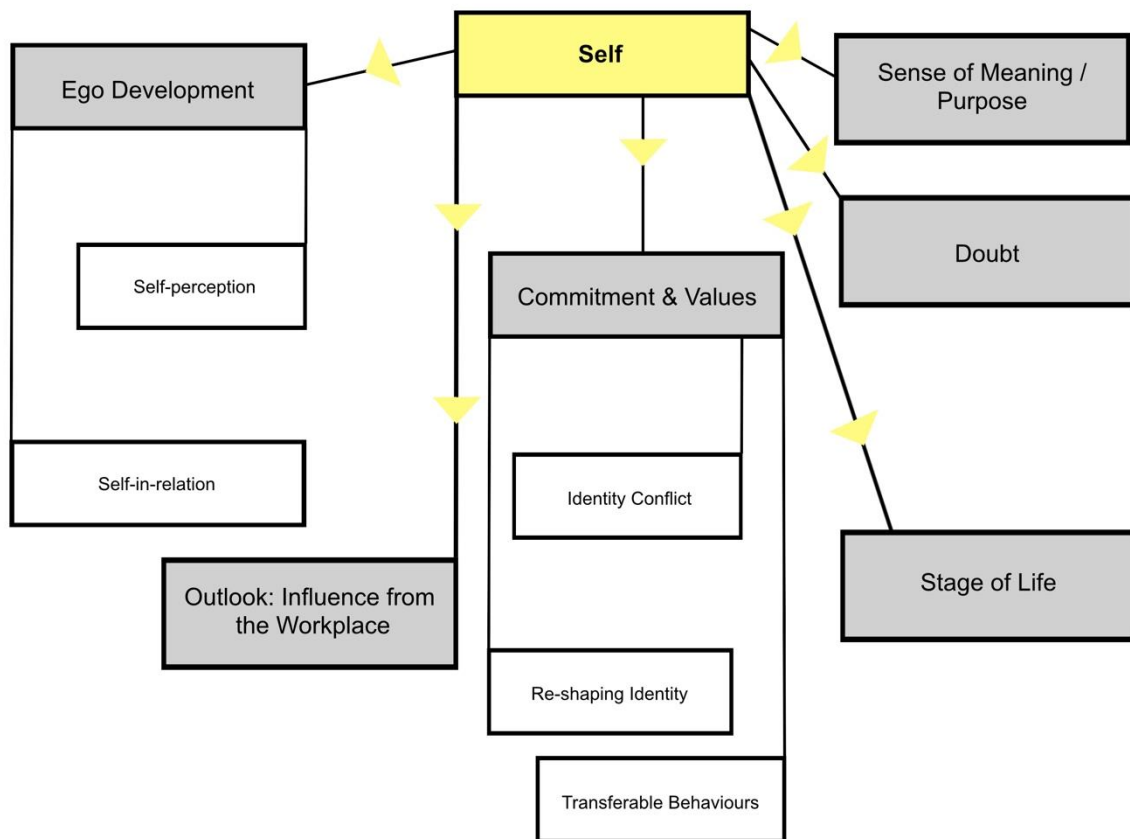


Fig. 5 – Findings: Themes and sub-themes pertaining to participants' self

4.3.1. Self - Ego Development

Ego development was a prominent theme influenced by the work and study contexts, which were sometimes the same space. Participants' views of themselves in the new setting were apparent through the attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours they projected, sometimes influenced by peers and academic staff. This theme explores the participants' desire for acceptance and whether they could become autonomous learners by calling on workplace skillsets. These characteristics appeared to impress upon acculturation and relationship formation, as revealed in the two sub-themes 'self-perception' and 'self-in-relation'.

The participants' views of their expertise in comparison to their peers' was notable. While some expressed feeling like imposters, others implemented their knowledge to stand out. The workplace had built confidence in some participants to articulate their

knowledge, making evident their contribution to the setting. The participants were aware of having developed since their previous studies, and appreciated the skills acquired along the way. Performing in this way helped the PG students to feel more equal to academic staff. The feeling and length of transition was likely influenced by the approaches taken by the participants to stand out or fit in.

4.3.1.1. Self – Ego Development – Self-perception

The participants' self-perception in the academy was influenced by how they participated in their studies. Contrasting behaviour to peers lead to assumptions about how they were being perceived.

“I do however get quite self-conscious about constantly interjecting with my opinion. I get paranoid that I’m dominating conversation or over-representing my area of expertise in proportion to others. It hasn’t stopped me from sharing my experience, but I am trying to be more conscientious when I do. I get paranoid that people are sick of hearing my voice and think I’m arrogant.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

“I think I found myself more mature to speak about literature, science or things like that in a more relaxed way with my peers in an environment outside the market logics.” (Jessie: Email Diary)

Charlie and Jessie’s contributions in the academy were shaped by time in the workplace, where their knowledge and confidence had been enriched prior to returning. Affirmation from the workplace led to confident articulation amongst peers where they may feel their knowledge is superior. These interactions, while clarifying their suitability to the setting, presented obvious distinctions within the cohort.

Charlie’s insecurities about over-contributing indicated untimely affirmation during her studies, mystifying the role she played during classes. A lack of initial feedback emphasised feelings of liminality, offering little clarity about the new identity she was moving towards. This proved significant for participants moving in from the periphery.

4.3.1.2. Self – Ego Development – Self-in-relation

Returning to the academy (albeit in various modes), the participants recalled how their relationships with peers stemmed from perceptions of their contributions.

“This may be partly imposter syndrome or just the tension of being a little more extroverted in a group of anthropology students who frequently and generally tend to be more introverted.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

“I have been told multiple times by my fellow students that my anecdotes and contributions are hugely useful and interesting. They ‘bring the subject to life’ and add some context about how it’s done ‘in the real world’. A few lecturers have also asked me to offer and contribute my opinion.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

“I feel that I can address professors in a more equal and mature way. I don’t see them anymore as I don’t know adults or something like this. I feel myself an adult, I don’t know if it has to do with work being some kind of rite of passage.” (Jessie: Email Diary)

Charlie and Jessie explained how relationships with academic staff confirmed that their contributions mattered. Charlie relied on others for reassurance, as she continued sharing knowledge; this provided entry and acceptance into the community. Eventual approval reduced feelings of dominance, although more timely intervention might have supported adjustment to situated norms earlier on.

Returning to the academy, Jessie felt that distinctions between them and staff had become fewer, changing how he communicated with and related to them. His background and relevant expertise may also have helped discover commonalities.

4.3.2. Self – Outlook: Influence from the Workplace

The participants' approaches to academic assignments and adjustment to the student role was influenced by learnt behaviours in the workplace, these traits influenced their experience in positive and negative ways. Their outlook may have also been informed by perceived control over the change, and how responsive or resilient they are to change; this was likely impacted by the on-going and changing guidance provided to universities on Covid-19.

The attitudes of some participants' stemmed from the urgency and former pressures felt at work, leading to high expectations and demands of the experience. Formerly, this approach helped Hunter to meet goals, and it continued to motivate her in the academy too. Nevertheless, her focus on assessed academic competence appeared to limit her holistic development.

“I feel like I still carry in me a lot of the competitiveness and unforgiveness I learnt in those jobs, especially towards myself. If I get anything below a “distinction”, my instinct is to insult myself, question my intelligence and compare myself to my peers. I’m slowly learning to accept myself and constantly reminding myself I am more than a number on any performance record.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

The lasting impact of workplace interactions had hampered Hunter's self-belief. However, making comparisons with peers was common amongst the participants, as some maintained their competitive edge. This appeared in Harley's reflection on collaborative work at the university, stating,

“The degree involves mostly group work (I would say 80% of workload) and I find it frustrating to work with student who has just finished their BSc and have zero work experience.” (Harley: Email Diary)

Some participants reported feeling misaligned with peers owing to earlier workplace learning, while others used this knowledge to their advantage, facilitating their integration into their programme. This asset helped them to connect with course content, decode the language of the academy, and understand PG expectations.

“My experience as a policy analyst has helped me in my anthropology methods module, specifically the class in which we learned about Participatory Scenario Development. While other, younger students had difficulty understanding the concept, I felt my previous experience in the policy world has benefited my understanding. I could apply my first-hand experience to abstract scenarios.”
(Arlo: Email Diary)

“...elements from my previous career as a public servant marry well with graduate life, such as organisational skills and a good work ethic (writing professional emails, cold calling, networking, etc.).” (Arlo: Email Diary)

Although established skills exhibited the participants' suitability to the context, confirming their competence in the field, these also created a barrier to connecting with their new network.

4.3.3. Self – Commitment and Values

This theme looks at the commitment and values, and consequently the behaviours and characteristics of participants in the new setting, comprising virtual and in-person environments. Three sub-themes were created to explore behaviour, ‘identity conflict’, ‘re-shaping identity’, and ‘transferable behaviours’. These speak to the participants’ dedication to roles or strands of identity, through which the perceived usefulness of traits can be explored.

‘Identity conflict’ addresses the use of workplace traits for new tasks and scenarios; this revealed how participants developed relationships and views of others upon returning. ‘Re-shaping identity’ details the behavioural adjustments made to satisfy the requirements of a student role. While initially encountering conflict with their ways of being in the new setting, the participants discovered ways to cope with the change. Finally, ‘transferable behaviours’ determined which characteristics could be upheld and implemented to their advantage during transition.

4.3.3.1. Self – Commitment and Values – Identity Conflict

The participants considered how their views of individuals and university activities were informed by the workplace. Former implemented behaviours and accepted expectations justified their views. Noticeably, experiences with colleagues had influenced some participants’ expectations of roles in the new situation, like Hunter who compared the performance of university staff with their own in the professional setting.

“I find it quite bizarre when someone (lecturers, colleagues, etc.) take hours to reply to an email, because at work, anything longer than two minutes to acknowledge a message was seen as rude or could even affect performance.”

(Hunter: Email Diary)

Hunter explored this from two angles, as the sender and the receiver of a message. She considered the repercussions of this behaviour at work, and from the perspective of a student lacking information because of the delayed response. This

highlights the clarity needed regarding institutional roles, outlining what to expect from the relationships within this setting.

Not dissimilarly, some participants found their expectations of working with peers were misaligned with reality. Coming from the workplace, some participants were shocked to find that PG students had different motivations, not least compatible skillsets.

“The lectures have been stimulating and I have been learning new things. However, some of those modules are attended by undergraduate students and the difference in experience is noticeable. Recently, I had to write an essay with 3 other undergraduate students, and it was truly dreadful. The differences in approach were significant. Two of them barely did any work, didn’t feel like taking responsibility for any parts of discussion – basically didn’t collaborate at all. This has been a massive difference to me comparing to professional environment where everyone takes responsibility for their work.” (Harley: Email Diary)

Harley used her competence in managing projects and contributing subject knowledge to her advantage in the new setting. However, the frustrating lack of accountability expressed by peers likely impressed on how conducive she viewed group work to her studies, also shaping her views of them. While Harley’s approach may have scaffolded learning for her peers, it may also have overshadowed her less experienced classmates, excluding both parties from the experience.

Adjustment to academic practice was drawn-out for participants struggling to understand and implement academic language. This exclusive language contrasted with former roles, creating barriers to accessing meaning.

“Term 1 I have finished two essays. After uploading my draft, I initially thought that the essay was much more challenging than my work task. That is mainly because I have not written essays for more than seven years, and academic thinking, which is the most essential thing in essays, I struggle to find them. My previous report usually needs to be descriptive and try to be vivid and attract readers to go on reading. But essays, which require more critical thinking, will

conflict with the way I used to be. Tutors advise me that I have to give more inspection and perception.” (Finley: Email Diary)

“It was more striking than the move from A-Level to Undergrad and I always felt like the academic language was hard to overcome in comparison to the more relaxed working-class office environment I’d just come from. It can feel like a class-based barrier which is something I’ve only felt for the first time since moving back into Education.” (Morgan: Email Diary)

Unfamiliarity with the PG student role meant that situated practices often felt exclusionary, preventing Morgan and Finley from developing new behaviours that kept their work traits distinct from their cohort. Uncertainty about developing writing skills and accessing meaning isolated them from the study experience, so that they sensed difference and doubt. Commenting on how she was supported to adjust to academic practice, Finley stated,

“Feedback, feedback, the more feedback. Feedback with the tutor, the peer and myself. Comparing different learning status and then find the problems and then modify them.” (Finley: Email Diary)

Feedback helped Finley to understand how she was doing, offering insight regarding academic practice or her participation in learning, and how she was adjusting to the norms of the setting. This clarification could provide reassurance to the student, impressing on the strength of her psychological resources.

4.3.3.2. Self – Commitment and Values – Re-shaping Identity

The participants drew upon knowledge and characteristics of their professional roles, identifying the changes required to accommodate the student role, to support their immersion in the pursuit.

Charlie, who endured a professional role simultaneously, explained how she accomplished ‘multimembership’ by making room in her day-to-day itineraries for alternative tasks.

“I have settled into the pattern of work and study, with the ability to change mental gears to address both types of work in the space of the same day. A key aspect of this is to create clear boundaries – being non-contactable to either whilst the other is in progress (turning off notifications, using different notebooks, different Chrome accounts etc.)” (Charlie: Email Diary)

By creating symbolic divisions of belonging between her pursuits, Charlie assigned objects and activities to each, which was occasionally complicated by remote study as some aspects of her distinctive practices remained the same. She explained how some taught sessions conflicted with working hours, despite their benefit to her professional trajectory. Charlie gradually acknowledged the spillover of her pursuits, which prompted her to “chose a small notebook for university work so it can more easily be carried alongside my other notebooks and laptops” (Email diary). It is possible that Charlie considered the semantics of these objects and their assigned spaces, to help manage the relationships within. Assigning accounts and tools to roles revealed her strategies for avoiding role conflict. Cultivating duties this way demonstrated how the workplace had prepared her to manage time and strike a balance. This helped to meet contrasting expectations while also feeling fulfilled; gradual integration of a student identity helped this.

“Largely I have become more acceptant of not being able to give 100% to either all the time. Whereas I would usually attend every optional lecture, read every additional text, work extra hours at my job to exceed expectations, I’ve realised that this isn’t sustainable. I can do just as objectively ‘well’ by limiting myself to what is required and have a better quality of life as a result. This has been a journey of personal development as well as a realisation on how best to live the hybrid working-student life.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

Reflecting on her adjustment from worker to student and the influence of her outlook on transition, Hunter recalled,

“It did not take me long to establish a working method and things started flowing shortly after. At times I found my course very demanding, but in a way that was

fair and encouraging. I felt generally very motivated and willing to take part in activities at ***.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

“Compared to past work cultures I have dealt with, *** has been a breath of fresh air and, unlike those work cultures, I identify with its values.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

While not working and studying simultaneously, Hunter and Morgan still felt the influence of earlier roles on their adjustment. Morgan brought a cultural philosophy to his studies that he sought in peers; his ideas about participation may have led to an unconscious dismissal of alternative opportunities and communities to take part in.

“The combination of being able to have a laugh and not take things too seriously but achieving good results at the same time has been very in tune with my philosophy and an aspect of personality I’d be keen to keep throughout my time back in education.” (Morgan: Email Diary)

Morgan’s identification with the new setting relied on discovering aligned values, or a shared philosophy. For some, departing the workplace had created expectations of community, while others discovered their preference upon realising the change. Connecting with the setting was significant as participants sought a sense of belonging, granting access to shared norms and behaviours of their peers.

4.3.3.3. Self – Commitment and Values – Transferable Behaviours

The participants described the bridges they had built between the workplace and university to enrich their development, explaining that established cultures and ways of being had influenced their approach to community and relationship building. Finally, they revealed how their knowledge about structuring time and organising assignments helped them keep up with competing deadlines and modules simultaneously, as they prepared for a pursuit of lifelong learning.

“I found that being a teacher helped me gain many practical skills and experiences which can be applied to my postgraduate studies; at the same time,

being a student allowed me to explore deep the pedagogy and educational field with solid theoretical foundation and academic reflection.” (Aubrey: Email Diary)

“Last term, I had an essay assignment exploring one of the learning theories into self experiences with positioning myself in the essay. After reflecting on my teaching experiences, I studied collaborative learning in the primary school context based on my previous working experiences. Therefore, the teaching experiences gave me a lot of ideas and possible titles to help me write the essay and gain a deeper understanding of the academic theory during my study with previous practical experiences.” (Aubrey: Email Diary)

“I feel like coming from professional background my attitude to assignments has been more structured, and often commercial knowledge (related to degree I study) benefited me in the class.” (Harley: Email Diary)

The interconnectedness of Aubrey and Harley’s practices helped recontextualise real-world experiences in a critical setting. Their understanding of theory beyond the academy likely explained “conflicts and nuances” (Jessie: Email Diary) that existed when ideas were explored across different contexts.

Charlie reflected on her workplace culture and the experience of working and studying during a pandemic; this revealed the caring framework relied upon during their return to HE.

“Approaching group work activities with sensitivity and compassion. Being aware that each person has their own lives to accommodate, so one must make an effort to find solutions and meeting times that work for everybody. Also watching out to make sure everyone is doing OK – supporting each other and looking out for each other’s wellbeing. Ensuring the health and happiness of the ‘work force’ is key to successful work.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

These behaviours supported Charlie to become more knowledgeable of peers, where she discovered the frequency of ‘multimembership’. She illustrated how modelling sensitivity shaped the relationships supporting her transition.

Almost all the participants reported that time management skills acquired in the workplace acted as coping mechanisms in the academy. Charlie explained how this balanced her roles.

“I’m used to juggling multiple projects at once, so have to regularly assess my workload and prioritise what’s most urgent or necessary. I’ve also learnt the benefits of planning ahead and proactively managing my time, to ensure that tasks are performed in the optimum way.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

Access to information about the full length of their programme helped the participants meet competing deadlines and participate in additional activities. Hunter shared her experience of travelling abroad during her master’s.

“I recently (successfully) applied to go abroad in June to do research for my dissertation and I think I was only able to submit my application on time because I was very proactive, sending follow-up emails when I didn’t get a reply, chasing my supervisor or the admin office for signatures and paperwork.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

Some participants described how professional experiences had helped them become more proactive, organised, and mature; this shift is detailed by Jessie. Finley also reflected this, explaining how familiarity with the situation helped her understand and adjust to meet deadlines.

“The previous workplace is kind of cultural company with huge workload, which pushes me to tackle my work as soon as possible to avoid the situation that I will be punished by my leader. It impacts my habit, no matter during my work or in my daily life a lot. I’m kind of lazy person in natural, and always leave all kinds of things until the final DDL to do them. Obviously, this kind of pattern brings me too much ‘surprise’ when it comes to the final. After work for several years, I changed it.” (Finley: Email Diary)

Support from colleagues initially helped Aubrey adjust to his professional practice. Communicating his professional and pastoral needs, he developed strategies to prevent overwhelm and stress.

“My previous job involved many team projects, which taught me how to work better with others and plan my time and learn to have a clear planning and goal orientation. When I was working, I was the youngest employee in our department, so when I encountered some problems I didn't understand, I would communicate with others in time to improve the efficiency and share instead of being anxious and feeling distressed by myself. This has taught me to take the initiative to communicate and interact with others, share with each other and make friends.”
(Aubrey: Email Diary)

Aubrey received greater support and valuable bonds with colleagues by revealing vulnerabilities and insecurities at work. His colleagues' awareness of these created a tailored experience of workplace learning, showing their care for his contribution. This initiative demonstrates the value of early intervention to ensure that a person is not struggling alone and can make use of available resources.

4.3.4. Self – Stage of Life

Although the participants did not reveal their age or other significant life events, that they had completed a bachelor's degree and carried out a professional role for a minimum of one year, offered some indication of the experiences informing their return to study. With information about age however, commentary about behaviour and development may have been offered.

Jessie explicitly reflected on perceptions of PG study held by him and his peers. His awareness of valuable opportunities exclusively available in HE was not something his peers seemed to recognise yet.

“I think the most important thing of all is that I understood more where I was. When I was in university after work and I saw these contrasts with my other like classmates because at some point I seen them that they weren't on this really understanding the privilege they had when they were studying about, for example, discussing literature, things like that in a free way, in a free space where you can really express your opinion.” (Jessie: Email Diary)

“I felt they had an obsession to be at work at some point and that they were like all the time thinking about what was good for their grade or something like this - where they didn't see the huge privilege of sitting in a room and discussing freely a paper [...] I know I have a life ahead of that which is not bad because workspace has it's very good things.” (Jessie: Email Diary)

Contrasting Jessie's former and current academic experiences, he claimed to be more present this time around, understanding the significance of institutional practice and the context-contained events and opportunities. The developmental nature of these situations afforded them space to expand perspectives.

Jessie approached his trajectory differently having already employed his academic knowledge beyond the university context; this offered him a confidence his peers may not have felt yet. For him, PG study appeared more for self-fulfilment than for enriching prospects, although his peers' alternate rationale may have justified their style of engagement. Showing little consideration for the significance of a PG

qualification beyond the academy, likely moderated the pressure placed on participating in his studies.

4.3.5. Self – Doubt

Doubt became evident in the participants' outlook on their situations. Lack of confidence was conveyed through proactive behaviour and seeking affirmation, their need to be resilient, and uncertainty about their purpose. Some participants expressed self-belief and assurance in their expertise, but Hunter felt insecure about sharing her knowledge, which created concerns about how competent she would appear in the new environment.

“It made me question impostor syndrome [...] like, I shouldn't be here. What am I doing? And so, I've always felt very comfortable in Academia and studying. But those moments made me think I must somehow have fooled *** into offering me a place. I don't know how I did it, but I did, and so it made me feel a bit insecure in my role as a student.

I've just learned to accept that I won't always get the best grades, and I'll have those moments of feeling I could have done a better job. But it's normal for everyone. It doesn't mean that I'm a fraud. So now I feel like, Yeah, I've come to accept my role as a student, someone who's learning, but without feeling I'm less.” (Hunter: Interview)

Hunter was not alone in feeling challenged by her self-perception in the new context, as Charlie also expressed earlier. What separated these two encounters, was Hunter's scepticism about the quality of her knowledge and readiness to participate in PG study, while Charlie's apparent competence sometimes meant overshadowing peers.

Hunter's data documented her evolving perceptions of returning to study, as she viewed the experience as a process and opportunity rather than a chance to showcase established knowledge, gradually reducing her felt doubt.

4.3.6. Self – Sense of Meaning / Purpose

‘Sense of meaning / purpose’ unpicked how the participants were made to feel in their situations, by relationships and interactions, and through the tasks and practices set out. The on-going pandemic may have also shaped how these experiences played out. This was predominantly determined by the uncontrolled responses of others to the participants’ contributions, creating a negative outlook as they received little affirmation from the academic community.

Transition created emotional turmoil, as observed in Jessie who described the experiences of working and studying differently. Importantly, he referred to ‘mattering’, which illustrated how he felt perceived and valued in a student role.

“When I worked, I felt way more control and the pressure and the tensions and at the same time, I felt way more relevant as a person that matters and whose work matter.” (Jessie: Email Diary)

“Contrast when I start in university [...] I felt that in one side I was not being much, like that the work I did wasn’t that important.” (Jessie: Email Diary)

The pressure Jessie felt to complete assignments in the workplace showed his impact on organisational goals. Their excerpt indicated that this was needed, likely impressing on his motivation to persevere, leading to feeling seen. Feedback in the workplace implied that someone cared about what he was doing. This contrasted with his studies, where he practiced mostly independently. Jessie liked to feel that he was serving a purpose, and that he contributed to something that mattered, but he lacked reassurance of this in academia. This appeared to create uncertainty about how he was doing or progressing, and if he was managing transition.

4.4. Support

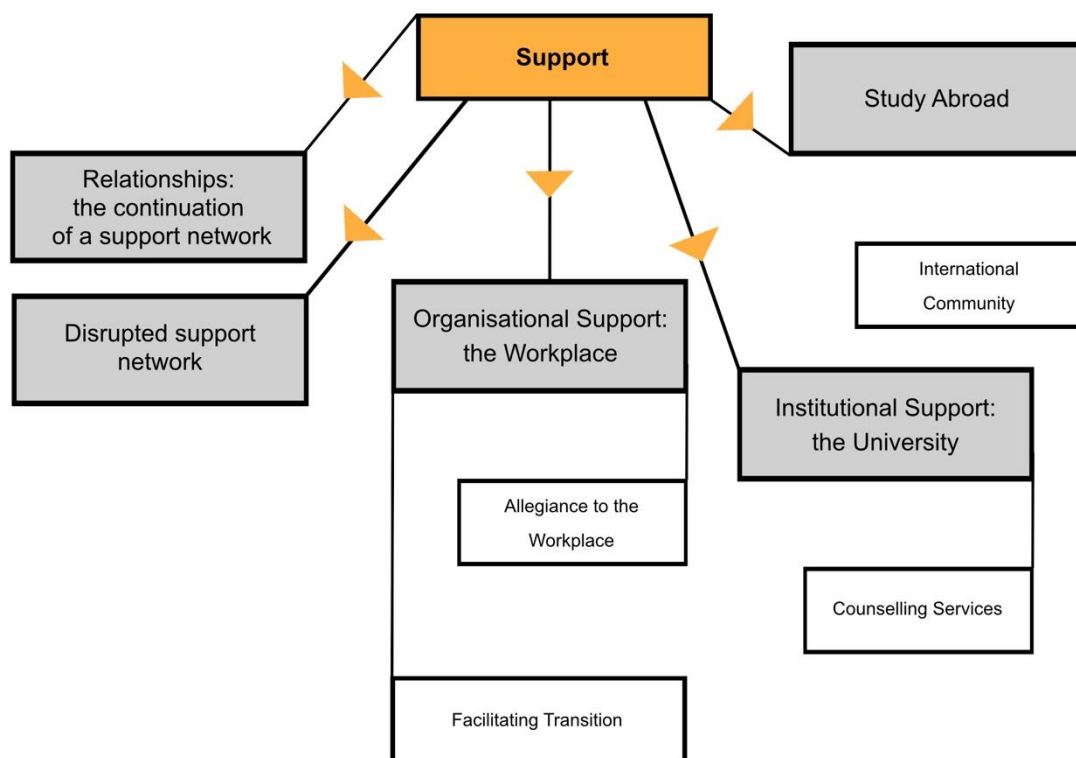


Fig. 6 – Findings: Themes and sub-themes pertaining to participants' support

4.4.1. Support – Relationships: the continuation of a support network

The return to study was characterised by 'the continuation of a support network' for some participants, who disclosed relying on pre-existing relationships, external to university. As they adjusted, this unchanged support helped with navigating financial precarity and sharing experiences with someone that could relate to their unique circumstances.

The continued support varied, including family, friends, and professional networks. In cases where the participants undertook their studies remotely, consistent external support was a high-level resource, stabilising the experience. These networks provided emotional support and/or financial aid, which had implications for the participants' motivation and ability to persevere in their studies.

The participants emphasised the importance of consistency over the duration of transition, providing comfort and familiarity. For those studying abroad, this support

was their connection to home. Harley and Arlo expressed the significance of their primary support network remaining secure and uninfluenced during this time.

“...my friends and boyfriend have supported me morally where needed, especially when I simply needed to rant. I have also made a few friends during the degree and “being in this together” has made it easier to go through each assignment and to learn one from another.” (Harley: Email Diary)

“My partner has supported me significantly throughout my transition. Since I moved from ***** to pursue graduate studies in the UK, the only person by my side was my partner who also moved with me. While friends and family provided some support virtually, it was nowhere as near as the emotional and financial support my partner could provide me.” (Arlo: Email Diary)

Arlo distinguished between in-person and remote support, describing sustained ‘connection’ across the two modes. Connecting with others helped with navigating unfamiliar facets of the setting, notably remote study. She explained the benefits of sharing the strangeness of the situation with someone, offering feedback on her reactions, and sustaining a human connection which many struggled to establish early on. These interactions likely helped with understanding and collectively building new knowledge about the setting.

Accompanied by their partners, Harley and Arlo shared a bond with another person weathering transition, which prevented feelings of isolation. Finley added that sharing transition with someone also helped navigate cultural differences.

“My husband. At the age of **, I always concerned more about my future. In ***** culture, woman at this age, the best way is to have a stable job, a stable family and keep this balance until they die. But he supports my choice to go abroad. He said that if you want to go, then go, without regret.” (Finley: Email Diary)

Finley reflected on cultural and societal expectations, depicting considerable unique concerns. However, continued approval from a caring figure processing the

challenges of transition alongside her positively influenced her outlook, offering affirmation and reassurance.

4.4.2. Support – Disrupted Support Network

Not all participants were able to maintain their professional support networks during transition. The loss of this high resource impacted the participants' return to study; these networks were familiar, consistent, reliable, and sometimes comprised relationships that spanned beyond the work setting. The loss of the latter, implied loss of multiple types of support from which affirmation and aid may have stemmed from, disrupting the lives of participants' beyond their return to study.

Where participants lacked opportunities to include established networks, they appeared disrupted, at times sending participants into a liminal state. Morgan described the differences between his former and current networks, his embeddedness in the work culture, and his distance from peers.

“This type of workplace culture was certainly something I fitted in well with and in our team had a great cohesion and would often socialise outside of work hours”
(Morgan: Email Diary)

“This was certainly a culture shock at first, particularly regarding sociality. Our office had been open plan and I had several good friends there who I'd often chat to throughout the day.” (Morgan: Email Diary)

“In comparison the first few weeks of university were very tough as so much time was spent studying solo before having the chance to make many new social connections. Going from talking to colleagues/on the phone all day to then going through whole days without speaking to anyone else was tough.” (Morgan: Email Diary)

Morgan's workplace relationships spilled into other areas of his life, showing that although once facilitated by the setting, they were no longer reliant on it. These relationships comprised on-going interactions throughout the day and beyond, but a sudden isolation occurred when they re-entered the academy during the Covid-19 pandemic. Morgan struggled to establish connection and faced solitary study, owing to insufficient facilitation to form new relationships at PG level. The shock of this signalled his unpreparedness for transition. This finding raised concerns about

community formation for PGs, and the significance of this for student motivation and perseverance or their satisfaction about their studies.

Finley also lacked support from the university; she claimed that better guidance for acclimatising would have helped with becoming familiar with institutional norms and practices.

“Maybe there are some lack of feedback in the learning context. I am the person who contact with my leader frequently. But here, my tutor even ignores my email one month. This is a frustrating feeling indeed. I know they are busy, but who is not busy?? They said welcome to communicate and do that in another way. I cannot understand. Responsibility for students is a rare quality.” (Finley: Email Diary)

Despite Finley's efforts to connect with her tutor, she felt excluded and rejected from the academic community when she received no response. Frequent correspondence at work had supported her to belong. This was not reflected in the university, leaving Finley frustrated and marginalised.

4.4.3. Support – Organisational Support: the Workplace

This theme explores the workplace support upheld during the return to study. Participants with on-going memberships in workplace communities, were provided with affirmation, which helped negotiate commitments during their return. The aid received supported participants to pursue studies, manage demands and expectations, and maintain interest and motivation. This was a high-level resource for those relying on an income, while others expressed the perceived value of nurturing skillsets and knowledge. Notably, the participants felt supported by colleagues to complete their studies.

The two sub-themes ‘allegiance to the workplace’ and ‘facilitating transition’, illustrate how balance was achieved between demands and competing expectations.

4.4.3.1. Support – Organisational Support: the Workplace – Allegiance to the Workplace

While Arlo, Charlie, and Harley continued participating in their work roles as they returned to study, Emery sought opportunities to maintain skills from her former practice.

“I do miss some aspects of my job including some of the diversity of working on the wards and also interacting with your team/teaching but I have been doing very occasional locum shifts to try not to lose my skills and for a bit of variation.”
(Emery: Email Diary)

Intermittently returning to her professional role offered Emery confirmation that she remained proficient in something that she cared about, influencing her self-efficacy, after struggling to adjust to academic study. These visits helped keep strands of identity alive, and by fostering these in situ, Emery had access to norms through interactions with colleagues.

Charlie carefully distributed her time to allow gradual negotiation and adjustment to different roles throughout her studies to overcome feelings of overwhelm.

“I had intended to maintain full-time working (35 hours) around my studies, but after the first 6 weeks, it feels a bit much and I’m discussing how to manage my workload better with my employer. I feel fortunate that my employer has been very receptive to discussing this and supporting me wherever possible. [...] 35 ‘over-tired’ hours are less productive than working fewer but ‘rested’ hours.”
(Charlie: Email Diary)

Employers collaborated with the participants to prevent conflict, negotiating how demands were met. The participants expressed how communicating their needs led to compromise that greatly supported their pursuits.

“When I was negotiating the contract for my new job (May 2021) I already had the offer to study at *** so my managers had agreed to be flexible with my time spent at university. Since the term has started, I have been doing a combination of early starts and half-days annual leaves to fit both work and study.” (Harley: Email Diary)

Harley and Charlie curated their time to meet their unique needs; the subjective nature of transition implies individual negotiation is required to resolve the issue of ‘multimembership’. Harley emphasised the significance of transparency, to show that memberships of respective organisations were understood and valued.

4.4.3.2. Support – Organisational Support: the Workplace – Facilitating Transition

The organisations used practical strategies to support the participants’ transition, like sharing accessible calendars to avoid conflicts, and encouraging them to participate in and share information about their studies, normalising the experience – this helped them to communicate about their learning with ease.

“I attend lectures/seminars weekly and my colleagues are made aware of my unavailability through my calendar.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

“My manager always allowed me to flex my schedule to be able to go to classes and take time off when it was needed, even if last minute. [...] I feel he wants me to do it and is impressed that I decided to study again, rather than treated as inconvenience.” (Harley: Email Diary)

The university was not often able to reciprocate the accommodations made by the workplace, as schedules and systems were inflexible, creating barriers to participation. This likely increased the pressure on workplace relationships to balance commitments, simultaneously enhancing participant loyalty to workplace practices.

“Sadly, the organisers of my degree didn’t think through how they will fit part-timers so I have all my classes with the rest of the cohort during my working hours. Luckily, my team has been very supportive and helped me manage my time effectively.” (Harley: Email Diary)

The issue here is that some modes of study, advertised as more inclusive, still manage to exclude individuals. The university widened participation by granting partial access, but by limiting the flexibility of programmes, they have not accommodated the demands of students. Even part-time study, albeit appearing to offer more time to complete study, did not have sufficient mechanisms available to support student participation.

4.4.4. Support – Institutional Support: the University

Support from the university significantly impacted one participant's return and was a welcomed addition to the personal networks that she arrived with. In Hunter's case, the temporary aid was a high resource. A single sub-theme presents a pivotal encounter from Hunter's trajectory, titled 'Counselling Services'. This experience helped her develop and apply coping mechanisms, which helped manage anxiety and her studies independently.

4.4.4.1. Support – Institutional Support: the University – Counselling Services

Hunter highlighted the emotional nature of transition which presented in discrete ways. She located valuable services offered by the institution to instigate coping mechanisms that helped to combat challenges. This showed the institution addressing the diverse needs of learners, exhibiting the significance of having somewhere centralised and accessible for learners to visit amidst their busy lives.

“At the start of the academic year I was feeling quite anxious, so reached out to ***'s Student Psychological and Counselling Services. Within a week I had had an initial checkup session, followed by six weeks of CBT for free. Most importantly, I felt those sessions were highly effective and I had no need for further assistance, despite the demanding year.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

Hunter's excerpt describes a timeline, giving an indication of the felt duration of transition and her evolving outlook. It is likely that this service helped her to monitor progress amidst the change.

4.4.5. Support – Study Abroad

The participants experienced studying abroad in different ways during their return. Relationships with peers and academic staff provided support through connections with different communities. For some, these networks influenced their engagement with studying, while others reflected on themselves in relation to others and the academic setting, offering affirmation.

Hunter was determined to encounter learning in various contexts, so she pursued a placement abroad during her PG studies which was approved as the pandemic restrictions lifted. Valuable support was offered by her host institution, her supervisor, and the students she was introduced to. This adventure, initiated by a conversation about research with a visiting lecturer, revealed “a whole new world opening up to me” (Hunter: Interview).

“That whole meeting was it just started making me feel very excited, and having ideas from, I had an idea for my dissertation.” (Hunter: Interview)

“I got to see her as someone who's been through things in life, and she's persevered, and she's independent. And she's curious about the world and all those traits. I really look up to.” (Hunter: Interview)

Hunter reflected on the significance of representation in the academy, as she worked with staff she could relate to. Her values were mirrored in the actions of the lecturer, which was hugely influential.

“I'd always thought about doing a PhD. People would tell me, ‘yeah, you're smart. You should do it’. But it was like she was someone who really who has specific ideas and plans for me. So, she really wants it. It's not just me imagining [...] She actually wants it, and she knows what she's talking about. It was a confirmation of Yes, I belong here”. (Hunter: Interview)

Hunter received affirmation from this relationship, that her participation was worthwhile – this appeared to help her overcome earlier bouts of doubt, enhancing her self-efficacy.

4.4.5.1. Support – Study Abroad – International Community

Participating in an international learning community in the UK was discussed in some participants' reflections. They explained how this positively influenced transition, exhibiting their diversity of friendships as the norm.

"I have not made many British friends since moving to *****. Most of my friends are international. I do not think this has impacted my education/learning. In fact, I think it's been a positive impact being exposed to people from various backgrounds." (Arlo: Email Diary)

"I do think befriending more British people would help me better understand life in the UK (social norms, values, etc.) and have more appreciation for their culture. ***** is more international though, and cannot be compared to the rest of the UK.. so in a way, I think my social experience is representative of the norm." (Arlo: Email Diary)

The ever-growing PG landscape in this global university, continued to re-define the norms and needs of PG learners. Arlo's interactions with peers illustrated how learning continued beyond her classes. Studying with other international students created a support network for overcoming unfamiliar facets of and concerns about the returned-to environment together.

Participation in an international community was beneficial as they struggled to connect with home students. Harley revealed some of the barriers she encountered.

"I lived in the UK for 6 years now and it has changed me – I identify less with my country of origin, but I don't find myself feeling British neither. Actually, the longer I live here the less I like the culture here. I miss the Europeanness of midland Europe without knowing what it really means to me or feeling any sense of belonging to a particular country. I find myself having troubles connecting with Brits in most of the social occasions and it affects many aspects of my life: at

work I find it hard to connect with people, especially if I don't understand the phrases they use." (Harley: Email Diary)

This final excerpt represents the struggle that many participants had with establishing bonds. This was not exclusive to international participants, as it was also encountered through remote learning platforms, and by those striving to share knowledge in classes but found these actions divided them further from their peers.

4.5. Strategy

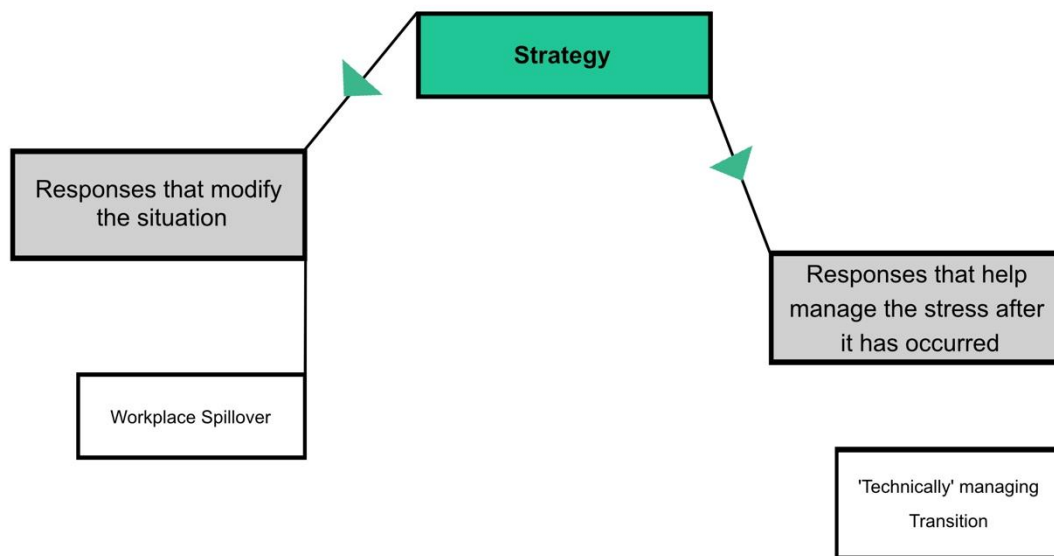


Fig. 7 – Findings: Themes and sub-themes pertaining to participants' strategy

4.5.1. Strategy – Responses that modify the situation

Meaning can be ascribed to responses of a situation once the resources belonging to situation, self, and support are understood. Responses are determined by desirable outcomes, and the individual's competence in employing coping mechanisms. Mostly, resources from professional roles and communities supported returning during the pandemic, which likely managed the meaning and stress of the situation.

Many participants comprised skills and traits from the workplace, which they hoped would help with adjusting to PG studies. The successful resources were interpreted as strategies. The sub-theme, 'workplace spillover', revealed the continuation of effective behaviours to manage time, deadlines, and conflicting demands. For those no longer participating in work, these strategies created clear divisions between their personal and academic identities, which merged at times.

4.5.1.1. Strategy – Responses that modify the situation – Workplace Spillover

The participants utilised soft skills like time management, organisation, and working in teams as they adjusted to study during the pandemic. Participants displayed other

learnt behaviours, like competitiveness and speed, which supported them to address their responsibilities as a student.

Emery and Morgan implemented their working patterns and schedules to structure time, organise tasks, and to create divisions between roles whether remote or on-campus.

“I think having spent significant time in the workplace I am used to being quite task focused. I have experience managing my own time and have found this helpful starting at ***. I try to stick to work hours at *** and I think this is because I was used to working in shifts.” (Emery: Email Diary)

“By trying to keep to a 9-5 schedule to stay on top of work this allows me to take some free time guilt free without feeling like everything is constantly piling up. A contrast to the working world where there was a clear demarcation between clocking on and off, being back in education it’s always hard to psychologically escape the feeling that any rest time is time you should be spending working.” (Morgan: Email Diary)

“In terms of how this has translated to university the more general experience of being in an office and planning my own weeks’ worth of work on every Monday morning helped to develop independence as we were not micro-managed. In addition, even something as simple as turning up on time every day helped to instil self-discipline which I’ve been able to continue when planning the week ahead for studying/seminar prep etc.” (Morgan: Email Diary)

Morgan’s workplace had prepared him for an autonomous and independent practice in HE, which he gave structure to using learnt behaviours and skills, and by establishing routines. Following a ‘9-5’ schedule likely helped Morgan to adjust his relationship with the environment when studying remotely, distinguishing between study and personal time and space.

Hunter recalled her fast-paced performance in the workplace. This approach likely supported adjustment to independent practice and coping with new demands; while

primarily used to prevent risk, she felt her efforts were compensated by reclaiming time as she “handed everything well in advance and could take some time to slow down and unwind” (Email Diary).

“I think the organisational cultures of both of my previous companies have given me a sense of immediacy and urgency I didn’t have before. I was used to having to respond to queries in the moment and being praised for how fast I solved a problem, which means I often approach learning at *** the same way. I always make sure to be one or two weeks ahead in my readings for classes. To me, the higher the pile of books I have to read, the quicker I want to get through them, because I never know if something unexpected might happen and prevent me from studying for a few days and the more ahead I am, the lower the risk of being impacted by unforeseen circumstances.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

The participants balanced the demands of many roles simultaneously, by viewing tasks independently of another and compartmentalising these. They often resorted to established patterns of workload management when they felt overwhelmed or busy.

“My experience from the workplace has definitely helped me multitask different aspects of my course. This has been particularly important this term, as I’ve had to juggle modules and their assessments with getting started with my dissertation.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

“Now as a MA student in ***, I still keep to finish my work as soon as possible. My experience to deal with work is, dividing them into small part, and finish them step by step, one by one. It will reduce my pressure when facing lots of assignments.” (Finley: Email Diary)

Contrastingly, Jessie felt conflicted reviewing former and current ways of meeting demands, expressing that a ‘consistent’ schedule kept him focused, but independent practice offered opportunities to be in control and accountable. He lacked familiarity with managing time and workloads, which made constructing a timetable challenging, showing low-levels of preparedness.

“When I was at work, schedules were so tight, so constant, so rigid that I'd never had the opportunity to do things my way - at the same time when I was in university, I always lacked the engagement I think I needed and to be every day here in the same place you know.” (Jessie: Email Diary)

Jessie's excerpt indicated that students might benefit from additional training or workshops prior to enrolment, to help with recognising and developing skills; nurturing techniques and traits aligned with institutional practice may support the students to plan, thus impressing on their outlook. The data suggests a lack of clarity about the independence and competence required of PG students.

4.5.2. Strategy – Responses that help manage the stress after it has occurred

To manage the stress of the new situation, and changing roles under unusual circumstances, the participants used technology. ‘Technically’ managing transition’ reports student participation in their studies during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how remote learning eased the demands of ‘multimembership’. Confidence in using remote platforms had implications for their outlook and experiences with stress.

Participants shared mixed reviews of technology use during their studies. The university employed this strategy to help overcome disruption to learning caused by Covid-19, but this complicated the experience of building relationships and communities. Contrastingly, some participants found the flexibility of remote study relieved the pressure of their demands.

4.5.2.1. Strategy – Responses that help manage the stress after it has occurred – ‘Technically’ managing Transition

Employing technology throughout their return to study during the pandemic enabled the participants to feel included.

“It has also been great for when you don’t feel 100%. I am prone to fainting, so don’t tend to travel if I feel off-colour. Digital classrooms mean I can join from home no problem.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

“The blended learning approach has allowed me to live a full academic experience, while remaining relatively safe in largely unsafe times. It also has added more flexibility and forgiveness to life. In my undergrad, if we were off classes for sickness, we just missed class [...] Nowadays, if you’re sick you just follow classes on Zoom or watch the recording once you feel better, which seems fairer and makes learning less stressful.” (Hunter: Email Diary)

Remote access to course content catered to participants’ unpredictable situations, highlighting the benefits of recorded and asynchronous resources, which supported them to remain at the same point in their studies as peers. When unable to attend

classes in-person, participants were not excluded from their community, as this consideration showed that they mattered.

The opportunity to engage remotely also catered to the commitments of students beyond their studies, as the participants tried to synchronise roles.

“I can jump between meetings with a couple of clicks and not have to worry about commuting time between home > office > campus.” (Charlie: Email Diary)

“On the one hand, online classes have given me more time for paid work. I also do not have to pay for transit to go to school, saving me lots of money.” (Arlo: Email Diary)

Participating in work and study remotely meant simply opening a new tab for some participants, relieving them of the time constraints of managing multiple pursuits. This offered a greater likelihood of becoming part of the academic community, as they attended classes regularly and became familiar with their cohort and the pedagogies employed at PG level. Developing relationships within the space led to clarification of who and how they were in that context.

4.9. Conclusion

This chapter presented themes generated using Braun and Clarke's (2019, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis and has employed Schlossberg's model of 4 S's (2008) to organise data and holistically assess transition. An in-depth exploration of the return to study during Covid-19 is offered, following a combined deductive and inductive approach, capturing latent and semantic meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The chapter concludes with a summary of the themes below.

4.10. Summary

4.10.1. Situation

Role change: Working Pattern

The working patterns of participants' professional roles continued to be implemented in HE to support their adjustment to independent practice and the demands of their workload. These structures helped balance their public and private time.

Role change: Identity

As the participants became accustomed to the expectations of the student role, they felt challenged to take on characteristics required for academic practice. Some participants conveyed uncertainty about expected behaviours in the new context, so proactively experimented with existing skillsets to help with adapting.

Assessing the situation (positive / negative)

The participants were mostly positive about returning to HE, showing a preference for their new role; this indicated that transition was happening on-time for many of them. While some had previously thrived in academic environments, others were ready to depart the workplace and implement their learnt skills elsewhere.

Contrastingly, the return was viewed negatively by part-time students who felt insufficiently supported to participate in their studies alongside other demands.

Perceived Duration: Moving Through

'Time' was a key feature of many participants' narratives. Some had trouble disconnecting with former roles, which made them feel as though transition was out of control. Some participants looked to the future, exploring how the experience of studying now, informed their outlook on academia down the line. Participants also considered gradual adjustments, taking on additional roles and responsibilities, and achieving balance.

Assessment: Working from Home

Some participants chose to study remotely to facilitate 'multimembership' and part-time pursuit, while others endured the lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which

led to hybrid or blended modes. Working during the pandemic had influenced remote engagement and interaction, which prepared some of them for building communities remotely and managing many commitments from a single location.

Remembering the Undergraduate Experience

The participants had different expectations of PG study. One had studied in HE recently and was familiar with institutional practice, while another participant felt their time in the workplace had prepared them. Upon returning, they discovered that cohort demographics and community building opportunities contrasted with earlier studies, impacting how they weathered transition.

4.10.2. Self

Ego Development

In most cases, the workplace had been a prominent developmental period. This was evident in comparisons between participants and their peers' performance in academia. This theme speaks to the need for affirmation, the change in autonomy, and the participants' self-perceptions.

Outlook: Influence from the Workplace

The participants drew on knowledge from the workplace to support their adjustment, employing soft skills to manage workloads and organise tasks. Their professional roles had influenced their outlooks, drawing on the urgency and pace set by former organisational structures.

Commitment and Values

The participants became aware of the incompatibility of some workplace behaviours for a student role and identity. Occasionally they could be told apart from peers by their contributions, which impacted how they related to peers.

Stage of Life

The participants' narratives described previous experiences with higher education and employment, and length of time away from HE. They indicated that the

university had not considered these, which hampered attempts to enrich their knowledge and benefit their studies.

Doubt

Some participants doubted their suitability to PG study as non-traditional students. For instance, one exhibited a lack of self-belief in their ability to progress through transition, illustrating how students can struggle to persevere or to move professional knowledge across to enhance their studies, without necessary support.

Sense of Meaning / Purpose

The participants needed to feel seen and that their input mattered. Upon returning to university, one participant received noticeably less recognition for their contributions, creating uncertainty about how they were developing in their studies. Workplace interactions had previously motivated participants to complete tasks, whereas students were expected to be accountable and autonomous in the new setting.

4.10.3. Support

Relationships: the continuation of a support network

Some participants were reliant on existing support networks during their return to study. While for some, these comprised colleagues and communities from work, others were personal relationships with partners, friends, and family. 'Continuity' was significant as they familiarised themselves with new norms and practices. These offered stability, connection to home, and practical support like financial security.

Disrupted Support network

Participants that departed the workplace entirely encountered a few shocks early on. Remote working owing to the on-going pandemic reduced in-person interactions, delaying community building. The expectation for students to work independently, led to feelings of isolation, which contrasted with the workplace atmosphere where individuals had dedicated places to work and clearly defined roles.

Organisational Support: the Workplace

Many of the participants that continued working maintained this support network despite altering their participation. They explained that balance had been achieved by using collaborative calendars, regular communication, and compassion.

Institutional Support: the University

Limited data depicted the support received by participants from the institution. One participant identified the availability of institution-wide counselling services. Although they independently sought help from this department; access to this service significantly impacted their coping. The student employed coping mechanisms and did not return to the resource again, which is testament to its effectiveness.

Study Abroad

This theme explored the experiences of studying abroad as an international student and travelling abroad during PG studies. The participants strived to maintain connection with an academic community while being abroad, as they relied on feedback regarding their development, and affirmation for their suitability to the setting. These supported the students to persevere in their studies.

4.10.4. Strategy

Responses that modify the situation

The participants allowed their workplace characteristics to spillover to regain control of transition during the unprecedented time. The continuation of schedules and working patterns (structuring time, pace, workload management) helped with differentiating study and personal time, preventing overwhelm by the combination of responsibilities.

Responses that help manage the stress after it has occurred

Technology was used by the university and participants to avoid disruption to learning during the pandemic, but also to accommodate 'multimembership'. While some participants identified the hinderances of this approach on their studies, this mode was found to reduce stress levels and prevent overwhelm.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research set out to obtain a richer understanding of the experience of returning to postgraduate (PG) study from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic. A range of methods were used to collect qualitative data, including email diary entries, digital storytelling tasks, and follow-up interviews. In this chapter, the findings of the research are interpreted and evaluated; the discussion is synthesised with the theoretical framework and prominent scholarship from the literature review.

This chapter employs the findings from the current research to explicitly address the research questions. Both the meaning and significance of these findings will be revealed through a discussion in the context of the current higher education (HE) landscape, with acknowledgement for the on-going pandemic, and existing scholarship on transition and identity. This chapter is divided into sections addressing each research question; these are reiterated below along with the themes that offer insight. For more detail on how these themes were reached, refer to 3.9.2.

To address the research questions the data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis. Within this, I implemented deductive and inductive stages as part of their six-stage process (see 3.9.1.). The themes listed below were arrived at once the inductive codes had been clustered to offer shared meaning, these themes stemmed from Schlossberg's model of 4 S's (see 3.9.2.). As can be seen, these themes are characteristics and coping resources from the 4 S's (situation, self, support, strategy), which represent 'domain summaries' in the current study. Domain summaries represent areas where shared topics are captured.

Only the themes that explicitly addressed the research questions have been discussed below; while all themes presented in the findings were valuable in creating an authentic depiction of the return to study, not all of these would answer the research questions in isolation, as such, should be considered instead for future research.

Research Question 1. What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?

To answer research question one, five themes were taken from the findings, drawing on both the inductive and deductive approaches to analysis. These were from three domain summaries.

Situation - Role Change: Working Pattern

Self - Ego Development

Self - Commitment and Values

Support - Organisational Support (the workplace)

Support - Disrupted Support Network

Research Question 2. How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?

The second research question is addressed through the exploration of three themes; these were from two domain summaries.

Situation - Role Change: Identity

Situation - Assessment: Moving In (Negative)

Strategy - Responses that Modify the Situation

The literature on transitions exhibits scholars' attempts to enrich understanding of PG experiences; this includes exploring motivations to return to study (Howard & Davies, 2013; Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014), issues involving drop-out and retention rates, as well as research on the induction process (Dreznick, 2022; Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022). Formerly, assumptions have been made about PG students, indicating that they require less support in their transitions (Heussi, 2012; Becker, Johnson & Britton, 2019), that they are already experts (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010), and that they are adequately trained or prepared to undertake academic practice (Cisco, 2020; Clapp, 2022). To clear up some of these misconceptions, the data in the current research has considered the earlier professional and workplace experiences of the students returning to study at PG level. The findings from this thesis seek to contribute knowledge on the PG student experience during Covid-19 to literature on returning postgraduates, transition, and identity. This new understanding is for the benefit of prospective PG students who have worked or

continue to work following their UG studies; and to offer implications for institutional practice to academic staff supporting PG students.

The data collected over the 2021-2022 academic year, offers wide-ranging insight contributing to several aspects of transition within HE. Based on the six implications stated at the end of this chapter, the contributions to research include; the recognition of diversity in PG studies, with a call for assumptions to be put aside; recognition of 'multimembership' being a common characteristic of PG learners, with suggestions for supporting their participation; insight into the process of becoming an autonomous learner at PG level, with suggestions for further research into student preparedness and how they can be facilitated through this change; an assessment of the role of induction and how this helps or hinders individuals to access institutional practice; awareness of issues with widening participation and student satisfaction; and finally, the role of technology in PG studies, and how a more inclusive and community-oriented focus is needed.

The next section will provide a summary of the key findings presented in the previous chapter. This list does not include all findings from the research, rather just those that address the research questions. This list aims to orient the reader, and to familiarise them with the structure of this chapter. Recognition of the limitations of the current research are presented towards the end of the chapter, in which the research design, methodology, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic are discussed. Implications for institutional practice follow, along with suggestions for further research, and suggestions for employing the findings of the current study in real world settings, both in emergency situations and as we return to on-campus teaching and learning. The chapter closes with a reflection on the successes and shortcomings of the study.

5.1. Summary of key findings

Before addressing the research questions through a discussion of key findings and existing literature, I have summarised these below. The structure exhibits the connection between the themes and the overarching research questions. Not dissimilar to the findings chapter, the discussions are grouped by domain summary (Braun & Clarke, 2021), based on Schlossberg's model of 4 S's (2008).

Research Question 1: What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?

To explore the first research question, one theme is taken from the **Situation** domain summary, this was based on the participants' working patterns.

The theme, 'Role Change: Working Pattern', was a similarity and a difference for participants, as some shared working patterns, while others had quite distinctive routines. The participants found that the independent practice expected of them in the new setting lacked structure, so, many of them continued to implement their working patterns to balance their competing demands. This demonstrated the participants taking stock of their resources to determine a way of coping with transition (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022), helping them to reclaim some stability. This implied that the participants sought ways to manage their multiple roles, while also seeking some kind of anchor to their existing life.

The key findings also stemmed from an understanding of the role of ego development, and how commitment and values were maintained, as presented in the **Self** domain summary.

The first theme, 'Ego Development', revealed that the participants' time spent in the workplace was a prominent developmental period in their lives. The subtle adjustments to their ego led them to feel more knowledgeable and more confident upon their return to study, which was likely owing to their progression and interactions encountered in the workplace. The on-going professional and social

interactions with colleagues appeared to support their identity renegotiation (Blume, 2015), allowing them to exhibit common characteristics. In the current study, identity renegotiation is understood as a process of continual change. When individuals communicate and exchange information during interactions, they co-construct new collective narratives and hence identities. By learning to value the differences between one another, like the participants' enriched knowledge of industry or their team-working skills developed at work, the individuals could adapt and grow and create an identity that helped them to understand who they are in that situation.

In the second theme, 'Commitment and Values', the participants showed their awareness for traits and behaviours they had maintained from the workplace, and how these did not always feel compatible with a student identity. This disagreement is telling of how a transition was being experienced, and whether the individuals had begun "letting go of aspects of the self, letting go of former roles, and learning new roles" (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022: 17-18). These behaviours were most noticeable in group settings where the participants judged their contributions against peers. This finding demonstrated the participants' uncertainty about who and how they should be in the new setting, whether in-person or remote; by drawing on known frames of reference in the new role, they ran into conflicting behaviours exhibiting their position between the roles of student and worker. In some instances, expectations of peers were challenged, for instance, during group work and when tasks were delegated; the distinctions between the participants' behaviours and their peers' suggested that they may encounter issues with developing relationships.

The **Support** domain summary captured a further two themes addressing the first research question, which were based on ongoing organisational support from the workplace where the participants would receive both social and financial support, and the experience of being faced with a disrupted support network.

The first theme explored 'Organisational Support (the workplace)'. The data exhibited how the workplace continued to play a considerable role in how some participants negotiated the challenges of returning to study, particularly for those continuing to work. Support was sustained by existing work colleagues implementing collaborative calendars, regular communication, and compassion; these helped the

participants to balance their time between their demands. Despite having let go of some workplace demands to make room for their studies, the participants did not express feeling any less involved with their professional communities. This 'multimembership' was particularly helpful and important to participants when they felt that the university lacked an awareness of how to support their return to study.

The second theme, 'Disrupted Support Network', depicted the experience of loss encountered by those who had departed from the workplace entirely, made more complicated by the remote nature of PG studies from the outset. The removal of their formerly established support network led some participants to experience isolation and culture shock in the new setting. The participants encountered confusion upon their return to HE, which said much about their readiness for embarking on their studies; this did not appear to be addressed by any early induction activities.

Research Question 2: How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?

The second research question comprises three themes from two domain summaries. Firstly, the **Situation** domain summary presents the participants' experience of role change based on their identity, along with their negative assessment of returning to university at the outset of their transitions.

The first theme, 'Role change: Identity', exhibits the gradual adaptation of participants as they felt challenged to meet the expectations of the PG student role and to carry out academic and institutional practices. The data indicated uncertainty about these changes. The analysis suggested that some participants may have felt under-prepared for the change, owing to the absence of clear expectations of the student role. The participants also addressed the significance of having opportunities to learn about who and how to be in the new setting. This ambiguity created conflict within the participants as they grappled with finding an alternative self-definition, which was made more complicated as earlier experiences attempted to inform the way that their transition was approached (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). The distinctions between their former and expected selves was unclear,

which meant that some participants were challenged by the concept of moving from a past to future version of themselves, from a worker to student role. Distinctions between levels of study may have added to this confusion.

To follow, the second theme, 'Assessment: Moving In (Negative)', showed how the part-time students in particular encountered conflict as they attempted to strike a balance between their demands. The data implied that insufficient support was provided to part-time students to help them participate in their studies. The participants did not feel considered in the planning of the PG programme, and that they had fewer opportunities to indulge in their new situation and ascribe the experience any meaning. Their lack of understanding about the student role, the expectations, values and behaviours within, will likely have hampered their confidence in taking on characteristics of a student role and to assimilate these into their identity.

The domain summary **Strategy** revealed the final theme, looking at the participants' actions and responses to the events and encounters of the new setting.

The closing theme, 'Responses that modify the situation', revealed that in maintaining characteristics of the workplace, the participants felt able to regain control of their studies, during a notably uncertain time. These traits helped them to structure their time, sustain a manageable pace to meet the demands of their workloads, and to keep up with deadlines. The continuation of schedules and working patterns helped the students to differentiate between study and personal time, as there were no clear boundaries set out for the 'independent practice' they were adjusting to. Based on the participants' former experience in the workplace, coping resources were available, however there was little evidence to suggest that the participants were prepared for being independent learners, nor that the university had provided training or support for this, as O'Donnell et al. (2009) also found. From their research with postgraduate students they challenged the notion that PG students are already experts of the environment (ibid.).

5.2. Interpreting the results

This section of the chapter synthesises the findings with existing literature on transition and identity. The discussion is structured by addressing the two research questions. To offer insight into how the research questions are investigated, I have listed the domain summary (based on Schlossberg's 4 S's) along with the name of the theme taken from characteristics of the 4 S's, followed by a blend of literature and interpretation.

5.3. Research Question 1: What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?

The following discussion explores the multi-faceted experiences of transition revealed in the data, drawing upon pertinent scholarship to exhibit its relevance and position within the current transition landscape.

5.3.1. Situation: Role Change: Working Pattern

The participants' former working patterns varied from a standard working week to shift work. When taking on the PG student role during the Covid-19 pandemic, some participants described how implementing these patterns helped them to create boundaries between their private and professional lives, as they were largely expected to study away from campus. The participants revealed how there were clear expectations in their former settings, and that they understood their roles. In the new context, a few of the participants continued to carry out their former working pattern to overcome the ambiguity of independent practice, characterised by an "absence of information" (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010: 274), and likely the unfamiliarity of remote study. Continuation of this supported some participants to balance the demands of their various memberships, an increasingly common feature of the PG population, while others (Arlo) claimed to have always worked alongside former study supporting them to navigate time constraints. The working pattern was revealed by some as an asset, which supported them to cope with and acquire stability during their return to study (Schlossberg, 2008). Similarly, the structure

offered by these was mirrored in findings by Eberle and Hobrecht (2021: 9), who argued that schedules are “an important component for students’ motivation and helps reduce self-regulation problems caused by increased autonomy”. This claim corresponds with Arlo’s experience, as she explained that her schedule encouraged her productivity. This finding values the ways that individuals formerly undertook their roles, for instance, through their routines, schedules, and rituals. Most of the participants lived each day according to a rigid structure with assigned working hours and clear expectations, though some (Finley, Hunter) claimed to carry out occasional additional hours to catch up on tasks.

Autonomy is defined by Bamber et al. (2019: 241-242) as the ability to “define and organise for themselves what they need to learn and how, and that they also work effectively with others”. This quality is reflected in the ‘mastersness’ framework set out by QAA (QAA Scotland, 2013; QAA, 2020), stating the expectation that learners are responsible, driven, and organised. However, the extent to which the participants were involved in organising their time and tasks at work is telling of how they experienced their return to study, and the notion of independent practice (Casey, Clark & Hayes, 2017).

The absence of autonomy was particularly evident in Jessie’s data as they grieved the structure of their former role, and for Arlo who had described the limitations of their professional role which had prevented them from feeling in control of their situation. ‘Control’ also emerged for Hunter, who described reclaiming time and energy in the returned to role, which enabled her to design an empowering schedule. These facets of their workplace experiences had produced unprecedented obstacles in the returned-to setting, challenging existing scholarship which has misrepresented the PG learner as an expert (Tobbell, O’Donnell & Zammit, 2010), because they are simply continuing their studies, which seemingly requires fewer resources to adjust. Contrastingly, some participants felt able to transform their attitudes and behaviours in the academic setting; Finley explained how enabling these to spillover, influenced how her tasks were completed. Tobbell, O’Donnell and Zammit (2010) have since linked this experience to identity development, indicating that a transition is in fact at hand.

While the assumptions of PGs have been recognised widely by academic staff and supervisors in the literature (Macleod, Barnes & Huttly, 2019), the data showed that this is not consistent in practice as the participants lacked regular feedback from staff on their progression and the expectations of them. With this, expectations about the degree of autonomy a PG learner should possess or be working towards during their studies remains unclear (QAA Scotland, 2013). This is reflected in the responsibility students take for their learning, and how they engage with academic skills and materials (ibid.).

Addressing these assumptions in the current research is an invaluable contribution to knowledge, particularly for marginalised and neglected populations encountering PG study (1994 Group, 2012; Coneyworth et al., 2020), such as returning and mature students. In considering the lived realities of learners, much is revealed about how they developed relationships with different members of the academic community, providing institutions with insight into how they can accommodate and include the students better (Gale & Parker, 2014).

The decision to uphold their working patterns in the new setting appears contrary to Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg's (2022) claim that a change in role and routine is required by the individual to encounter the moving in and through stages. The continuation of working patterns is reported positively as the students felt better equipped to manage the demands of their student role. While applying skills from across domains supported some participants to regain structure, much like Arlo who referred to the value of their organisational skills and work ethic, the continuation of these behaviours might also have prevented them from making full use of the institutional resources and from learning more about how PG students are expected to manage their workloads in the academy. This line of thought corresponds with existing scholarship revealing the difficulty that mature students have in reaching out for help, as they tend to rely on existing networks and veer away from being perceived as someone that is struggling or unable to cope (Heagney & Benson, 2017). This will have led to a different experience of how studies are carried out in comparison to their peers, keeping the participants on the periphery of their learning experience, thereby reducing their opportunities to take on student behaviours (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Karmelita, 2018). Schlossberg (1981) reminds us that

individuals will not respond in the same way to the same experience, but this theme revealed that many of the participants described maintaining their working pattern to relieve the stress of the unclear independent practice (Bamber et al., 2019), thus, the working pattern might be considered an asset. Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010) consider that adjustment to academic practice is often based on competence with workload management, designing schedules, and engagement with academic language and terminology, some of these abilities became clear through the participants' moveable skills.

Attempts to adjust to independent practice are often thought to be carried out in isolation (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010), something that was reflected in the participants studying remotely. Hunter's competence in navigating contrasting roles independently is reflected in DS.8 and DS.9 (3.12.) where she depicts isolated symbolic objects. With these, are implied strands of identity and skillsets that may be transformed to enhance opposing roles. While participants in the current study were remote from one another owing to the pandemic, Karmelita's earlier (2018) findings indicated that students were withdrawn from their peers and the norms of a student identity because they were studying independently.

Not dissimilar to the participants' in the current study who drew upon their workplace skills to help cope with the return to study, Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010) also claimed that the unique approaches employed to navigate transition can prevent learners from establishing commonalities and from fully participating in a student identity, resulting in a sustained connection with their former roles (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

5.3.2. Self: Ego Development

The participants' time in the workplace was perceived to be a prominent developmental period (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022), where their ability to reflect and become self-aware was established. The gradual and subtle growth of these significant skills and qualities showed similarity to a 'sleeper' transition (Schlossberg, 1989) whereby the participants matured, reporting that they felt more knowledgeable and more confident about their professional practices. This was noticeable in the participants that effectively drew upon workplace expertise to help cope with their return to study; this involved referring to esoteric knowledge of the subject as well as employing their proactivity and resilience to demonstrate their proficiency. These behaviours characterised the experience, revealing the participants' commitment to existing identities. An example of this was Hunter's transformation of skillsets (time management, organisation, multi-tasking), which supported her to meet the competing demands of different modules and application deadlines. Finley also depicted (DS. 6, 3.12.) the usefulness of existing knowledge, which included gathering information, analysis, and dissemination; she felt these competencies were applicable to both publishing and academic writing.

Upon their return to HE during the pandemic, the distinctions between their competences and characteristics compared to their peers was considerable, possibly a result of the progression made through interactions encountered in the workplace, where they may have had opportunities to exercise and develop knowledge, or collaborate and present knowledge. Charlie alluded to the impact that sharing their knowledge might have on how their peers perceived them, which in turn influenced their self-belief about their participation in the collective learning experience, and their feelings of being an imposter; these feelings of concern and doubt were also reflected in Hunter's data. Based on Blume (2015), it is these transactions between individuals that support identity renegotiation, eventually leading to the development of new branches of identity in which the common characteristics of their relationships could be captured and performed. However, the limited interactions that participants encountered with academic staff problematised their understanding of how they were doing in the returned-to setting and raised questions about identity. Finley found that access to information and feedback about PG studies and how her academic skills were developing was scarce and ultimately hampered her self-belief. This contrasted

drastically to the communication she received in the workplace. Hunter's initial experience was not dissimilar, but despite this, her imposter syndrome was overcome when she formed a small network of peers who shared her concerns, helping her to discover common traits.

Exploring ego development is significant as it underscores the role that time plays as individuals leave and return to education. As seen in the developed traits maintained by the participants, their time away from the academic environment supported some of them to become better equipped to pursue PG studies. It is possible too that any professional work undertaken in a remote setting owing to the Covid-19 pandemic may have supported their adjustment to this new feature of academic study, boosting confidence with virtual platforms or digital literacy. One participant also claimed that the minimal temporal distance between former and current study facilitated their readjustment (Arlo). In literature on internships, the combination of time and the transformation of knowledge, is thought to influence students' renegotiation of identity in the new setting (Popov, 2023). Existing skills and knowledge can be thought of as resources or internal assets (Schlossberg, 2008), supporting transition. Their time away from study may have facilitated a better understanding of why they wanted to commit to PG studies and how they were going to manage it (Cooper, 1999). In the returned-to setting, the participants presented characteristics and traits that reinforced their connection to the workplace, making the worker and student identities appear even more distinct.

In the current research, the participants' workplace experience was another way of telling the students apart from one another. As reported in Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022), because of the increasingly diverse population of learners in higher education, individuals are thought to have fewer commonalities between them. The results reflect this. The increase in the participants' confidence and their ability to transform knowledge gained in the workplace, created barriers around members of the cohort where their different contributions told them apart, indicating that their additional characteristics could lead to difficulty with integration, a hurdle faced by Charlie and Harley.

In the same way that the participants had taken time to adjust to their workplace practice and culture after leaving HE, they were now required to adjust again, a process that is often drawn out because of the individual's self-perception in relation to the new community and environment (Strangleman & Roberts, 1999). However, scholarship has revealed the multi-faceted experience of transition for returning and mature learners, and the frequent horizontal nature of these are reflected in the current data (Gale & Parker, 2014), as individuals frequently move between contexts to fulfil roles assumed at the same point in time. While it seems plausible that this process of becoming and belonging was challenging for the students, it was made more complex by the short timeframe that PG students often have on their programmes, and in this case, the even shorter period that students had to access the campus. Since PG courses may only last one or two years, some of the participants were faced with the additional pressure of fitting in and becoming a member of the academic community from the outset (Bownes et al., 2017). Schlossberg (1981) reported that how well an individual adjusts to and fits into the new environment is telling of how the individual will experience transition. For the participants continuing in their professional roles, the consistent and stable support networks established prior to enrolling as a PG student appeared to become a barrier to them showing interest in fully integrating into their academic community. This said, other students hoping to become part of an academic community struggled to bring their student identity to life as they remained unsure of what was expected of them and unsure of who they could rely on for support (Arlo).

Not surprisingly, the continuity of the participants' workplace behaviours, including a competitive edge and time management skills, appeared to bring them some stability in the new environment; their understanding of their workplace identity and what could be accomplished in this status inspired them to maintain their traits. An example of this was found in Morgan's narrative (Diary Entry), as they explained how they would follow a similar routine by studying from 9-5 daily, and by planning and organising their weekly tasks to achieve balance. Implementing this routine worked to Morgan's advantage helping to avoid being overwhelmed and tasks piling up. The findings suggest that although their time in the workplace had inadvertently prepared them for PG study, they remained unclear about the PG student role and what to expect from the new environment (Schlossberg, 1981) as they were mostly required

to study at a distance, indicating uncertainty about who and how they were meant to be. Hunter also assumed some of their workplace traits which led them to complete learning activities very quickly and exhibited a competitiveness in their attempts at being efficient. While these facets of their professional identity had satisfied the academic requirements of their student role, Morgan and Hunter may have experienced difficulty aligning with collective behaviours, norms, and beliefs, influencing how individuals are perceived by others in new environments (Askham, 2008; McQueen et al., 2009; Brunton & Buckley, 2020).

It is understood that skills are developed in the workplace based on some of the foundational learning acquired in HE, and before that, in school. These skills are refined by their application to real-world settings, something the participants found that not all their peers had encountered. Charlie and Jessie's data indicated that they felt responsible for expressing their cultural capital to validate their earlier learning and expertise (Zepke & Leach, 2005; Gale & Parker, 2014), which after a period of continued use led to affirmation by staff and peers. In their narratives, the participants exhibited the value of participating in workplace learning but recognised the barriers and conflicts that can be experienced by learners where their behaviours and academic skills are not well aligned with peers. The characteristic of difference emerged in Hunter's reflections too, as she highlighted the significance of working alongside academic staff that she could relate to, both in interests and values. This encounter enriched her confidence and encouraged her to share her passion and knowledge with academic communities abroad – something she had not felt within her department.

In a PG cohort where learners are known to comprise a variety of demographics and life experiences, understanding the influence of the workplace on how an individual participates in their studies is essential for developing suitable resources and ultimately modifying pedagogy that considers the wide-ranging needs and experiences of students, to become more relatable. Consideration should also be given to the on-going influence of the pandemic, as guidelines for universities continued to change. This interpretation of the data confirms Smith's (2006) argument that participation in a professional pursuit can adequately prepare an

individual with employable skillsets for higher education, evidencing the suitability of knowledge across domains.

5.3.3. Self: Commitment and Values

As the participants took on their new roles, they evidenced their growing awareness of the distinction between the traits and learnt behaviours they had brought from the workplace and those of their peers. They felt that some of their characteristics were not always compatible with a student identity, with some examples being offered by Harley including the pace that they were used to working at, along with Hunter's views and expectations of others. The uncertainty about the student role conveyed by some participants indicated that conflict was being encountered as they maintained old behaviours, while others encountered liminality as they parted with old ways of being and attempted to learn about the PG role. This finding is consistent with Jackson II (2002) who contended that some facets of an identity remain shielded, while others are open to change; in this case, the individuals reported recognising the behaviours of those identifying with the student role, while simultaneously expressing that their limited knowledge of PG student identities caused them to be selective and to hold onto their established traits. For instance, Finley reported undergoing an unlearning of behaviours as she discovered that recontextualising workplace knowledge was not a simple process. She defended her knowledge, claiming to be familiar and competent with industry requirements, but doubt emerged as she considered how these would benefit her new role (see DS.6, 3.12.). This difficulty was also shown by Hunter, who was determined to take on a student identity, whilst grappling with the competitive and unforgiving traits they had become used to carrying out. While these were sometimes motivating, they created doubt in Hunter as she compared herself to others. The participants protected their known versions of self, though not entirely rejecting the prospect of alternative ways of being (Blume, 2010). Contrastingly, Emery struggled to transmit existing traits and expertise, which led them to question their perceived competence in completing tasks. Their transition captured the experience of moving between environments, as well as returning to a novice role which challenged their self-perception and self-belief. It is probable that the limited opportunity to exhibit their existing knowledge affected how they perceived others and how they developed connections with the community.

Notably, the experience of adjusting to institutional norms was highlighted in the data, made more challenging by their infrequent opportunities to be amongst peers,

as affirmed by Arlo, an international student, who found the distance of remote study isolating. They revealed the distinctions between norms encountered in the workplace, detailing where further clarification about the student role was required to support the returning learners to understand who and how they should be in their new role (Blume, 2010, 2015). The data shows how the individuals embarked on PG study with a host of skillsets, interests, and commitments, some of which the participants pursuing work alongside their student roles continued to encounter (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007: 325) commented that "Who you are, where you come from, and where you want to go are all important features in the negotiation of meanings that enable identity shifts favoring participation".

The inability to cease carrying out learnt behaviours indicated that the participants had come up against the process of letting go of known roles and ways of being (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). In DS.8 (3.12.), Hunter showed how her on-going employers had delivered equipment to her home to avoid disruption to her role, illustrating the literal obstacles and symbolic objects that complicated her attempts to foster a new strand of identity, enabling role contagion to occur. The participants reported behaviours that distinctly connected with former and on-going roles, although they did not indicate their awareness for the usefulness of these. Some of these behaviours included being responsible and knowing how to create boundaries around tasks. This competence was reflected in both Arlo and Hunter who curated zones for their roles at home. While Hunter confined her studies to a neat stack of books (DS.9, 3.12.), Arlo spoke to the influence of space on her ability to focus, and the importance of having autonomy to leave traces of personality in a space (DS. 1 + 2, 3.12.). Schlossberg (2011) explained that, during a transition individuals often float between old and new ways of being, based on their need to cling to a known frame of reference in search of some stability; this was also depicted by participants using single spaces for multiple purposes.

The data reveals how the participants became liminal participators of the learning experience, stuck out on the periphery unable to integrate into a single community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The literature reports facets of academic practice that have been known to exclude individuals from fully participating in their studies;

for instance, when programmes are not designed to accommodate the broad demands and needs of PG students (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007), or when individuals enter new and unfamiliar communities of learners with little knowledge of the norms (Christie et al., 2008). It was felt that although the continuation of participants' workplace behaviours sometimes distanced the participants from their cohort, they felt unable to change because the limited interaction with peers could not compete with on-going work relationships.

Socialisation has been known to help create collective identities and support networks, requiring individuals to become immersed in and take on the norms of a projected identity (Tierney, 1988; Donze & Gunnes, 2018). This meant that the participants had to adjust their relationships with aspects of their worker identity to make room for alternative traits aligned with the new context. The participants reported observing how academic practice was carried out in their taught sessions, raising their awareness of the various dimensions that would facilitate their socialisation (Armstrong, 2009), and hence creating a sense of belonging somewhere (Bridges, 1991; Cooper, 1999). The participants showed a very gradual departure from the liminal space owing to their increased familiarity with the learning environment, as they reported developing friendships and feeling accepted by their learning community and understanding more about how to complete academic tasks. Armstrong (2009) also explained how continued involvement with group activities can lead to individuals becoming socialised, an example from the data included attending seminars with the same group of peers. As demonstrated by Scott et al. (2014), Kamler and Thomson (2006), and Knights and Clarke (2013), by situating oneself amongst peers, the individual is granted access to the norms of student identities, something that was unclear to the participants in the current study for some time. Upon obtaining this information, the participants felt able to benchmark their behaviour against others to understand how to meet the demands of the new practice; Finley's narrative revealed the role that feedback from her tutor and peers played during their studies in helping them to understand the institutional conventions of the space that existed despite the diversity of students and staff. Brooman and Darwent (2014) reiterated the significance of this feedback in helping students to become more confident in their studies, consequently helping them to sense a fit in the academic setting. This is a notable finding in scholarship on mature

learners, whose perseverance in study appears to benefit greatly from the confirmation and affirmation offered by the academic community (Heagney & Benson, 2017). Based on Scott et al. (2014), being seen carrying out student-congruent behaviours, engaging with academic activities and building relationships with their peers and community, can enable the individual to be perceived as a student by others, affirming their position and role within the new setting. Failure to conform to these norms, as evidenced by Harley, could lead to exclusion from the learning experience (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2007). Regardless, O'Connor (1994), Fairchild (2003) and Smith (2006), alluded to 'multimembers' being more selective about how they participated in their studies - prioritising their academic participation and discounting the value of attending the physical campus for social events (Christie, Munro & Wager, 2005). Interestingly, the participants did not report widely on their social experiences during their PG studies; this may be owing to much of their experience taking place in an online setting where it was more difficult to facilitate social events, or it might confirm what is said in the literature about the perceived value of social facets of study.

Willson's (2019) earlier work about information behaviour and liminality in Australia explores how an individual's search for information in different contexts can influence transition. Their work points to the significance of comparing past and present situations to arrive at meaning about an experience and role in the new setting, although this may have been difficult given the remote nature of some participants' earlier roles. Some of the returners had conflicting ideas about how to approach learning, owing to their assumptions about the motivations and interests of their peers, and the expectations of student-staff relationships, which gave them the impression that redefining themselves as students was drawn out, this was projected in both Finley and Harley's narratives.

The reflections of participants in the current study, much like those in Willson's (2019) research, supported a readjustment and negotiation of behaviours and attitudes toward academic practice, thereby preventing their conflicts from creating feelings of marginalisation.

Interactions with others in the academic community helped the participants to grasp information about their distinctive roles; the significance of these interactions is reiterated by Blume (2010) who argues for an on-going exchange with others to nurture the many changing identities held within an individual. Willson (2019: 842) contends that,

“Redefinition is a process of negotiating between the self and the new social context, a progression of positioning oneself in new ways as the landscape changes. Of particular interest is the use of comparison to deal with differences and the drive to make meaning from the situation.”

Should behaviours projected by participants during interactions with others reject the influence of their relationship, it is likely that the individual will refrain from becoming a full participant. It is within these interactions that an individual faces new understandings or perspectives, leading to renegotiation of the self (Jackson II, 2002). Taking DS.4 (3.12.) as an example, Finley depicted another way that renegotiation can be stalled. A photograph of her former office details rows of partitioned desks segregating colleagues and preventing interaction. Observing interactions between others in the academic community may have supported the participants to understand student roles better, inspiring them to reconsider and reshape their dominant traits to fit in better.

This discussion about commitment and values, specifically behaviour, focuses on the participants' desire to improve their understanding of learner identities and to feel able to identify as a student, while simultaneously disputing the need to change their behaviours. The potential for identity conflict during this process indicates that a re-evaluation of the perception of a PG student identity may be required. This phenomenon was also explored by Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010: 261) who describe the HE landscape as comprising a “multiplicity of identities”. The narratives exhibit the participants' determination to continue performing their once advantageous workplace behaviours which led to unsuccessful integration owing to the judgements they made about peers and assumptions about staff. There was little indication in the data that the university was aware of the distinctive work-related backgrounds of the PG students in the current study, as they showed little

acknowledgement for how their behaviours may have contributed to or enhanced the collective learning experience. Thus, the data suggests that there remains the expectation that students be reshaped upon enrolment to meet the unspoken expectations of a PG student role (Palmer, O'Kane & Owens, 2009). Rather than the learning environment being co-created, the emphasis is on students being socialised into the existing practice (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016), as such identity modification remains a prominent aspect of transition to flourish in the new setting.

5.3.4. Support: Organisational Support (the workplace)

Schlossberg (2008, 2011) argues for the value of external support during transition, as mirrored in the data. The support networks developed in the workplace played a considerable role in the participants' transitions, most significantly for the participants continuing to work. Continued participation in the workplace community of practice allowed the participants to feel that they belonged somewhere and that they were cared for. This was especially important when the participants sensed that the university had a lack of awareness of their needs; some of these needs included a desire to have existing knowledge recognised, seeking community development in the online classroom, and a want to understand the institutional language which some participants reported created feelings of exclusion.

Notably, PG students often comprise a range of memberships (Callender, Locke & Marginson, 2020; Cruwys et al., 2021). This might include families, social groups, clubs, and professions, and in the case of the current participants, their workplace communities of practice. Based on Blume's (2010) assertion that identity is co-constructed, it is probable that during the return to study, the participants received influence from an existing portfolio of identities. Within each of these earlier affiliations, the individual's self-perception will have been altered depending on the meaning (ibid.); in taking on a student role, the participants' faced developing a new strand of identity or awakening an old one, which in turn may have led to a reshuffling of identity characteristics where more dominant traits fall into the background, and others fall away, so that behaviours aligned with their student status could prevail. When an individual takes on a new role and possibly a new identity, they negotiate their known ways of being to be successful in the new role, sometimes this means taking influence from different roles.

For the participants who were required to continue working to support their pursuit of study, this support network played into transition. Already socialised into their work settings, many of the learners had taken on the attitudes and characteristics common to their professional identity (Campbell & Alexander, 1965; Donze & Gunnes, 2018; Walker, 2021); as demonstrated in earlier scholarship, creating homogeneity in a professional environment is known to create a supportive and effective working atmosphere. However, socialisation can also be quite exclusive as

it is also known to dismiss the unique attributes and histories of individuals (Palmer, O'Kane & Owens, 2009). The analysis indicated that continued participation in this work community required the participants to make a conscious effort to learn about a student identity; alongside this, every effort was made by their workplace organisations to support the students to balance their demands and to engage in their learning; one example included negotiating flexible and unconventional shifts or work patterns to support the student to manage competing tasks. This network resembles a 'convoy of support' as referred to by Kahn and Antonucci (1980), facilitating the participants through their return to study. The continuation of these connections with the work community suggested that existing relationships can offer support, feedback, and sometimes influence as they adjust. Connection to the workplace provided emotional and financial support to the participants, which contributed to their feeling more in control during the largely unprecedented time.

Earlier scholarship discusses the variations of support provided during transition, from emotional to practical, including childcare, funding, or support from friends and family (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015). An understanding of the types of support received by the students beyond the institution is valuable as it provides insight into the additional support that might be offered by the university, particularly during times of crisis, as well as giving an indication of the individual's preparedness to endure the return to study (Pendleton, 2007; Powers, 2010; Karmelita, 2018).

In the current research, it seemed that 'multimembership' was of particular significance to the students whose studies were characterised by independence. Their memberships revealed the significance of belonging to more than one context, which is consistent with Cruwys et al. (2021) who explored support networks during times of change, suggesting that stability and acceptance in a community can soften the shock of entering another. The participants addressed the independent nature of PG study by considering how their learnt behaviours from their former (or on-going) professional roles could support them to persevere in their studies, and by drawing on their continued networks for motivation and support with managing demands. Belonging to other communities outside of academia also appeared to help make the experience of studying less isolating. The process of moving between roles and

adjusting one's identity has been known to trigger a host of reactions, such as "feelings of alienation and exclusion, as well as of excitement and exhilaration" (Christie et al., 2008: 567). 'Multimembership' is also known to help individuals to overcome the vulnerability that one might encounter when only identifying with a single group (Cruwys et al., 2021).

The participants' continued participation in their workplace communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) led them to share their thoughts on the importance of belonging to a group; integration was dependent on the gradual alignment of interests, rules and beliefs, and the experience of learning and exchanging ideas (ibid.). The participants described having worked with different organisations for varying periods of time; their familiarity with the work setting confirmed O'Donnell and Tobbell's (2007) understanding that time and fellowship is the catalyst for departing from the periphery, something that may be difficult to achieve considering hybrid and remote study. As the participants attempted to take on the student role, their gradual acclimatisation to the academic community and increasing knowledge of the norms of the space, helped them to move inwards from the periphery and experience their competing roles more fully from the inside.

While there is evidently a lot of internal adjustment undertaken as individuals work on establishing bonds, institutions and organisations often support this by creating opportunities and spaces in which communities can develop, both virtually and on site (Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022). However, the participants in the current study did not show much awareness of these spaces. Most participants explained how their studies and interactions with peers happened online, but that these encounters did not always present opportunity for the students to interact in social ways; the integration of social activities and openings for interactions between peers in virtual environments would likely have been beneficial to their adjustment to study. This finding is significant not only in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Martzoukou et al., 2020), but for students who will continue to carry out various modes of study remotely (Gast, 2013); considering the external pursuits and responsibilities of PGs, accessing classes and communicating virtually is often a practical way for them to stay connected. However, there was evidently some concern about the quality of online provision over the course of the current research, as has also been identified

in several studies (O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015; Stone & Springer, 2019; Guppy et al., 2022; O'Dea & Stern, 2022). The data indicated that greater training provided to both students and staff about the institution-wide virtual platforms may facilitate better relationships to form in this space. While this might enhance the student-staff and peer relationships formed remotely, it is possible that the additional training while having long-term benefits might lead to increased workload.

Based on the experience of letting go of old roles and routines during transition, according to Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022), it was assumed that the participants would feel less involved in their work community and enter a liminal state as they moved between their two roles. However, the data revealed the employers' efforts to support the participants to complete their studies; this appeared to lead to greater allegiance to the workplace by the participants. These findings confirmed those of Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) who found that the consideration of employees' needs often led to reciprocation in that there were benefits for both students and the workplace, such as higher quality of work and more enthusiasm in the work environment. By catering to the unique needs of the participants, the employers demonstrated the value they placed upon their workers.

Therefore, the value of continued participation in a professional practice while studying can be observed, though there are shortcomings, too. At first, it may seem that maintaining a close connection with the people from a former pursuit will provide much-needed support during transition. But because some of the participants divided their time between their two roles, they did not feel inspired to seek out or learn about the full extent of resources, events, and activities provided by the university, likely owing to the stability that their existing networks provided. By removing themselves from the work setting entirely, as expressed in Morgan's narrative, the opportunity to fully immerse in the experience of being a PG student led to them investing more time in learning activities, nurturing relationships with peers, and eventually giving the experience greater meaning, influencing their relationship with different identities (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Fostering these facets of study as a mature student was also found to be tiring, lonely, and dependent on pre-existing coping mechanisms such as resilience and organisation, as grasped in the workplace.

The relationships upheld between the participants and their organisations may also act as a benchmark, leading to expectations of the university. Where these expectations are not met, and efforts are not made to bring the students into the embrace of the academic community, the distance between them remains (Ebaugh, 1988). For instance, one participant reported having issues with the speed at which the university dealt with student enquiries, while another reflected on timetabling and organisation; this may explain why workplace behaviours were carried through to the student role.

5.3.5. Support: Disrupted support network

Within this theme, the loss of community is discussed, based on the participants' departure from the workplace entirely. This experience has been found to connect with feelings of alienation (Adler, 1975; Christie et al., 2008; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022), where a stable network and identity motivated by shared beliefs and ideas is removed and a new one is not yet established (Peters & Waterman, 1982; Tierney, 1988; van den Berg & Wilderom, 2004). Armstrong (2009) refers to this as disidentification, emphasising the perceived distance between people, practices, and environments, likely felt quite strongly by participants studying remotely during Covid-19. As a result, the participants faced culture shock (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001) and isolation as they struggled to connect with the new setting. The literature exhibits approaches taken by institutions to help students overcome their experiences of losing support networks (Hughes & Smail, 2015), and to support students to become re-oriented and to gradually feel more prepared for their adjustment to practice, role, and community (Christie et al., 2008). Acknowledgement of this troubling encounter within the return to study emphasises the significance of implementing intervention early on (Hughes & Smail, 2015) to facilitate adjustment.

The disruption of a support network in the current study revealed much about the grieving process encountered by some learners as they moved away from established communities, friendships, environments, and roles, into the new and unfamiliar position of a PG student. This referred to their experiences with making connections in virtual spaces, taking on the cultures of new communities, and studying as international students. Notably, some of the international students in this study had relocated to the UK to consequently fulfil online studies, pointing to the two-pronged adjustment. In DS. 3 (3.12.) Arlo's image of a dry-stone wall represents her vision of a support structure, claiming that forming support is a process. This points to significant or dominant rocks or individuals, the continued repairs made to the wall or network, and the contributions or adjustments by others over time. The artefact cleverly portrays the diversity of support that the participants received and speaks to the changeable nature of this.

In the literature on culture shock, scholars reflect on homesickness, and the inaccessibility of cultural understanding (Oberg, 1960; Adler, 1975; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001), which connects closely with evidence of the participants facing additional issues pertaining to class, background, and age, qualities they once had in common with their colleagues. These results confirm Ward, Bochner and Furnham's (2001: 6) comment that "the greater the cultural gap between participants, the more difficulties they will experience", but also that "one need not sojourn outside one's country to experience culture shock or to undergo a cross-culture experience" (Adler, 1975: 13). While several participants had departed their professional communities, others referred to the continued support of their partners which helped them to acclimatise, particularly as international students. Both Arlo and Finley acknowledged the importance of weathering transition with someone that understood their circumstances; for Arlo this meant leaving behind familiar and comfortable surroundings, while Finley faced the emotional impact of cultural expectations of women at certain times of life.

The liminal position is informed by the past and future, but uncertainty about the new role and how former knowledge would benefit integration into the new environment can create feelings of instability (*ibid.*), increasing the chances of becoming marginalised (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022: 116). In the current research, Morgan explained how their professional community permeated all facets of their life, implying that the absence of their colleagues-turned-friends had left them in a vulnerable situation at the outset of their studies, with little identity left to cling to (Cruwys et al., 2021), stressing the urgency for institutional support during this time. This was also found to be troublesome for Emery, who eventually decided to integrate occasional locum shifts into their schedule so they could participate in different tasks and sustain connection with a version of themselves they reported was missing. This temporary and liminal state can be "neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification" (Turner, 1974: 232), based on the understanding that participants had not yet grasped the norms of their new role through the academic community, nor had they fully let go of the ways of being and behaving that they had come to know in their former role.

Based on Bridges (1991), transitions begin with endings before graduating to the liminal space. That the departure was such a significant part of transition corresponds with Schlossberg's (2011) moving in and out stages, indicating that transition can begin as the individual prepares for the change (Bridges, 1980). But in the context of the current study, this move may appear somewhat metaphorical, as individuals were expected to largely pursue their practices remotely and thus the experience of situating oneself in a new role or setting may have been very different to their expectations. Morgan's account of transition began with a clear departure from the workplace, with an easily identifiable end. Despite their formerly weathered encounter with HE, the radical shift in cultural norms created a deficit (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001), drawing out their stay in the liminal zone. The participants' move from a space whose identity was characterised by 'we' rather than 'I' (Donze & Gunnes, 2018: 106), bears connection with Turner's (1974) description of betweenness, reiterating the disconnectedness of the individual from their known and undiscovered surroundings – located on the periphery. Söderlund and Borg (2018: 888) also explored this betweenness of roles, underscoring the often-experienced move between "collective contexts, organizational structures, positions or professional identities".

The fact that much of the participants' studying happened remotely, also contributed to the sense of liminality. For many, this was not a usual location associated with studying, the strangeness of which was mirrored in findings by Olson (1983) who found the motivation of teleworkers was greatly impacted by their not being situated close to their work site. Like the current research, issues with belonging to a community also arose (ibid.), as they missed out on casual exchanges with colleagues, and feeling as though they occupied a space and purpose within the collective. Similarly, with no fixed site to call a workspace, the participants of Shortt's (2015) research relied on transitory dwelling spaces. These were not easily come upon in the current research as the participants and their peers were not encountering the same environments, further isolating them from one another. Because students could not interact in this haphazard way, they struggled to sense that others were encountering the same issues during their return to study (Parks, Evans & Getch, 2013; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022; Raaper, Brown & Llewellyn, 2021), preventing them from gauging the norms of the PG student

experience (see ‘mastersness’ qualities in Chapter 1: Introduction (1.2.1.)) (Bamber et al., 2013; Macleod, Barnes & Huttly, 2019). In spite of this, some participants modified their unique environments to reflect and accommodate their new role, drawing on their interpretations of expectations, and becoming familiar with tools and technologies. These comprised of notebooks and laptops that could be packed away as roles changed, mimicking the transitory nature of informal spaces.

Gale and Parker (2014) contend that transition is conceptualised in three ways, one of which is induction; this notion is synthesised in the current study, offering knowledge about student expectations and acclimatising to the returned-to setting. The exploration of induction activities at PG level is on the rise following a greater implementation of technology since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (Robb & Moffat, 2020). This conception has helped to explore how students are encouraged to develop communities early on in virtual environments. Tailored and timely resources disseminated during pre-enrolment can help students to prepare for their new role; this guidance has been known to contribute to the success of studies (Bownes et al., 2017). Support with community development early on may have prevented the participants from sensing a distance between their peers in the current study.

In order to support learners to connect with their new practice and adjust to the academic community, Bownes et al., (2017) suggest providing “‘refresher’ material online prior to Semester 1 to help bring everyone to the same starting point” (ibid.: 9), clear information regarding student expectations, “[g]eneration of study groups during early courses as part of the “official” procedure, that might then act as models for students to generate their own study groups for later courses” (ibid.: 9), and the dissemination of invitations to social events early on, amongst other recommendations. The significance of strong communication and developing relationships was resounding in their research, a finding also reflected in Morgan’s feelings of uncertainty and isolation. Morgan states,

“In comparison the first few weeks of university were very tough as so much time was spent studying solo before having the chance to make many new social

connections. Going from talking to colleagues/on the phone all day to then going through whole days without speaking to anyone else was tough.”

Earlier establishment of connections within the academic community may have offered the participants stability and confidence as they moved away from a liminal position where they experienced connection with both former and prospective roles (Robb & Moffat, 2020). This may have altered the experience of returning drastically for some participants who felt that these connections were not established at all. Arlo’s reflections on her supervisory relationship recall never having met in person, not least meeting regularly, which reinforced the disconnect that she sensed as an international student who was required to work to support her studies.

Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012) contend that transition and academic information should be disseminated gradually or even throughout the year. They also argue that the use of ‘active interventions’ can avoid issues with relationship building. Organising these relationships early on can provide opportunity for feedback from the academic community, helping new students to understand the norms of a new identity (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018), something that the participants identified was missing. An increasingly popular approach is the use of mentoring or buddy schemes (Nelson et al., 2006; Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012), which aim to overcome issues with establishing a sense of belonging and connection, helping students to fit in amongst individuals encountering similar transitions (Kasworm, Polson & Fishback, 2002; Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012); this resource had not yet been developed for the PG population at this university. It is possible that these schemes would support students to fit in to social groups and to find peers with who they share experience or connection. Despite studying remotely, forging connections with peers may have profound implications for how the students engage with their studies, and their attitude towards the experience. As outlined in Robb & Moffat (2020), students conveyed that knowledge of how others had weathered transition helped those new to the situation to feel relieved and less stressed, as reiterated by Arlo who found her concerns to be normalised when taking on the Student Representative role. Menzies and Baron (2014) and Dreznick (2022) also asserted that students felt less vulnerable with the knowledge that they were not alone in transition with their dispositions. Some participants struggled to sense the

experiences of others, like Jessie who emphasised the isolating nature of online study and the disconnection they felt from their peers. This contrasted with Charlie's experience of PG study, as she drew on earlier experiences with remote working which prepared her to be more 'sensitive and compassionate' towards others as they attempted to pursue their learning amidst other existing pursuits.

These findings emphasise the significance of becoming aware of the resources and assets available to the participants in transition, and, where this is not possible, ensuring that timely contact is made by institutions to students to instigate acculturation. Offering students tailored support, as in, information directly relating to their studies, demystifying the expectations of PG studies and academic life, may help to stabilise the uncertain time, helping students to cope with and manage their responses to the new situation.

5.4. Research Question 2: How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?

The participants shared their experiences of how particular facets of transition were informed by institutional practice carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some participants' reported feeling insufficiently supported by the university, while others suggested that the university was unaware of what support they required; based on this, the participants were inspired to draw on existing skills and behaviours to cope with the various changes. Domain summaries help present the data, organising new understanding about facilitating students' experience of role change, their assessment of the situation, and their unique actions and responses to transition in times of global crisis.

Different institutional practices influenced how transition unfolded. The ways of doing and being carried out within the institution (both remotely and on-campus) impacted how students connected with their roles, how they accessed information about PG study, and their experience with induction. The latter is important to new students because it helps with orientation; the university arranges events relating to academic practice and study skills and introduces students to the various social memberships and opportunities across the faculties.

5.4.1. Situation: Role change: Identity

The participants expressed that identity adaptation was a significant aspect of their change from a work role to a student role. The lack of certainty about the expectations of PG student roles led some participants to feel underprepared for their studies and disconnected from the institution. This was challenging for participants who had formerly worked within clear boundaries; both Arlo and Finley spoke to this distinction, reflecting on the joy of being more independent but that often this meant relying on interpretations of institutional information. A very gradual identity renegotiation through interactions with others in the academic community allowed the participants to grasp who they were going to be in the new setting (Blume, 2010). Re-defining themselves as students (Ibarra, 2003) was a lengthy process; the data illustrated how becoming part of the academic community was

challenging owing to the literal distance between peers because of remote study, as well as an absence of institutional support during this time. Arlo explained that within her adjustment to PG study, she also faced a new academic system and discipline, which created a multifaceted transition. To manage these different situations, the participants sought support with developing academic skills, and with nurturing networks and friendships. The significance of casual exchanges during this time likely influenced the connections between peers, something Jones et al. (2023a: 81) contend is required to develop a 'virtual community'.

The data shows how the participants brought various skillsets from their unique workplace practices (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022); like those sites, the university also implemented an institutional practice that did not always align with the students' known ways of being or of working. As Finley showed, the regular communication and feedback she was accustomed to was scarce in the new setting, creating uncertainties that prevented her from feeling included in the academic community. Understanding how established values and behaviours could be integrated into PG study was felt to be essential in helping students in transition to adjust to their PG studies. The disorientating nature of this, was depicted in DS.5 (3.12.) by Finley. A photograph of the university library taken at an angle is aimed at a distant focal point. The various visual elements (shelves, stairs, lines) speak to her search for structure, while simultaneously implying a distance between herself and clarity.

The independent practice faced by the PG students contrasted drastically with their workplace practices, although their former ways of working were found to be very effective for completing their studies. The data exhibited an absence of autonomy in the workplace, which led to new challenges in the academy, however compatibility of some existing skills supported participants to cope. For instance, workplace responsibility helped them to be more accountable for their learning, while others continued to feel excluded by on-going assumptions about PGs. Some of the data suggests that the participants' development in the workplace may have been limited by their organisational culture, structure, or role specification, creating difficulty with managing independent practice in the new situation. It was also felt that the relationships sustained in the study and working settings differed significantly,

because of the contrasting practices performed by members of the communities, requiring further alterations in the learners' behaviours and interactions. Notably, Hunter felt disconnected from her colleagues, which became increasingly apparent as she discovered academics with whom she shared values and interests, and who affirmed the significance of her contributions.

The lingering force of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the frequently changing sites of learning, had created confusion over where students associated their identities with. The identities of the learners appeared to be heavily influenced by their former and continuing professional pursuits. The lasting association with old ways of being shed light on why the participants struggled at times to project who they felt they were meant to be, and what the definition of a PG student was.

As demonstrated in previous studies, the experience of transition, becoming a member of a new community, and taking on a new strand of identity, can be a challenging endeavour bringing about internal conflict (Ibarra, 2003). Deciding which parts of a known identity to let go of and how to recruit characteristics of a new identity can lead individuals to a temporary space where they identify with very little of either (Turner, 1974; Schlossberg, 2011); this conflict is known to create issues with developing self-definition (Ibarra, 2003). The data presented several ways that the participants felt different from their peers, indicating that there were contrasting characteristics emerging. Some participants indicated that they felt unable to control how their transition was unfolding, which only added to their difficulty in negotiating identity and taking on the new role. An example of this is Arlo, who was forced into multimembership by necessity; to qualify for funding she studied full-time, but she then topped up the additional funds required by carrying out a professional role alongside her studies.

At the start of term, induction often includes more advanced students and alumni, the student union, and student ambassadors, along with advertisements for volunteering and jobs to complement one's study (Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022). This introduction to the range of characters participating in the academic community can help new students to build connections and find their place (ibid.). Institutional support has become increasingly accessible and accommodating to PG students

owing to the growing implementation of technology, which has supported students unable to attend on-campus to meet their peers and receive important course information; examples might include a Q&A panel with staff and former students, or the use of breakout rooms and tools like Mentimeter or Kahoot to encourage student participation and contribution. Online provision during the Covid-19 pandemic aimed to include students participating in various modes, it was also used to ensure that those with families and jobs also felt included, as they are often restricted in how and how often they can participate (Remenick, 2019). For details on the provision offered during the 2021-2022 academic year at the host university see Chapter 3: Methodology (3.5.6.).

Gale and Parker (2014) contend that conceptualising transition as induction suggests that the experience has definitive start and end dates, but as the participants evidenced here, their adjustment to the university spanned much of the academic year - despite McClure's (2007) assumption that a PG transition usually lasts around six months. There is some overlap in these conceptualisations, however, because if the institution focuses on the students' identification with the university, the institution was also thought to be prioritising development, which is durational (Gale & Parker, 2014) and not fixed in place or time (Quinn, 2010), thus suggesting that for the purpose of student development induction may need to last longer.

Slay and Smith (2011: 87) argue that the individual's position within the new environment is reinforced by the meaning of their relationships, a point further developed by Popov (2020), who contends that as the learner reviews the behaviours and interactions carried out within the academy, they are supported to become situated, and their role within the new setting may become clearer. Based on Cotterall (2011) and Martin, Lord and Warren-Smith (2020), it is conceivable that these interactions hold the key to accessing a student identity. The exchanges between individuals may reveal commonalities of an identity and the expectations of those carrying out a student role, further informing and affirming their self-definition; the experience of co-creating identity is known to facilitate the individual to move in and out of a situation with the knowledge of who they are in that relationship (Jackson II, 2002). Through this facet of transition, students gain access to

“university culture in general and the conventions and expectations of students’ individual disciplines in particular” (Beasley & Pearson, 1999: 303). As is evidenced in Jessie’s narrative, these connections were not easily made in the current research, owing to the inconsistency of learning environments, and their implication that very few opportunities were provided by the university to build communities, which meant few circumstances in which to try on identities (Ibarra, 2003).

Taking work by Home (1998), the notion of role change relating to identity appears to exhibit instances of role conflict and role contagion. The data shows how conflict and contagion may overlap, because of the remote nature of much of the participants’ studies. At times, this meant bearing connection with many strands of identity all at once, which, as Schlossberg (2011) contends, can arise as an individual in transition moves between roles. The participants that continued pursuing their professional roles alongside their PG studies, showed that they were often splitting their time between practices and negotiating who they were; Charlie demonstrated ways that they achieved balance between their demands, which included creating boundaries around tasks using different tools. This was made more complicated for the participants experiencing predominantly remote provision, as they were faced with changing roles in a situation where much else stayed the same, unleashing the potential for different or multiple identities to influence the situation, opening room for disruption and inconsistencies.

Literature on PG study reveals distinct approaches taken by universities to support students to build communities that go beyond the walls of the classroom (Armstrong, 2009; Hall, 2010; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Robb & Moffat, 2020). Without students having the opportunity to engage with a wealth of student societies (often established by students themselves), staff are known for going to great lengths to assign students to reading groups, tutor groups, and group projects, to encourage connecting on social media and participating in forums on the University’s virtual learning environments, as well as motivating students to express an interest in conferences and academic collaboration. However, based on the lack of reflection on these activities by the participants, the data indicated that studying on a PG course in a time so fiercely influenced by the lingering Covid-19 pandemic required resources that tended to the needs of students unique to that period. The limited

support offered by the university to the participants pointed to the responsibility placed on individual students to find ways of becoming part of the community; this revealed gaps in the provision that students sought, preventing what Gale and Parker (2014) describe as 'becoming'. Arlo embraced this responsibility, as reflected in her role as Student Representative and the influence of this on becoming part of a community; while helping her to know peers better, she also gained a sense of purpose within the academy through a role defined by institutional norms.

While belonging to different groups and memberships was found to be a common characteristic of individuals in the academic community, for both staff and students, the data confirmed that greater support was needed from the institution to ground the students more firmly in their studies, particularly as evidence showed the participants' workplace organisations were keen to encourage and foster their learning experiences. A 'living bridge' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) connecting the work and study domains to show how the competing pursuits might instead enrich one another, may help the students to achieve balance between their roles.

Overall, the data demonstrates the significance of providing access to information about the PG student role prior to the pursuit of study, offering timely and relevant information, particularly when universities are facing unprecedented circumstances. In becoming aware of students' prior experience with education and by offering information early on to support their preparedness, universities can help students to adapt in the new setting. Clarity regarding the expectations of students and staff and how to integrate this knowledge into existing frames and identities appears to be critical yet largely absent in supporting students to adjust. Clarification is likely to enable individuals to engage with knowledge about student identities, despite the continued influence of their external networks, without relying on interacting with a live academic community. Considering the participants' role change and identity adjustment may inform the approaches taken by institutions to help students prepare for their adjustment to university life and study and the changes entailed. It is possible that where there is an absence of information about the student role, students may rely on having their differences in common to attempt a co-construction of identity (Blume, 2010), just as Arlo did with their international community. Where one can observe the experience of difference in another, they

may choose to be empathetic. This empathy may lead to understanding or acceptance, whereby the meaning made from this interaction rests as the foundation of a co-constructed identity.

It was insinuated by the participants that remote study hindered their opportunities to develop a student identity, suggesting that greater assessment of the resources, platforms, and pedagogies employed to facilitate community building online is required (Martzoukou et al., 2020; Stone, Downing & Dymont, 2021; O'Dea & Stern, 2022). This exploration of role change reveals that by offering ways to take on a student identity, there is a better chance for individuals to connect with and build relationships with others who share this identification, thus bringing the student in from the periphery of the community. Exploring how the values and expectations of the academy can be effectively communicated online through the provision of training and preparatory courses might also be significant.

5.4.2. Situation: Assessment: Moving In (Negative)

The data shows that the participants lacked knowledge of the expectations of the student role from the outset. This absence of information had considerable impact on the part-time students, who were challenged to balance their various demands within and beyond their studies. The participants reported that this issue was neither relieved nor recognised by the university, in some cases leading the participants to feel that they did not matter (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). Harley demonstrated this issue as they reported that “the part-time group has not been organised. Instead, we are thrown into full time cohort and share the same timetable and deadlines”. This appeared to leave the part-time students stranded at the periphery of a student identity, where they had little access to support or knowledge of the academic community (Babineau & Packard, 2008; Kasworm, 2008). Similarly, full-time students like Finley reported that the lack of feedback from staff and uncertainty about how to build on existing knowledge only added to the ambiguity of the role. These experiences indicated that transition could be made more challenging by the barriers preventing access to the norms and expectations of the community and corresponded with Blume’s (2010, 2015) work on identity renegotiation, contending that moving between memberships is made possible by a good understanding of the identities and relationships within each situation. The importance of this was conveyed by Scott et al. (2011) who found that PG students often favoured social connections made within the institution above the acquisition of knowledge, because feedback from the community informs students about how they are progressing and adjusting. On the contrary, the participants’ expectations regarding communication and time management were not met (Hunter), leaving a gap in their understanding.

Corresponding with previous research, the data shows that some participants felt isolated from their PG studies (Nelson et al., 2006; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022; Salta et al., 2022; Yeo & Li, 2022), which may be attributed to the remote nature of study during the pandemic. As a result of the limited opportunities provided (particularly to part-time students) to build communities or to participate fully in their studies, they encountered fewer occasions in which to make meaning of the experience (Winn et al., 2006; Blume, 2010, 2015; Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). Hunter was faced with different barriers to

participation, which slowed down relationship building for her; these included having to carry out a professional role to fund her full-time studies, the remote nature of interactions, and being in a new city only added to the isolation. This was consistent with Arlo who had also left a familiar setting for the UK.

The findings depict the diversity of the current PG population, simultaneously revealing that the experience of teaching and learning had not been designed with diversity in mind. The participants discussed participating in terms of how they accessed resources and materials, their academic community, the learning environment, and how they took on academic practice; the data revealed that participation looked different for students studying in different modes. In the current research, Harley emphasised that the timetabling did not consider the availability of part-time students, and that sometimes cohorts were merged, suggesting that materials and activities were not always developed for different modes of study. The part-time students were not always able to attend these merged activities because of existing commitments, which demonstrated that their programme required the students to compromise rather than encounter a tailored experience. This knowledge is consistent with Griffin and Gilbert (2015: 95) who said that more information about the heterogeneity of students is required to meet their unique needs. As part-time students often continue to pursue other commitments beyond the university, it is paramount to consider how they can be supported to sustain their connection with learning as their external networks and demands push and pull them between roles and identities (Brunton & Buckley, 2020; Jafar, 2022). Arlo reported that her studies were influenced by financial and structural barriers. Notably, her supervisor showed no compassion for her need to work to support her studies, which hampered their relationship and reinforced Arlo's perceived differences with others in the department.

While some participants reported that having the option to participate in their studies online helped them to navigate their commitments, they also explained how the experience could not be compared to in-person teaching and learning, as they reflected on technical glitches and communication not being so free-flowing. This is not the first instance of this issue arising in research on the student experience in higher education; Gale and Parker (2014) identified transition types to suggest that

greater understanding of students' lived realities is needed to support their attempts to navigate change, and these transitions could eventually be facilitated by institutional policy and practice undergoing modifications based on such knowledge. This finding calls for provision designed with specific populations of student in mind. Provision will be discussed in more detail in the Implications for Institutional Practice towards the end of this chapter (5.6.: Implications 2, 4 and 5).

The data shows how some participants continued to participate in the workplace, creating a 'multimembership'. The students' participation in roles external to the university shows how important it is for information about the student role to be accessible beyond the physical campus, indicating, as Saar, Täht and Roosalu (2014) do, that resources may not yet adequately meet the demands of part-time and remote students. The importance of having information located in accessible spaces was highlighted in Littlejohn et al. (2021) who shared the significance of designated spaces to support identification. The participants suggested that these resources should comprise of greater opportunity for building social connections, mechanisms for managing multiple roles and workloads, and that the methods of communication across the academic community need to be reconsidered. It was felt that these resources would work to support the development of a student identity.

As also expressed by Lave and Wenger (1991), the inability to participate in collaborative activity meant that students could not co-construct their student identities and owing to the few commonalities between the PG students, little existed to bring them together. If there is an assumption that PG students are already expert learners (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010; Bownes et al., 2017), then it is likely that insufficient support would be offered. As Arlo highlighted, the institution's inability to acknowledge her existing competence sent mixed messages about its suitability to the setting and whether it may enhance her PG experience. As Cotterall (2011) reported in their study, bringing students together with 'old-timers' (Lave & Wenger, 1991), those familiar with academic practice and/or the learning environment, can be an effective approach to integrating the learners into the community. The literature presents examples of how universities have offered support of this kind to facilitate student integration, including the use of buddy schemes and transition programmes, as well as induction activities like guided tours,

group meetings, and forums (Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022; Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012).

The work the participants were doing on the boundary was consistent with Bencherki and Snack's (2016) findings, explaining how membership in other pursuits allows different behaviours and rituals to be carried across contexts. The participants' partial participation was a result of their lack of familiarity with peers, independent academic practice, as well as the continued pursuit of work and working from home by some. They demonstrated how being steeped in a particular context, such as work, and bringing practices, values, and beliefs, from that context to a new one will have a negative effect on forming community in the new context. The languages and symbols of these contexts are often connected to very specific practices, simultaneously including and excluding individuals. Where the traits associated with a former identity felt more stable, the student appeared to encounter difficulty integrating (Askham, 2008; Martin et al., 2014). This difficulty emphasised the significance of the support offered to PG students, particularly as they are known to have demands beyond their studies, giving them opportunity to create identities based on the relationships they encounter (Blume, 2015) that they can confidently turn on and turn off as they change contexts. This notion is also consistent with Cruwys et al. (2021), who determined that having a host of identities at hand during transition can protect and support an individual as they enter temporarily unstable positions; these different groups and resources can contribute to coping in distinctive ways. The students' memberships might also facilitate connections between their lived experiences, or between their studies and professional practice, for instance, if the students had participated in a university society centred on a shared interest or experience (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012). It is possible that the students might receive support from a group of individuals who they can relate to and compare their experiences with, not simply a 'PG society' or a 'mature student society', but a group more explicitly on the periphery of their 'multimemberships', more explicitly working and studying simultaneously, in which vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms could be shared. As a result, they are less dependent on support from staff (Menzies & Baron, 2014).

The implementation of technology within teaching and learning has meant that individuals can now continue to participate in their studies despite the physical distance between them and the university. While the research showed that flexibility was beneficial for the participants who were able to save time and better manage their various commitments through remote participation at less conventional times of day (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Couch, O'Sullivan & Malatzky, 2021), a contrary view in previous scholarship was that having access to learning in this way can lead to difficulty in 'switching off' (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Consequently, this can result in individuals feeling overwhelmed and overworked, as well as experiencing role conflict (Home, 1998). Role conflict can be encountered when one finds the demands of many pursuits coming to a head, spilling over into another, competing for attention; whereas contagion may occur when an individual is tasked with focusing on one thing but becomes distracted by another, that is, when one becomes aware of other tasks, which intrude and divert the worker. However, the participants in the current study demonstrated their proficiency in assigning different tools to manage the competing demands of their roles and multipurpose workspaces.

While participating remotely brought about opportunity for connection and interaction, the participants reported that without being able to observe "what is done, how it is done" (Tierney, 1988: 3) on campus, they faced interruptions to their student identity development and their attempts to belong. This was emphasised by Jessie who reported that online classes offered infrequent opportunity to contribute and discuss the learning material with peers. The lack of consideration for integrating the learners into the academic community led the participants to employ coping mechanisms acquired elsewhere, although this behaviour continued to separate them from their peers. While the reason for this experience was not made explicit, it is worth considering the style of online sessions, for instance whether it was a seminar or lecture, and what tools were encouraged to disseminate information. Involuntary remote study was also spurred on by university strikes; this jarring reality indicated to Arlo that the felt distance separating the community might not be exclusive to the pandemic but rather rooted in institutional politics, influencing her outlook on the academy generally.

According to Blume (2010), to co-construct identity an individual must encounter the projection of values and beliefs from another person through interaction, creating a narrative that lives at the heart of their relationship. Without these interactions, as the data in the current study has revealed, it is possible that connections will not be made between individuals, preventing them from grasping the expectations of their role. The participants' struggle to learn about and take on a student identity implied that insufficient support was provided by the university to help the students cope with role change during transition (Powers, 2010; Karmelita, 2016). This finding was unsurprising, as it has been reported by Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2022: 150) that "We are not what we were, nor are we clear about who we should be and what is expected of us". No longer in the workplace, but not sufficiently inducted into the academy, these returning students appeared to be liminal and facing potential marginality, as expressed by Schlossberg (1981).

As shared by Blume (2010, 2015), the opportunity to experience identity was paramount for the participants as they were required to move in and out of professional, private, and academic spaces, which for some time took the form of a single location. The part-time students reported having fewer opportunities to experience the academic community, which limited their understanding of a student identity, consequently, it was felt that consideration for additional ways for them to access and learn about the norms of a student identity would be particularly important. This comment is also made considering the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in considerably more studying taking place remotely than the students might have expected; their preparedness for remote study varied across the dataset.

There was a clear divide between the participants who benefited from the implementation of technology and those who found the experience isolating and alienating. It seems likely that the participants who were 'multimembers', owing to their continued participation in the workplace, viewed the experience of studying online more positively because they had already encountered a sense of belonging to various networks, whereas those studying full-time appeared to be more reliant on the online space for community. This finding suggests that more research is required to understand how communities can be developed and fostered in online environments.

5.4.3. Strategy: Responses that modify the situation

The knowledge and skillsets acquired throughout the participants' time in the workplace were enacted in various ways as they adjusted to PG study during the Covid-19 pandemic, based on their predominant frame of reference and identity, leading them to feel more in control of their move back to study. Their experiences with various working patterns had influenced their time management; as a result, the participants were able to bring structure to their studies, which helped them to manage their workloads, academic practice, and to balance their pursuits. As they implemented known traits in the new role, the participants inspired the meaning of the relationships established between peers and staff in their new situation. An example is Hunter's confirmation from an academic member of staff that they had made the right decision to return to study, and that Hunter was making a valuable contribution. This interaction impressed greatly on the way Hunter felt about her choice to return to HE. Some of the participants referred to feeling like an imposter in the university, because of how they perceived their contribution to their learning in comparison to peers but described how they overcame this because of the interactions they eventually participated in, confirming the value of their input to the shared learning experience. Charlie also discussed how their contributions in the classroom based on their experience in industry was gradually warmed to by peers, providing Charlie with affirmation as their peers responses offered feedback. This finding echoes issues acknowledged in the literature about students holding on to and implementing existing identities (Brockmann & Laurie, 2016). The participants' choice to employ their knowledge of the workplace within their PG study revealed the assets they had available, some of them consciously implemented skills too, like "writing professional emails, cold calling, networking" (Arlo). The data suggests that the little information provided to students about their role and independent practice left them to their own devices, a point also made by Robb and Moffat (2020: 47).

Blume (2010) explained how the projection of established identities in different settings requires a response from others to develop co-constructed meaningful identities. Charlie explicitly shared her professional identity early on in their studies, which led to a gradually modified version of self as staff and peers responded to and valued their contributions (Lundberg, 2003; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Charlie's outlook grew more positive owing to their renegotiated

identity, which corresponded with earlier work by Cooper (1999) who promoted the significance of valuing individual contributions in a learning setting to foster students' engagement.

The fusing of one practice characteristic into another, enabled the participants to open their identities up to be influenced and changed by the events of the new situation (Blume, 2010); the actors and activities of the new setting influenced how the participants related to and found meaning within their return to study. For instance, participants implemented working traits, attitudes, and knowledge into their student role, as well as approaches to team work and views on organising tasks. This is an example of traits moving in and out of the foreground to help cope with a situation, the relationships, or interactions within a space (Blume, 2015).

There was no indication in the data that the participants were supported to employ and enrich these assets early in their course of study. Very few of the participants reported that their competence was acknowledged by the academic community, revealing that former experiences were not being recognised or drawn upon, making it difficult for returning students to share their expertise. Unable to nurture their established practices, or access knowledge on adjusting to the new academic practice, the participants' narratives revealed how problematic identity renegotiation was. As Blume (2015) claimed, to modify ingrained ways of being and knowing, on-going interactions between individuals is required. This claim corresponds with Jafar's (2022) research in Canada, which showed that mature students felt that institutional support, particularly the careers services, were unable to support students to develop professionally or to prepare for more advanced opportunities.

The participants' earlier practices were kept alive in strands of their identity and were drawn upon at various intervals during their PG study (Blume, 2015) suggesting that institutional practices (teaching and pastoral) influence different parts of study as individuals construct their understanding based on previous knowledge and experience. The participants may have established an alternative version of a student identity because of their interactions within on-going relationships with colleagues, compared to their student counterparts who may have taken a more linear path in education. Obtaining knowledge of the PG students' former practices

would support educators to tailor their teaching styles, including the academic and pastoral aspects of their relationships.

Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010: 274) characterise the concept of independent practice, commonly pursued at PG level, as “an absence of information rather than an active facilitation of helpful practices”, which is consistent with the findings in the current study. As little information was provided to the participants about the expectations of their role, they expressed feeling companionless and detached from the academic community rather than independent. Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010: 275) state that “The principal method of participating in an academic community as a postgraduate student was experienced by participants, paradoxically, as becoming independent”. The students are then tasked with finding ways to undertake participatory learning, as shown by Arlo who found that in becoming a Student Representative she discovered commonalities with peers sharing in her concerns, notably as an international network.

The participants implemented various workplace behaviours to overcome the uncertainties brought about by the independent practice and becoming autonomous learners (Robb & Moffat, 2020); notably, the difficulty with defining autonomy is an on-going issue identified in the literature (QAA Scotland, 2013), thus was unsurprising. The lack of information communicated about autonomy indicated a positive spillover. Independent practice was interpreted as being subjective, and heavily informed by the coping mechanisms available to the student embarking on transition. Overall, it was felt that recognition of the PG students' former experiences was required to evaluate the preparedness of the learners to take on PG study and to consider the resources necessary to bring individuals to the same starting point (Bownes et al., 2017: 9). The responses and behaviours of the returning students may determine how the pedagogical practices of the institution are accepted and understood by them.

The difficulty the participants had adjusting to academic practice showed that they were not experts in the returned-to setting, as previously discussed by O'Donnell et al. (2009) and Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010). The participants' workplace skillsets led them to redefine the concept of independent practice, as they employed

these assets to cope with the ambiguities and uncertainties experienced. Their earlier workplace experiences differed from one another's leading to variations of strategies being employed. The participants' ability to move away from these behaviours also seemed like it might correlate with the duration of their participation in their working role; however, only data indicating years away from HE was recorded, rather than years in employment, meaning that this can only be hypothesised. This hypothesis can be explained by Finley's case; she was employed as a magazine editor for six years and consequently found it particularly challenging to adjust her writing style without continued support from staff. How independent practice was communicated by the participants differed; the findings showed that they had contrasting encounters with information exchange, which can be traced back to their mode of PG study and whether they were able to establish institutional relationships.

The participants drew upon knowledge of the workplace to cope with their return to PG study suggesting that they were becoming autonomous. The decision to respond to institutional challenges using old frames of reference demonstrated their ability to overcome the absence of information by adapting their established knowledge for a new environment. The self-directed nature of independent study appeared most problematic for the participants, which encouraged some to continue implementing former working patterns, while others maintained rigid and competitive attitudes to manage their workloads. Some participants found that the institutional norms of engaging with and communicating knowledge was fundamentally different to what they had been used to as they were less transparent, but these issues were overcome by their implementation of soft skills, in particular problem solving. Through their actions, the participants demonstrated their ability to bridge the two contexts by relocating skills.

Smith (2006) contended that participation in the workplace can positively influence and prepare an individual for taking on another role, although the value of this knowledge in the university was largely absent in the data, with only one participant, Charlie, expressing that they were encouraged to share their knowledge of the subject from an industry perspective. Charlie explained how they shared their knowledge of the market, products, and human need, which was found to

complement the course content. The learning undertaken in Charlie's former working role appeared to help them to fit into the academic community. The strategies employed to manage workloads and structure time appeared to be based on former frames of reference indicating a continuation of performance, thus begging the questions of how and if this knowledge can be credited in the new setting (European Commission, 2012; Saar, Täht & Roosalu, 2014). Arlo illustrates the value of prior or existing workplace roles; as a former policy analyst, she felt better prepared to meet the demands of modules as she had previously grasped an understanding of the complex subject matter through first-hand experience.

Lawy, Bloomer and Biesta (2004) found little consideration for the wider contexts of students' lives in learning design, preventing them from building relations and links between knowledge. The data showed how the spillover of workplace knowledge contributed to the shared learning experience, despite this uncovering more differences than similarities within the PG cohorts. The notion of positive and negative spillover is considered in the literature to describe the ways that different pursuits, contexts, and communities influence one another (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). In the current research, skillsets from the workplace have been drawn upon, representing positive spillover. This finding speaks to Ellemers' (1993) earlier work, where they describe how individuals bring different facets of identity into the fore to cope with or to benefit a situation. This understanding was later outlined in Blume (2010, 2015) too, where identities are described as mobile, changeable, and co-constructed. There were however instances in the data where negative spillover occurred in the behaviours of the participants, as their former approaches to completing assignments and managing workloads was conflicting with the collective practice of the learning environment. Based on these findings, it is reasonable that the participants carrying out multiple roles in a single space may have also encountered spillover, as symbols from other identities interrupted their pursuits.

While it is true that many programmes within higher education accept credits for earlier studies and work placements, the participants in the current study felt that they maintained and contributed a valuable but overlooked set of characteristics to the learning setting – skills that are not necessarily or explicitly accredited or valued by the institution. The significance of these contributions, as well as coping

mechanisms, require further exploration, and may benefit from consideration of horizontal expertise where information is moved across and between contexts. As the landscape of learners continues to evolve, it is possible that knowledge of how these traits can be developed to suit the learning setting better will be beneficial to future learners. Consideration for their work-oriented approach may influence how transition is understood throughout the institution, and thus influence the support made available (Dane, 2022).

Based on the data, the participants did not report feeling supported to integrate their prior knowledge into their studies. These issues could be addressed through the modification of teaching practices, not simply becoming more inclusive, but also by becoming aware of the significance of continued professional practice for individuals studying at this level. The continued implementation of widening participation initiatives recruiting learners from various demographics and backgrounds should be required to consider the needs and diverse experiences brought to the learning experience. By taking these factors into account when designing programmes, it is possible that institutions will encounter greater student satisfaction and retention rates. Existing studies have indicated the significance of taking earlier learning into account, particularly for academic activities including self-assessments, reflective work, language skills, academic literacy, and career planning (Rezaiefar et al., 2019; Coneyworth et al., 2020), but also to understand the preparedness of students to carry out their studies (Bamber et al., 2019). The latter may be particularly informative when gauging how capable students are at being independent and autonomous learners. Further to this, by considering the distinct needs of learners, the institution may find that they raise standards of equality, leading to students feeling better supported to participate.

5.5. Limitations of the study

Looking back over the current research, limitations have been identified. Thought has been given to the contributions of the findings to the higher education (HE) landscape, and how the experience of studying during a pandemic is understood. The considerations are listed below, along with suggestions for addressing these limitations and how to improve further research.

5.5.1. Limitation 1: The Population and Sample

The research sample comprised nine participants who were all PG students at the time of data collection and were studying either full-time or part-time at the university. While the qualitative data offered great depth of understanding, it is possible that the findings are not easily transferable. The sheer quantity of data obtained was owing to data being collected at numerous intervals throughout the academic year.

This relatively small sample was drawn from the large PG population at a single research-intensive university, considered a 'Global University'. Drawing from this population may limit the findings to predominantly representing the experiences of an international student body, not forgetting the experiences of those at a prestigious research-intensive university. At times it was unclear which reflections related to the experience of returning to study from the workplace, and which documented their experiences of studying abroad. The on-going Covid-19 pandemic also meant that the host university was selected for convenience, albeit a suitable research-driven environment.

To participate in the current research, students had to be enrolled on a PG programme at the university, to have undertaken a minimum of one year of work prior to that, and to have previously obtained a bachelor's degree (or equivalent). This led to expressions of interest being received from students who had encountered a wide range of professional experiences. This was a valuable representation of the contemporary PG landscape, enhancing the subjectivity of the experiences reported. On reflection, recruitment based on the experiences of faculties or departments, or perhaps professions or working patterns, might have

helped to generate themes representative of certain populations, thus producing knowledge applicable to divisions of the university. The data also indicated that some participants had carried out their working roles for longer than others; this difference may have influenced the experience of returning to study, though this was not made explicit in the current research.

Despite these shortcomings, the data covered many facets of transition as documented in Schlossberg's work (2008), and provided insight into the varied backgrounds, experiences, and roles held by the current PG population at this university, particularly during this unfamiliar and uncertain time. Capturing the insight of a larger sample and multiple university sites would lead to an enriched understanding of transition.

5.5.2. Limitation 2: Data and Data Collection

Individual level data

The qualitative data collected throughout the study took the form of written email diaries, visual stimuli in response to the digital storytelling tasks, and follow-up interviews. While this created a bounty of data, and in many ways produced full and informative narratives, the absence of individual/identifiable data meant that reporting the findings at times felt that personalisation was lacking. The case studies (3.12.) present unique narratives capturing participants' home/international status, gender, profession, and time between levels of study, but it was felt that information including age, location, background, length of time in profession, and other unique identifying characteristics might have explained the adjustment to postgraduate study during the pandemic more fully.

In hindsight, a better understanding of the heterogeneity of the sample would have provided useful outcomes, addressing certain communities or populations and could have contributed to a gap in the literature about how different demographics experience the return to study, and possibly transition. Knowledge of personal attributes may have contributed to the interpretation of the data telling the participants apart. Ultimately, while these details may not have developed a general

depiction of the return to study, they were able to illustrate the differences encountered, addressing the research questions.

Digital storytelling

It was felt that the digital storytelling task was the most challenging method to participants. While I was determined to support participants to convey their experiences in ways that they felt most comfortable, it transpired that this approach was confusing for some of them. Some participants reported not having enough time available to come up with a creative response, while others struggled to understand what was required of them to complete the task. While my drive to include this method stemmed from a desire to create a space for authentic representations of experience during the pandemic, I was also drawn to it because of my own creative background. My interest in this method may have led to assumptions being made about the participants' enthusiasm for communicating in this way.

The digital storytelling outcomes were explored through photo-elicitation in the follow-up interviews, which led to a co-construction of meaning, and are presented in the participant case studies (3.12., Appendix 13 and 14). By presenting these images back to the participants in the interviews, they were reminded of the data they had initially shared when temporal distance was minimal. While this method had initially caused some confusion to participants that were unfamiliar with disseminating ideas this way, it eventually revealed some unexpected benefits to the research; this predominantly included ensuring accurate recall of experience during the interviews. To use this approach more effectively in qualitative research, one might consider placing more emphasis on this aspect during recruitment, so that participants feel more prepared for the tasks. Presenting fewer questions in the email diary entry task may also have given them more time and less pressure to complete the creative tasks. This vast data was beneficial as I began piecing together a depiction of possible transitions, however the subjectivity of these extensive narratives made selection of the most significant themes difficult. Therefore, I was tasked with collating the data and representing the participants' stories, without overcomplicating them or losing meaning.

5.5.3. Limitation 3: Carrying out year-long research

I principally decided to carry out a year-long piece of research so that I could document transition over the academic year, and to document how Covid-19 played into the return to study. Owing to the difference in questions and topics at each data collection stage, the time aspect of transition was not well documented. Capturing the influence of time on the return to study was also made difficult by some participants not participating in all data collection points; the most informed collection point being the first one. Despite being flexible with submission timings, students faced their own programme deadlines and exams, which rightly distracted them from the research. There were no incentives offered to participants, apart from emphasising the value of reflecting on this experience within education.

The issues faced regarding participation might be overcome by choosing different times of year to collect data (based on PG term dates), or by simply beginning the study with a larger sample to avoid the impact of drop-out rates. It is possible that an alternative research method would also support students to participate in the research without taking too much of their time; for instance, focus groups can be very effective and reflective opportunities to gather qualitative data. Carrying these out remotely (online) might also add to the ease of participating.

5.5.4. Limitation 4: Covid-19

Carrying out research during a global pandemic was a challenge, but it was a significant shared global experience in which large amounts of necessary learning could occur – new knowledge may have included how to prepare universities to manage crisis, and the development of digital pedagogies. It was important to situate the data in the context of these circumstances as the findings were interpreted. This unprecedented encounter impressed immensely upon the experience of returning to study, and is evident in much of the data, particularly the participants' responses to remote study.

From the outset of the research, I was restricted by how I could recruit participants. Accessing the population remotely was challenging, and finding gatekeepers was only possible through email correspondence. Although I had previously envisioned

advertising my research opportunity on flyers and university message boards on campus, I eventually had to rely on members of staff to disseminate the research instead. I was aware that I was placing an additional demand upon academic staff, during a time where many were already facing challenges from their own faculties and departments. To achieve the widest possible reach, I contacted every head of department at the university across all 11 faculties. When the university re-opened its campus to students, it became apparent that the research would have benefited from recruiting students both remotely and through on-campus advertisements; this would have catered to the courses that had adopted blended or hybrid styles of teaching and learning, for students choosing to attend campus.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, data had to be collected remotely to abide by health and safety guidelines. While this was not an issue for the email diary entries or the digital storytelling, it was felt that in-person follow-up interviews might have been preferable to some participants. My proficiency in using online communication tools like Zoom to record conversations facilitated the success of the online interviews. However, collecting data in this way might be anxiety inducing for participants not confident in utilising these platforms.

It was also felt that an in-person follow-up interview might have made the year-long experience more tangible and enjoyable for both the participants and the researcher. It would have enabled a human connection, and to put a face or voice to the writing. Building rapport and relationships with participants, particularly over longer periods of research, has been known to encourage participants to stay engaged with the experience (O'Reilly, 2012; Saunders & Townsend, 2019).

5.5.5. Limitation 5: Questions not asked

Although there were sufficient opportunities to ask the participants questions throughout the research (three times, plus a follow-up interview), it was felt that the research might have yielded quite different outcomes or rather explored the experience of returning to study in a very different way with the inclusion of other questions.

In limitation 1, the significance of understanding whether the participants are home or international students is considered. While the data in the current study has not fallen short of comparisons between experiences of returning to learning, further questioning of this information would offer another layer including a richer understanding of circumstances, environments, and social and cultural differences.

Some of the participants referred to their former studies in HE, one explained that their experience of returning to study was influenced by the short gap between their former and current studies, while the other reflected on the changes made in their life following their first experience with HE. More explicit questions about the participants' earlier experiences in school or in their undergraduate studies may have provided greater insight pertaining to their student identities.

The participants were not required to state where they had completed their BA (or equivalent) studies, however information about their experiences of studying at other universities, different types of universities (other than Russell Group), or across different subjects and disciplines would have helped gather insight of provision across the HE landscape, and helpful comparisons beyond Covid-19. This knowledge may have helped to characterise different areas of the landscape, and to learn about the range of needs and types of support that exist. This insight may also be significant in illustrating that the experience of transition is situated in a much wider context surrounded by other experiences of studying and working; these facets of experience may reveal much about if and how transition and identity renegotiation take place.

5.6. Implications for Institutional Practice

Based on the findings of the current study, this next section presents implications for institutional practice which suggest areas for consideration within the institution, predominantly on a local level although these might be considered further afield when taking in to account the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and how to prepare for crisis situations in future. These implications are predominantly aimed at academic staff, although the insight may also be of benefit to workplaces and organisations, and helpful for prospective students preparing for study. The six implications offer an overview of the issues captured in the findings, with suggestions for ways to explore the matters further, for the benefit of future postgraduate (PG) learners, and education during crisis situations.

The section is structured by the two research questions. To address the first research question **What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?** I have proposed three implications:

- (1) Recognising diversity: setting aside assumptions
- (2) Multimembership: the new norm
- (3) Becoming autonomous: ready or not?

The second research question **How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?** also yielded three implications for institutions:

- (1) Accessing institutional practice: the role of induction
- (2) Increasing participation but reducing satisfaction
- (3) Technology: creating a more inclusive space.

To conclude this section, I provide suggestions for further research based on gaps in the field that have been identified through the findings of the current research.

Research Question 1 - What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?

5.6.1. Recognising Diversity: setting aside assumptions

A significant finding was the diversity of the postgraduates (PGs), and their wide-ranging attributes. While the evolution of this student population is not surprising based on recent scholarship exploring massification, internationalisation, competition for employment, returning learners, non-linear transitions to higher education (HE), and student identity, it was remarkable to find that institutional practices continued to fail to acknowledge or address this through their provision. The institutional constraints on developing a co-created learning environment (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016) meant that the institution still relied on a socialisation model for students to adjust to student norms, which were often outdated and unhelpful, a finding mirrored in Marvell (2022). This is consistent with Remenick (2019) who also contends that the responsibility to fit in should not be placed on the student, rather institutions ought to invest in learning more about their students' needs. The diversity of students may also have been influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic, which created issues with employment and job security, mobility, and a greater need for upskilling, thus increasing returning numbers.

The data showed that university staff continued to demonstrate various assumptions about PG students, based on the student perspective, and that the PG students had expectations for their interactions with staff and peers too, which often led to unforeseen social barriers. Consistent with Dane's (2022) findings, these learners appeared to take a similar approach to their studies as they would to a new professional role. Based on this, as participants attempted to integrate into the PG role, many found that they brought with them beliefs and behaviours from the workplace, such as their attitudes to task completion and team work, which resulted in more discrepancies than commonalities with their peers. Contrary to O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007), this research revealed that individuals found it increasingly difficult to participate in their studies as they struggled to interact with the surrounding academic community, owing to their diverse behaviours, and not helped by the remote aspect of their studies.

Based on the findings, I urge student-facing practitioners working in HE to invest time in learning about who their students are, what shape their students would like their academic relationships to take, and to learn about the knowledge they bring to the setting to enrich the collective student experience, this might also involve consideration for the design of provision to accommodate engagement in different modes. This corresponds with a claim by Mellors-Bourne et al. (2016) who describe the recognition of this cultural capital as essential to generating tailored support. By tailoring the learning experience and enriching practitioner knowledge about student needs and approaches to study, it is hoped that this will make the experience more relatable and relevant to individuals, which in turn may help them to identify better with their PG role, something that felt significant as the pandemic had forced a physical distance between the students and their campus. This action corresponds with Matheson and Sutcliffe (2018) who contend that early intervention of relationships can facilitate taking on new branches of identity.

Master's study is not limited to the student-staff relationship however, and so early establishment of a support network could be significant. I recommend the implementation of a master's level transition or buddy scheme within the host university (to accompany the existing undergraduate and doctoral level facilities), as a method of connecting students with other PGs striving to identify with the institution, and to bring them in from the periphery (Nelson et al., 2006; Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012). The success of these at undergraduate (UG) level is telling of how beneficial it can be to have a connection with an existing member of the academic community (Wenger, 2010; Cotterall, 2011). Encouraging PG students to collaborate on re-defining a student identity may lead to enhanced feelings of belonging, and thus a co-creation of the learning space. A consistent community for new students during a time of crisis may also offer some stability, reduce feelings of isolation and allow students to weather experience together.

5.6.2. Multimembership: the new norm

The findings point to the common occurrence of 'multimembership' within the PG population. It was reported that little consideration for the diverse and competing

demands of the learners was given by the university. The time constraints placed upon these students meant that they remained reliant on pre-existing support and did not make full use of the resources available through the university. The extent of engagement with resources will likely have impacted their student experience during the Covid-19 pandemic; their lack of awareness about available resources might hamper identification with a student identity or create missed opportunities for much needed support: while some might benefit from academic study workshops, others might require financial or well-being support.

For part-time students to feel able to identify with the institution from an early stage, it is recommended that clear allocation of timely resources is provided, particularly in times of great uncertainty. Non-traditional learners often encounter challenges to participating in their studies, as indicated by Steele (2018) who reported that part-time students feel as though they have been forgotten, and by Remenick (2019) who draws on the institutional, structural, financial, and cultural barriers they face. This could be avoided if specific information was designed with the PG learners' lived realities in mind (Gale & Parker, 2014).

It might be beneficial to develop accessible resources with clear indications of the types of support available from different members of staff, to satisfy the concerns of students; it is possible that these concerns are heightened not simply because of the role change encountered, but because the circumstances in which they are studying are unfamiliar. A resource for learners might include an infographic, a guidebook, a website or even software. While a handbook seems the obvious location for this, the current problem appears to be that all programmes have a handbook, but that not all programme handbooks support learners.

I argue that these students need to be able to develop their close academic networks early on, to establish a connection with the setting and academic community. While many programmes have webpages dedicated to their 'People', these are often lengthy and uninformative. However, infographics, can be an effective way of providing a visual snapshot of information. There are examples of how effective creative stimuli can be in disseminating information and communicating with students, demonstrating that students can be supported to understand and

remember information in different ways (Yarbrough, 2019; Abbazio & Yang, 2022). Considering the remote nature of study during the current research, it is helpful to consider ways to create engaging material that is accessible and comprehensive on a remote platform, as on-campus policy and provision may not be suitable. This recommendation is for both academic and professional services in the university who work to create resources promoting university best practice, and to support students to prepare for studies.

The felt and literal distance between part-time students and their studies can prolong their adjustment to a student role. Therefore, a termly study pack may also be a viable recommendation: this might include study expectations, links to resources, key contacts, campus map/study spaces, relevant groups or social events, and a term timetable. The information within these packs may become less over their studies, but their inconsistent participation in the role may initially make sourcing necessary information for study and adjusting to study, more challenging.

In addition, well-timed communication may result in information not being misplaced, allowing individuals to build deadlines and appointments into their schedules. Early provision of information is particularly useful for students with many responsibilities and roles to help organise their time. Corresponding with the literature (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018; Dreznick, 2022), prompt interaction between the returning student and the academy prior to induction can help foster the relationships needed to understand the norms of the setting. In addition to the infographic or information pack, this might take the shape of online 'meet and greets' or group tutorials, with a focus on ensuring that the part-time students are able to meet one another so that they feel paired with someone weathering a similar transition to their own (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). In times of unprecedented activity, these conversations and meetings will be significant for new students as they attempt to connect with their new role and unpick the expectations of them. The intention of these partnerships is to create a sense of belonging to the academic community, despite the part-time students' intermittent attendance on campus, particularly as research shows that less involvement in the physical campus community can lead to issues with retention (Hardin, 2008).

By providing students access to their learning materials, and an outline of student expectations, they may feel more confident about taking on a student identity, which can be effectively developed through interactions with staff and peers. Distinct from full-time students, the part-time cohort may benefit from events that are designed with their unique needs in mind, as they navigate continued professional roles or caring responsibilities. This might include out-of-hours office-hours, or group catch ups. The idea of a Q&A with former part-time alumni might also be insightful, where they can offer top tips to PG students managing many pursuits. Becker, Johnson and Britton (2019) revealed the value of 'testimonies and videographies' as PG resources; these were found to offer considerable insight into lived experiences and learning trajectories. Providing more tailored resources to these students with information, realistic coping mechanisms, and strategies, may lead to students feeling understood, recognised, and supported by their community. The clarity and support provided through these connections are likely to have profound implications for student loneliness and wellbeing during times of crisis.

Given the effect of the pandemic, further development of asynchronous remote resources for these students might also support them to access relevant information and to learn at their own pace. The findings show that class recordings were helpful for this. Other suggestions include balancing the synchronous and asynchronous nature of part-time programmes to accommodate other pursuits by offering classes at unconventional times (evenings or weekends) or making recordings of synchronous sessions available where conflicts arise. Further, consistent and accessible support should be prioritised, accommodating the range of learning styles, to provide a sense of the culture and community to students. This might involve mentoring or small-group tutorials bringing together individuals facing similar barriers to learning, facilitating relationships that connect students to their cohort.

5.6.3. Becoming autonomous: ready or not?

Upon returning to higher education as a PG, the participants were expected to take on an independent academic practice, which is a widely accepted expectation at PG level (Stuart et al., 2008; Bamber et al., 2019). However, as the scholarship pointed out, this practice is notoriously characterised by a lack of information (Tobbell,

O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010), which unsurprisingly made the adjustment difficult for the students, creating a barrier to their studies. The data shows that some participants claimed that their programmes provided sufficient insight to help them cope with the change, while others felt stranded and ill-informed. This situation was made worse by the forced experience of remote study that was drawn out across their studies. It is likely that this impacted the participants' access to information about expectations and norms, as their proficiency on virtual platforms was put to the test.

To overcome this issue, the participants began implementing their learnt workplace behaviours and skillsets to meet their interpreted expectations of independent practice. The participants found this to contradict the many assumptions made about PGs in the literature, particularly that they are seemingly experts of the environment (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010). Although the implementation of established working patterns demonstrated the resourcefulness of the students, it did not guarantee that their learning would be enhanced, nor that these patterns would be suitable for a student role (Christie et al., 2008). This finding supports Robb and Moffat's (2020) claim that PG students require institutional support to become more autonomous in their studies, as well as Bamber et al.'s (2019) argument that the ways that institutions want and expect their students to perform needs further clarification across all members of the academic community, so that students can be adequately prepared to take on an academic practice and so that staff can support it. That said, the mystified 'independent practice' paired with the physical distance from the campus and its community, only added to the participants' drive to clutch on to old behaviours and coping resources.

Based on the problems created for individuals who had not been autonomous in their studies or workplace previously, it is recommended that more explanation is provided surrounding the expectations of being a PG student. That PG students are thought of as motivated and responsible participants of the academic community, has led to confusion about roles, difficulty structuring workloads, and uncertainty about development. Institutional support might comprise more consistency regarding information dissemination; it is possible, however, that dissemination of this information may differ between faculties or departments, but agreement on the

information shared across programmes will lead to students being supported equitably. Based on the short duration of PG courses, this issue should be addressed urgently so that future learners can begin adjusting from the outset. Further confirmation is likely to bring students closer to a student identity, and to help them to feel more a part of the academic community.

Furthermore a student manual with clear guidance on independent practice could significantly impact learners. This resource should be considered across the HE landscape, owing to this facet of study being a prominent characteristic. This might suggest skills to learn, and recommendations from past students. This resource is intended to help students prepare for studying, and to address any perceived weaknesses, which might help staff design support for individuals. Regular communication from staff or personal tutors about the expectations of PG study may offer insight and emotional support as learners will have a designated person to approach with concerns. The current research recognises how detrimental this lack of understanding can be to learners; I suggest that students are brought in from the periphery by ensuring that institutional practice and languages are shared to avoid exclusion from the experience (Jones et al., 2023a), something that students were already at risk of as they faced remote study. While I argue for clearer communication of the expectations from the host university, I recognise that enquiries into other exclusive institutional practices should also be considered.

Research Question 2 - How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?

5.6.4. Accessing institutional practice: the role of induction

Postgraduate (PG) courses are often tightly packed with a wealth of information about admission, course content, social and academic events, research opportunities, fieldtrips, and more, so it is easy to see how students can become overwhelmed by the magnitude of information available particularly when it is disseminated early on in their studies. At this stage, students often have little idea of what their academic year will look like or what they will be interested in participating in and when, which can lead to information becoming lost or ignored. The timeliness of resource allocation and communication was drawn upon in **Multimembership: the new norm (5.6.2.)**, to support the participation of part-time students.

Generally, existing literature portrays induction spanning the first couple of weeks of term, with wide-ranging events, student mixers, welcome talks, and module introductions to attend (Kinder, Koduri & Byrne, 2022), but this was experienced differently for this Covid cohort. In the current study, the returning professionals may be seeking information aligned with their rationale for returning to study, not simply friendships and additional hobbies. This may comprise learning about their role and responsibility as a student; what is available to them within their department; understanding what good academic practice is; finding out who they can contact and what the boundaries of these roles are; and what professional and career opportunities are available, amongst other things. Interestingly, existing studies have outlined a lack of careers-related support for PG students (Jafar, 2022), which could lead to an additional demand on their time if they must seek these independently. Based on the significance of different areas of induction to individuals, it is possible that opportunities to become integrated into the student community may be missed out on, leading to isolation.

Many scholars contend that induction should not be limited to the beginning of term because transition can span contrasting durations for different students, if it occurs at all (Nelson et al., 2006; Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Robb & Moffat, 2020). The

uncertainty that accompanied the changing guidelines on attending university during the pandemic in the current study may have created greater need for a staggered or re-induction, this may also have been required to introduce students to their respective settings (on campus or online). I suggest that the structure of induction be reconsidered; that it begins prior to the student's arrival and continues as new and more relevant events or opportunities arise. Finding a solution to overcoming the overload of information that needs absorbing in a short timeframe is complex, although ensuring that key information is received early on can arguably be addressed by either making these sessions mandatory, like they often are at undergraduate level, or by integrating these into the PG timetable so that students can begin to see how these workshops and study skills correspond with their studies. Considering the gradual return to campus, this speaks to the importance of regular and clear communication, something that could be compiled to advertise other relevant information and activities. To emphasise the relevance of these sessions, tasks and activities might be designed to connect with certain modules or academic portfolios and written assignments. The importance of this suggestion is described by Brooman and Darwent (2014) who emphasise the need for more 'student-centred' opportunities to be available for longer to facilitate transition.

The significance of induction to support adjustment to student norms and culture became evident in the findings as the participants discussed the importance of community during the drawn-out remote experience. This corresponds with recent findings by Santa-Ramirez et al. (2022), who call for more opportunities for students to network and connect within their allocated programme agenda, something that staff could implement to promote the continuation of peer engagement beyond taught sessions.

5.6.5. Increasing participation, but reducing satisfaction

The wide-reaching recruitment of students in higher education today represents the success of widening participation initiatives. Institutions deliver learning in various modes – full-time, part-time, hybrid, remotely, flexibly, amongst others – and with the support of funding initiatives, universities have helped knowledge to be accessed at different stages of life and to be accommodated around other commitments. This

was evident in the way some participants persevered with studies in a pandemic, all the while managing other commitments. The findings show that the different approaches to participation meant that 'access' looked different for the learners, including how they accessed the academic community, the learning environments, and the resources and learning materials, which at the outset was predominantly remotely. This only became problematic when participants noticed they had been assigned to classes with students studying in alternative modes to themselves, for instance, part-time students amongst a full-time cohort, something noted by Steele (2018) in their research.

In the current study, the participants felt the university had not developed an experience tailored for part-time students, providing space to build community, and be empathetic and supportive (Steele, 2018). Merging their schedule with the full-time cohort meant that often they were unable to attend classes owing to external commitments, such as work. This implication calls for greater consideration of non-traditional learners' needs, to develop an experience aligning with their unique conditions.

If universities continue recruiting students from under-represented groups and through participation initiatives, they will need to develop their understanding of and support for a diverse student population (Stuart et al., 2008). At current, PG students predominantly rely on family members, savings, or the workplace to fund their studies (Morgan, 2015), and Raaper, Brown and Llewellyn (2021) added that mature students were more likely to rely on family and friends rather than the university. The significance of this support and need to continue working should be noted in the current study as the pandemic had created financial difficulties for some.

Greater outreach will bring many benefits to the HE landscape, but it would be unfair to suggest that new students are welcome in the academic community without adequately accommodating them. The institution should also consider the long-term benefits of new flexible pedagogies, and how online provision might contribute to students' career trajectories as they develop technological skills for the workforce, extending the success of widening participation initiatives. Further research should consider how to facilitate non-traditional learners in overcoming barriers in their

return to university (Bamber et al., 2019), and what opportunities they require to develop the skills to do this; these might include study skills workshops, events to develop social skills, or sharing coping mechanisms for balancing commitments. It is possible that establishing a friendship group or a convoy of support (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980) at work may help individuals to adjust over time.

Opportunity to clarify the expectations of the student and staff roles should be available, so that students can familiarise themselves with the setting, even if they are experiencing it from a distance. The literature also argues for better representation within the staff body (Hogg, Abrams & Brewer, 2017); Donze & Gunnes, 2018; Cruwys et al., 2021), to foster students' identification with the academic community. Travis et al. (2023: 5) contend that identification can help overcome imposter syndrome and "the impression that academics lacked understanding of their lived experiences".

This implication points to the significance of institutional support, something that was not praised in any depth within the current study, though it is clear from the data that enhanced support would have contributed to greater satisfaction amongst the participants. Further to this, by considering the distinct needs of learners, the institution may find that they raise standards of equity; this may lead to students feeling better supported to participate. Taking time to learn about the needs and lives of our dynamic student population will not only help with designing relevant support but will also reveal the types of knowledge and prior experiences of learning that they contribute to the setting. This insight will indicate what skills the students require support with developing, building on earlier education and assisting them in feeling better prepared for their studies (Jones et al., 2023b).

5.6.6. Technology: creating a more inclusive space

The Covid-19 pandemic which took place during much of the participants' PG studies meant that many programmes within the university continued to provide resources and access to learning opportunities remotely. Although there was a growing push to get students back on campus, to take advantage of in-person

provision and social opportunities, participating remotely helped students to manage their 'multimemberships' more effectively.

Where the implementation of technology was concerned, the participants expressed that the leading issue encountered was the barriers to forming a community and relationships with peers (Fawns, Aitken & Jones, 2019), which frequently led to feeling isolated. Those without an existing support network relied on this virtual space to meet wide-ranging needs, though, as literature reports, the sudden move to the online space indicated that insufficient preparation and training had been undertaken by teaching staff, which meant that some areas of teaching practice appeared underdeveloped (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015; Stone & Springer, 2019; Guppy et al., 2022; O'Dea & Stern, 2022). This was surprising because remote and virtual learning has been provided through higher education institutions for decades (Fawns, Aitken & Jones, 2021b).

This implication calls for more research to improve understanding about community development in online environments, and how students can be supported to develop authentic academic identities in these spaces. This research should involve consideration for the suitability of platforms (Eberle & Hobrecht, 2021), and what styles of interaction are effective in supporting students to overcome issues like isolation, this might include workshops for instance. The participants in the current study did not convey the success of curriculum principles, whereby students are encouraged to develop a sense of community and are supported to participate, suggesting that better understanding of how to engage with these principles is needed. To address this, I argue that further research gathering the insight and reflections of students who have engaged with studying in this way would help develop existing resources, and the unique resources that accommodated the on-going unprecedented impact of the pandemic can be developed based on reflections and successes. It is also worth considering the preferences of students in terms of instruction and participation, to support the on-going development of resources (Turner, 2024). Exploring what students perceived was missing, how this impressed on their overall learning experience, and what strategies they developed to become part of a community, would all be valuable contributions to knowledge. As the participants had largely been encouraged to remain a safe distance apart from

others for a prolonged period, insight into establishing authentic virtual communities is needed, this should take account of the significance of informal interactions. This research should also aim to include the perceptions of staff who facilitate the interactions within these spaces. During the pandemic, remote connection was the predominant opportunity for connection; coming out on the other side has shown the potential for this space to continue to build and foster community, with the insight of what needs to be achieved to overcome solitary studies.

Based on the evident advantages of being able to offer the virtual learning environment as an alternative access point to education, I strongly urge the university to develop training for staff and facilitators of online spaces, to prepare them for creating a space that accommodates social, pastoral, and academic aspects of learning. Staff should be encouraged and supported to develop materials and pedagogy for remote access to enhance their digital literacy, and importantly to develop their own confidence in these innovative strands of teaching and learning (Smith Curtis, 2023). It is possible that this certainty in their practice, may influence staff feelings about job security in a dynamic HE landscape, where retraining and upskilling is increasingly the norm (Santa-Ramirez et al., 2022; Smith Curtis, 2023). Training should also be developed in line with institutional values and expectations, so that students can understand how to become and feel part of the wider academic community. This speaks to the successful implementation of strategies to support with the adjustment to online provision, and preparation for possible emergency teaching and learning in future.

5.7. Suggestions for future research

This section proposes approaches and topics for future research projects. The intention of these is to build on the findings of the current study, to develop insight and to remove the limitations formerly addressed.

Building on the first recommendation, *Recognising Diversity*: setting aside assumptions, I suggest further exploration of transition for non-traditional students, the experience of community-building at PG level, and enquiry into student-staff relationships. This should also offer some indication of the lasting impact of Covid-19 on higher education (HE), pointing also to lessons learnt. Following Dane (2022), I support the call for an examination of existing transition models within HE institutions. They propose considering models applied beyond the academy, for instance in the workplace, somewhere the PG community is increasingly connected with. Further assessment may help develop a suitable transition design embracing the needs of growing student numbers.

Further research into institutional provision provided to support PG autonomy is necessary, beginning with a clear definition of the term and examples of what this looks like. Exploring the expertise required to become autonomous might shed light on moving skills from the workplace to PG study, and how these might prepare learners better for unprecedented situations; while consideration for how students can be supported to identify these skills is also needed. Where independent practice is concerned, insight from across Russell Group universities, and universities generally, would reveal how effective existing support is and how consistent the expectations of independent practice are. This might also provide opportunity to benchmark the availability of resources developed in response to the pandemic across the settings.

The findings portray the experience of transition and induction as multi-faceted. Although induction can span weeks of a term, the data indicates that students would benefit from induction events spread across the year. It is possible then, that the boundaries within which induction currently sits may be removed, spanning an unspecified length of time, mirroring characteristics of transition. It would be helpful

for induction to be moulded by the circumstances it is providing for. I propose an exploration of stages of study or new terms, and whether they require unique inductions for students to re-learn or re-engage with the evolving expectations of their role.

The part-time students suggested that there was an 'in crowd' - that the design of their studies was not considered in the same way it had been for full-timers. An exploration of differences between existing part-time and full-time programmes and modules may provide insight into how the realities of learners have been considered. Where widening participation is concerned, this exploration might include how lived experiences of learners can be critically engaged with and integrated into their studies, which may also be helpful for programme design and ensuring that learning is more inclusive.

Research comparing the transitions of PG returning and mature learners to those enrolling straight from their undergraduate (UG) degree would reveal much about how UG students preparedness for studying during Covid-19 differed. The findings in the current study contradict existing assumptions about PG learners, thus getting to the root of these and creating more transparent understandings of experiences would be beneficial for the PG landscape, particularly practitioners designing resources for PGs and those facing crisis situations.

A final proposal is an investigation of the implementation, use, and experience of technology during PG studies. Research into current provision and training for facilitators of online environments, with an enquiry into the needs of PG learners, would inform how training could be developed and tailored to the population. Researchers should also look to the knowledge of remote practitioners from the past two decades, as well as considering ways that universities have used this in response to earlier pandemics or emergency situations.

Where undertaking further research on the topic is concerned, researchers should consider duplicating the research design drawing on Schlossberg and Blume to explore the return to study following the Covid-19 pandemic, after reasonable time has passed. This return to a 'new normal' may depict a representation of transition

(albeit considering the unique circumstances of individuals) that is not burdened by a global crisis. Indeed, to continue with this work on the shift from a workplace back to higher education, notably acknowledging the significance of returning to something formerly experienced, one might consider approaching this through the lens of alternate theory. For instance, Zittoun (2006, 2009) explores ruptures as transition, and in earlier work investigates adults engagement with tasks in contrasting 'domains of activity' over the life course (Zittoun, Gillespie & Bernal Marcos, 2023).

My existing relationship with the institution and experience of returning to study benefitted the research, influencing how data was collected and interpreted. Going forward, while it would be interesting to document the evolution of the return experience at the host institution, to see how student needs and support both change and correspond over time, it would be helpful to carry out this study at an alternative location to make comparisons. These findings would likely reveal the cultural and social differences at play, offering a wider view of returning to study (perhaps more generally). While this duplication may enhance the rigor of the study, it might also help tackle the current issue of researcher bias. For reflection on overcoming the limitations of the research, see 5.5.

5.8. Reflection

- Positioning

On reflection, I deliberated my relationship to the research setting and the participants which clarified the beliefs and values brought to the research. There appeared to be commonalities which could have created bias, like studying at the host institution after returning from the workplace, leading to assumptions about PG study and student roles. This also included my shared experience of resorting to remote study during the Covid-19 pandemic.

An autobiographic excerpt was developed to separate my experiences from the participants', to avoid influencing the interpretation of data. This helped overcome potential power dynamics in the current study, as I illustrated my experiences of transition elsewhere, so not to influence the research outcomes. Furthermore, the use of Schlossberg's 4 S's model in the autobiography helped explore and eventually depict the return to study.

Nevertheless, my commonalities with the participants would also support considerate and empathetic responses to their return to study, as our shared understanding helped nurture knowledge. This was most noticeable in the follow-up interviews where a human connection was constructed. By disclosing, if only briefly, my return to study following a period of professional roles, I conveyed an understanding and interest in their narratives. I believe that this honesty was pivotal in establishing good rapport.

- Ontology, Epistemology, and Theoretical Orientation

My stance had implications for how the research was carried out. To begin, a social-constructionist ontology exhibited my belief that truth and knowledge exists between individuals, as they exchange shared understanding, accepted meaning, through a mutual language (Berg & Luckmann, 1966; Howe, 1998; Hay, 2015). Paired with an interpretive-constructivist epistemology, knowledge creation became clear. This pertained to the interactions between agents across specific contexts, like the workplace, the university, or on remote platforms. Through this, the subjectivities of experience could be considered, relating to context, society, culture, and Covid-19.

This paradigm promoted joint meaning-making between researcher and researched, and participants with their environments. My stance was informed by who I am as a researcher, facilitator, student, and various other strands of identity and lived experience. I recognise the privilege of my relationship with the host institution, the knowledge I have access to, and the influence of this over the research.

This qualitative research collected in-depth data using methods including focus groups (preliminary study), interviews, email diary entries, and digital storytelling. A psychosocial orientation was employed, depicting the interconnectedness of individuals and society, where an on-going cycle of interaction and influence takes place (Erikson & Newton, 1973). Exploring the return to study this way documented the personal, social, and cultural influences on transition, where the individuals encountered modifications to identity, relationships, and the meanings ascribed to experience.

Lastly, the theoretical framework comprised Schlossberg's theory of transition with their model of 4 S's and Blume's theory of identity renegotiation. Schlossberg's work has extensively explored adult learners, confirming its relevance for investigating social and educational transitions. Pairing these two counselling practices helped embrace the psychosocial, tending to the impact of roles and relationships on evolving identities, which helped address the research aims. In addition to the wide-ranging data exhibited within the four domain summaries (Situation, Self, Support, Strategy), insight regarding the connection to other and context, and the influence of interaction, were gathered from Blume's work.

5.8.1. Expectations of the research

As can be seen in the findings, there are instances where the data shows the lack of support and provision to PG students throughout their return to study amidst the pandemic. Based on my earlier motivations to carry out this research, this was not entirely surprising; I had hoped to understand more about the experience of returning to PG study during crisis, what the challenges of this are, and what assumptions exist that prevent students from receiving much needed support during this time. This, I hope, will send a message about the ongoing importance of relearning about

students – particularly considering the growing numbers of international students, massification, and widening participation initiatives. The literature also promoted the need for further research on PG transitions generally, and this became evident through my findings, particularly where the participants referred to facets of their former working roles, something I had not found in the research of other scholars. Scholarship pointed to the difficulty that PG students have with adjusting to independent practice, suggesting that the expectations are poorly communicated, and this was no different in the current research, though this was likely made more complicated by remote study. However, the participants clearly indicated strategies and coping mechanisms that were employed to overcome this uncertainty. These included the continuation of working patterns to establish balance and maintaining traits from their former role which helped to manage their time and tasks. Reflecting on my experience as a member of the PG student community, I can recall feeling that my peers were occasionally more or less prepared for certain facets of PG study, sometimes this meant drawing on experiences they had encountered beyond the academy, while others used their familiarity with the setting to their advantage. The experience of studying through a pandemic however was likely unfamiliar territory for the participants, as such, the suitability of resources or coping mechanisms was unclear, levelling out preparedness. Regarding the support provided by others during transition, the participants confirmed reports in the literature regarding the influence of organisational support on employee loyalty, although I was surprised to find that this was spoken more positively about than the support from the university.

5.8.2. Effectiveness of Methods and Methodology

Things that worked well

The methods chosen to explore the experience of returning from the workplace to PG study, included email diary entries, digital storytelling, and follow-up interviews. The data was collected over a year-long period, collecting rich descriptive data in a documentary style. Participants were able to be creative in how they presented this data, and I could offer flexibility regarding when the data was submitted. Finally, the follow-up interviews were an opportunity to develop a human connection within the

research. The photo-elicitation supported a co-construction of meaning while prompting the participant towards their earlier data. It also allowed me to respond to the data, showing emotion and empathy, something the participants might not have sensed through their remote submissions.

I attempted to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the data throughout the research. Firstly, the participants constructed interpretation with the researcher during the follow-up interviews which meant that accurate meaning was conveyed, and misinterpretations were cleared up. The participants also had the opportunity to member-check and read about themselves in the thesis prior to final submission to ensure that they had not been misrepresented. The rigour of the data was ensured through three separate data collection methods at different times of the year. Over this period, I was able to develop a trusting relationship with participants, which led to their confidence in me and a stronger rapport. Developing case studies (using a narrative thematic analysis) and a further reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to present collective findings, supported me to become familiar with the data, particularly through the inductive and deductive levels of analysis, which revealed a mix of latent and semantic meaning.

- Researching Remotely

While carrying out research remotely was a challenge, situating the research in the context of Covid-19 helped to generate knowledge about studying during this period in history. Being able to conduct research during this time speaks to the effectiveness of certain research tools during times of crisis. For instance, I found myself learning how to utilise online platforms efficiently at a much faster rate to carry out research and, as a result, I feel better equipped to implement different research approaches and tools in future. In choosing to use several data collection methods, I have been able to evaluate which of these were most easily and effectively responded to in instances where participants were working remotely or in solitary environments.

- Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework was constructed by two theories that were developed for psychological counselling. Schlossberg's theory of transition has predominantly been

used to explore the individual experience, which can limit the recognition of social influence on the individual. However, by pairing this with Blume's theory of identity renegotiation, a practice that has been implemented in collective and group settings and research, I was able to capture a wider view of transition that encourages reflection on one's relation to others, which happened in different ways throughout the pandemic. Through this, participants revealed common characteristics of their identities, interconnections, and constructions of meaning. This information might comprise the participants' social networks, contexts, and work environments, amongst other things. Although Blume's work comprises a series of stages leading to identity renegotiation, their theory is not fixed on specific life stages, making it increasingly suitable to explore this diverse adult population.

- Analysis and Presentation of Data

The case studies illustrated participants' unique experiences of returning to study, supporting the research to grasp a holistic and in-depth understanding of the many contextual and relational aspects of transition. The cases support the reader to know the participants more intimately, interpreting their data in context, in which they discuss variations of qualitative data (email diary, digital storytelling, interview), including the artefacts that represented pivotal moments during their return. The cases were presented using Schlossberg's model of 4 S's, not dissimilar to the analytic format chosen in her own work, following a narrative thematic analysis. This supported the deductive aspect of the subsequent reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) where collective data is presented in Chapter 4: Findings.

The selection of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021) to explore the data collectively (Chapter 4: Findings) was effective, offering the necessary flexibility and space for interpretation, while also allowing effective engagement with transitional characteristics based on Schlossberg's 4 S's (2008, 2011).

However, literature demonstrates that presenting data following a thematic analysis can exclude unique takes on experience, often dismissing individual experience that may provide significance. This was overcome in two ways in the current study.

Firstly, the narrative thematic analysis used for the case studies highlighted subjectivities through storytelling while also revealing patterns between participants.

Then, based on Braun and Clarke's (2021) more recent work, I incorporated domain summaries into the presentation of the RTA. Domain summaries are where concepts are grouped by a shared overarching topic, comprising different branches of meaning. I strived to avoid losing the specificities of the data by presenting the findings by domain summary, either Situation, Self, Support, or Strategy.

5.8.3. Effectiveness of Methods and Methodology

Things that need further consideration

- Sample size

The sample size in the current study was influenced by the convenience sampling carried out at the chosen UK university, despite having a research-driven culture, one in which students are encouraged to participate in and contribute to the creation of new knowledge. The research was advertised to PG students across the 11 faculties, which intended to gather a wide-ranging representation of PG experiences. While the subjectivities of students were captured, the data was unable to provide recommendations for specific subjects, faculties, or groups of learners; an alternative research design might have employed a more selective (non-random) sample focusing on a particular discipline or demographic. A larger sample, however, may have created insight pertaining to gender, demographic, or mode of study even; this may have been achieved by incorporating a selection of Russell Group universities (or a selection of universities generally) with which comparisons could be made and distinctive patterns drawn out.

- Digital Storytelling

Participants may have found the diary entries time consuming and even challenging if they encountered language barriers. The digital storytelling tasks were included to overcome language barriers, allowing participants to portray abstract experiences using symbols that they felt most comfortable with. While I had hoped that these would be more inclusive, there were instances where participants reported not having time to complete them or that they did not understand the task. This issue may have led to inaccurate representations of their return to study thus misleading

the interpretation of data and providing ill-informed conclusions for further research (hence the significance of photo-elicitation).

5.9. Summary

Within this chapter I have critically engaged with relevant scholarship to explore how the data relates to existing knowledge in the field of higher education, returning learners, transitions, identity, and navigating study during a global crisis. A synthesis of this knowledge revealed ways that the data aligned with what is already known about transition and identity, at times leading to an evaluation of or addition to accepted knowledge. Notably, I believe that the employment of Schlossberg's 4 S's (2008) and Blume's identity renegotiation theory (2010) has created an opportunity to analyse the participants' adjustments in great depth, making transparent the students' subjectivities as well as helping to extract the commonalities of the sample, while taking stock of how the experience of returning to study can be a radically different experience for different students, even more so during a pandemic. The application of Schlossberg's theory of transition to explore returning learners in this research adds to the growing applicability of Schlossberg's work to the field of adult studies. By employing their model of 4 S's to explore the experience of PG transitions throughout Covid-19, this study has been able to validate its applicability to this area.

The findings of the current study generated a collection of themed answers to address the research questions; the key points are listed below.

Research Question 1. What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?

It became apparent that the participants were part of a changing PG landscape, in which they were contributing to the diversity of PG cohorts, and new innovate teaching and learning approaches in response to the pandemic. Despite this, it was found that staff within the institution continued to lean on existing assumptions about the learners, which led to students feeling insufficiently supported to adjust to their new identity and to academic practice.

PG students are known to be participating in various endeavours at once, which can comprise caring responsibilities and family matters, or workplace roles and professional pursuits. As a result, they can be considered 'multimembers'. The data

revealed that the part-time students felt inadequately supported to participate in their studies, suggesting that their learning opportunities were not designed to accommodate their varied lifestyles. Given the likelihood of spillover during the experience of remote work and study, overlooking the issue of balance and participation was surprising.

Becoming an autonomous learner was challenging for some participants as they reflected on the limited opportunities they had to develop this skill, which may speak to the extent of support provided to students at lower levels. This skill stood out as the learners adjusted to independent practice, posing a barrier to participation. Although it should be noted that being an independent learner and an isolated learner are not the same; notably, students struggled with adjusting to both considering Covid-19.

Research Question 2. How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?

The exploration of institutional practices revealed the importance of induction to student adjustment, as a way of bridging the felt distance during remote study. The participants, without explicitly labelling induction, reflected on how they were supported with their studies early on, identifying an absence of certain activities and information.

As evidenced in Research Question 1, the diversity of the current PG landscape speaks to the success of widening participation initiatives, which has spurred on the recruitment of learners from diverse backgrounds to continue their studies at PG level. Although there is significant data to show the rising numbers of these students, there has been little said about how these students are accommodated once enrolled. The participants of the current study remarked on areas where greater consideration is needed for students attempting to achieve balance in their lives through managing their commitments and demands, and that the university should continue to strive to understand the lived experiences of these students to continue supporting their participation. This knowledge will continue to be reshaped as we adjust to the lasting influence of the pandemic.

The final contribution to knowledge pertained to the use of technology in PG studies. While this was at first found to be implemented because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it transpired that some students continued to participate in learning remotely by choice or by design of their programme. These virtual environments were found to be adequate for disseminating knowledge but hampered the experience of connection with peers. This implication calls for research and training for practitioners that provides insight into developing a more inclusive, relational, and community-oriented space.

Amongst the suggestions for future research, I have addressed each recommendation and proposed an approach to extending the knowledge on these distinctive but interconnected topics. To address the diversity of the cohort and the setting aside of assumptions, I propose an exploration of transition models used beyond the educative setting to consider and integrate design that is more aligned with the current student population. This may unearth ways that the returning students can be supported to integrate their learnt skills and behaviours from the workplace, and even from previous study. Observations of the ways that other universities support their learners to become autonomous, and how they communicate the expectations of independent practice, would be beneficial to developing consistency across higher education. I have suggested that the boundaries of induction are removed, so that resources are promoted in timely ways throughout transition. Further consideration for the distinctions required between full-time and part-time programme design will help to develop tailored programmes for learners with diverse needs. Finally, exploring current provision for facilitators of online learning environments may offer insight into any absence of instruction or guidance. This would be helped by the insight of students too, who may wish to discuss the ways that their experience with community building in this space could have been enriched.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1. Thesis Aims

This research set out to explore the experiences of postgraduate (PG) students returning from the workplace to higher education (HE) during the Covid-19 pandemic, addressing the research questions:

1. What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?
2. How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?

This research is based on an extensive review of literature on transition, identity, returning to study, the workplace, and a growing body of scholarship on education in times of crisis. This literature was synthesised with relevant information about culture shock, liminality, socialisation, and communities of practice. Notably, existing literature on PG transitions was found to be dominated by undergraduate experiences (Gale & Parker, 2014; Butcher, 2015; Charlton, 2016; Steele, 2018), therefore this doctoral study intends to contribute to the limited research on moving from a workplace to postgraduate study.

While research on PG experiences continue to emerge, the last decade has shown how these learners have been overlooked (1994 Group, 2012). Therefore, this research offers valuable knowledge about adult learners contributing to understanding about PG diversity, highlighting experiences that characterise the move from work to study during the recent pandemic. This original contribution is informed by the narratives of nine PG students at a research-intensive UK university, revealing the influence of distinctive environments, resources and networks.

The participants' narratives highlighted the challenges they faced upon returning to study during this unprecedented time, communicated in the participant case studies (3.12.) and the Findings Chapter. Participants referred to practices that excluded them from their studies, the financial precarity that gave participants little choice

about pursuing work alongside study, and the use of technology that shed light on presumed levels of digital literacy.

The findings revealed on-going assumptions that influence existing institutional practices, and how these impacted the support students received during their studies, confirming earlier research (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010; Bownes et al., 2017; and Robb & Moffat, 2020) and emphasising the need for change given the unprecedented circumstances presented by the pandemic to higher education. Assumptions were based on student understanding of the PG role, academic study, and student norms, creating barriers to their participation. The participants indicated what information they both needed more of and guidance with; notably, support should look different for students participating in alternative modes of study, and, where possible, should be designed with more flexibility to address current circumstances.

6.2. Transition

In the current study, transition was conceptualised as “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006: 33). While it was not assumed that participants would encounter transition as they returned to study during the Covid-19 pandemic, the analysis showed that adjustments were made to their relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles.

The participants detailed encounters with new communities, peers, networks, and spaces (relationships); navigating independent study (routines); the expectations of PG students and what PG students expected from the university (assumptions); and the obscurity surrounding PG study (roles). The subjectivities of transition became apparent as participants described their on-going reliance on existing support networks, and the decision to carry out working patterns. This confirmed Schlossberg’s (1981) belief that no transition will look the same for any two people, thus returning to study was different for each participant. These distinctions emphasise the difficulty with capturing a single definition of transition, nevertheless, it is possible that the participants’ behaviours represented shared characteristics of returning learners from the workplace. Indeed, this diversity indicates that more tailored than generic support is needed.

In their roles as PG students, the participants suggested being confused about how to be, what behaviours to carry out, and how to gauge the norms of the role. The participants’ observations and reflections of their identities and their peers’ identities, indicated that they had encountered (but not necessarily fulfilled) a process of identity renegotiation throughout their studies. The participants’ awareness of relational practices in the environments where their studies took place greatly informed how they managed the relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles they were faced with (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006).

The need to acknowledge the possibility for transition taking place in students during their PG study is essential for understanding how they will adjust to their new role, what support they might require, and what strategies they possess to cope effectively. While there are common features of PG study identified across the literature and within the current study, understanding how these are interpreted and responded to by learners is crucial for designing informed support.

To conclude, the uniqueness of this research includes returning to study rather than moving on from previous study straightaway, notably during an unprecedented pandemic. This experience illustrated the possibility for multiple transitions to be happening simultaneously, informing one another (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2022). However, there were also instances where transition was hampered by the participants being unable to fulfil certain expectations of their return (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, 2011), like being on campus or frequent communication with members of the academic community. The return itself can be conceptualised as both a vertical and horizontal transition, based on participants' rationale for study; this can be seen in participants who had departed the workplace entirely to develop their academic competence (vertical) and those who divided their time between work and study equally (horizontal).

While transition in the current study was in-part characterised by skills and resources from the workplace and on-going personal relationships, the pandemic played a considerable role in misaligning expectations and hampering student preparedness. This included remote study which was sometimes influenced by digital pedagogies or access to equipment; isolation and a lack of community, owing to the felt distance between students and campus, and how they felt included in online taught settings; and the limitations on space which led to students undertaking different roles in single environments. These experiences complicated the process of taking on a student identity. This said, the pandemic also created more flexible teaching and learning and growing opportunities to develop digital literacy.

6.3. Key findings of my work

Research Question 1. What transitional experiences characterise the change from a workplace to higher education?

Key themes:

Situation - Role Change: Working Pattern

Self - Ego Development

Self - Commitment and Values

Support - Organisational Support (the workplace)

Support - Disrupted Support Network

Returning to study from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic was characterised by existing support networks (predominantly at home and in the workplace), the transformation of skillsets, the interpretation of PG expectations, and adjusting to the academic community. Four female participants (Hunter, Harley, Arlo, Charlie) continued employing traits from the workplace to support their studies, implementing working patterns and building on existing knowledge. By maintaining an established pace and sense of competition the participants could balance competing demands and manage independent practice, demonstrating their resilience and adaptability. Participation in the workplace had made the participants more confident about their knowledge and skillsets. Some of these skills benefited their studies, but were not reflected in their peers' behaviours, impacting how they related to one another.

The support received from colleagues by participants continuing to work was significant, contributing to their motivation and perseverance in their studies; this was reflected by Charlie and Harley, two part-time females, whose organisations were devoted to supporting lifelong learning. This approval likely fostered their sense of belonging, granting deeper engagement with their tasks. Contrastingly, participants who had lost the stability of their workplace community struggled to develop relationships in online lectures and seminars, leading to feelings of loneliness. This was troublesome for some of the returners who sought confidence in their new role

and the drive to stay motivated to meet learning objectives. These feelings were reinforced by their adjustment to independent practice, and a desire to contribute (using existing knowledge) and participate (in a hybrid setting) in unique ways. Notably, three female international participants (Harley, Arlo, Finley) reported that the on-going support from their partners had helped weather transition, providing a connection to home. This support was tailored to their unique circumstances that would in turn influence their view of studying. The connection to home provided stability as many participants studied in a new country, in a second language, following different academic systems.

The data showed that two international females studying full-time approached their return to study positively (Hunter, Finley), showing signs of relief in the changed pace, and enjoyment for the academic environment. Not dissimilarly, a mix of male and female participants studying full-time showed increased levels of autonomy (Emery, Arlo, Aubrey, Morgan, Hunter) in their control over study schedules and the direction of interests and projects than they had at work. The participants appeared confident in personalising their experiences with greater flexibility, which supported them in meeting demands and staying motivated to persevere.

Research Question 2. How do institutional practices impact on individual-level transitions?

Key themes:

Situation - Role Change: Identity

Situation - Assessment: Moving In (Negative)

Strategy - Responses that Modify the Situation

The findings show how existing institutional practices impacted individual-level transitions. The accepted ways of doing and being within the institution determined how provision was implemented, and how the students connected with this.

Prominent examples included the role of induction, the dissemination of information about student expectations, and how PG study was communicated.

The expectations of PG students were difficult for the returners to grasp, leading to issues with adjusting to academic practice and taking on a PG student identity. Participants who had disassociated with academia for a while indicated that a better understanding of the role would help them to balance work and study during the pandemic, and that this insight would support them to develop connections with peers, enabling them to fit in. This was important for participants who had previously relied on the campus to learn about student norms. The analysis also showed that some lacked preparedness for a student role despite having been students previously, emphasising the need for access to relevant and timely information; this information should include more clarity about participation, workload, and programme timelines, to help with managing competing demands. The part-time students indicated that adjustment was influenced by an absence of information, and that their inability to plan led to missed learning opportunities. These missed opportunities hampered their chance to build community and to interact with peers, making the process of adjusting less clear. Notwithstanding, the impact of Covid-19 on staff teaching practices may speak to the extent of information and support available to students, influencing student adjustment.

The overspill of workplace characteristics into the new role helped the students to regain control, because they could set their own pace to meet academic objectives, and construct boundaries around their private and public time. This was evident in

three full-time participants (Emery, Morgan, Hunter) who continued to fulfil their working schedules to manage independent study and adjust to PG expectations. While this choice initially illustrated their resilience in navigating change, their working patterns also fostered their independence creating implications for lifelong learning (their ability to be motivated and disciplined learners). For the students encountering 'multimembership', maintaining these techniques showed their proactive approach, preventing them from becoming overwhelmed, and helping them to persevere.

The distance between peers during the pandemic also created issues with understanding PG expectations, however two part-time female participants (Harley, Charlie) expressed how the option to study remotely helped to overcome issues with commuting and work schedule clashes, showing the range of responses to the situation. The pandemic had truly hampered the participants' opportunities of developing community, as recalled by two international females (Arlo, Harley) who expressed a desire to weather transition with someone that could relate to their situation. This was significant for their emotional support as this communication can benefit how meaning is made, whilst showing them that their responses are valid. Feeling understood but so far from home had profound implications for how the participants felt connected to the culture of the academy.

6.4. Significance of the research

6.4.1. The significance for the research landscape

The thesis contributes to the limited body of literature on the return to study from the workplace during the pandemic and to the PG experience more broadly. It also documents transition for PGs, in particular returning learners, a fast-growing feature of the higher education landscape. The literature on education transitions mainly explores linear experiences and is populated by scholarship on the UG and postgraduate research (PGR) experience, whereas this research details PG study using the PG voice, an approach gaining momentum in the landscape (White, 2023). With this information, greater consideration for PG resources can be taken, such as the content and structure of study skills workshops, the types of community building events promoted, or the expansion of transition schemes, all of which will help inform the support and provision offered during crisis situations, informed by the important contributions made in this study by students who have re-entered education from a workplace.

The data revealed both vertical and horizontal transitions, the latter of which is underreported in existing research. The vertical transitions included participants undertaking higher levels of study, moving into new specialisms, and participating in PG study to enrich their workplace contributions. Simultaneously, the horizontal transitions depicted participants moving regularly between settings, over boundaries, between work and study. These highlighted some common characteristics of PGs (including a reliance on external support, participation in multiple communities, and existing expertise to contribute), thus revealing the influence of alternative domains (including communities, cultures, and expertise) on their experiences.

The theoretical framework employed in the current research offers a new approach to exploring transition, namely Schlossberg's theory of transition and her model of the 4 S's, and Blume's theory of identity renegotiation. While Schlossberg's work often features in literature on adult learning, and Blume's practice investigates the experiences of adults through the life course, their pairing to explore transition beyond the individual is original. Blume's work on relationality and the influence of

the other has shifted the use of Schlossberg's theory to capture a more holistic narrative of transition.

6.4.2. The significance for HE institutions

6.4.2.1. Assumptions

The findings address existing assumptions about PG learners. I argue that the continuation of assumptions about preparedness and expertise has halted the development of facilities for this diverse group and was especially problematic for those students persevering through Covid-19. These assumptions often stem from students' earlier success in higher education. Practitioners should be cautious about presuming that the development of provision and resources will be beneficial to all PG students, given their diversity. Deeper knowledge of PG students might also enhance student-staff relationships and inform pedagogic choices.

Assumptions were particularly problematic during the pandemic, as students adjusted to their teaching and learning environments, developing and maintaining relationships, predominantly remotely. Students relied on information online to support their adjustment, as working on campus or in-person with peers was often prohibited. Subsequently, the gaps in their understanding triggered stress and disorientation. While some participants empathised with staff during this trying time (who were under pressure to ensure a continuation of learning), others had assigned expectations to staff as they would have in the workplace, showing little acknowledgement of the impact of Covid-19 on respective roles (Kassem, 2022).

In the literature on widening participation, the assumption that providing access to HE will simply be enough prevails, but this does not guarantee participation as revealed in the current data, particularly for participants enduring remote studies. Greater awareness of students' mode of study may help practitioners to develop support for learning.

Furthermore, professional staff in the academy working in Welcome, Induction and Recruitment, may benefit from this research, as it demystifies what is known about

PGs, and the types of information they might benefit from. This information might be disseminated as resources including leaflets, workshops, apps, and Q&As.

6.4.2.2. Technology

Assumptions about students' digital literacy, like their confidence and familiarity, led to students feeling unfulfilled in their studies on virtual platforms, as they struggled to develop networks with peers and academic staff, and to engage fully with learning materials. This was particularly problematic given the restrictions in place owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant that the choice to be remote or on-campus was withheld, requiring all participants to rapidly familiarise themselves with new learning platforms. Timely research shows that this was also true for staff (Kassem, 2022). Existing literature (Zawacki-Richter & Jung, 2023) speaks predominantly to the accessibility of technological devices for students, whereas the current research highlights the need for academic staff to be skilled in developing conducive learning environments that support students to connect with their peers, the space, and the content (Jones et al., 2023b), considering the pandemic.

There would be value in further exploring participants' earlier employment of remote platforms in the workplace, to understand their preparedness for study. Indeed, for those with experience of remote study, understanding how this has moved on would also inform provision aimed at addressing expectations and preparation. Insight about the digital literacy required to support engagement in a virtual space would be helpful to returners, as would tips about effective communication and relationship building in these spaces.

6.4.2.3. Preparedness for PG Study

Fourteen years ago, Tobbell, O'Donnell and Zammit (2010) wrote about the assumed competence of PG students, although a rare example of such research. Findings in the current study show that even more research is required, highlighted by the changes brought about by the pandemic, some of which have persisted or can be seen as a precipitating event. For instance, while some participants felt familiar with the environment as they gradually returned to campus or acclimatised to remote platforms, they were unsure about how to adopt the expected PG

characteristics (outlined in Chapter 1: Introduction), these attributes include abstraction, depth, research and enquiry, complexity, autonomy, unpredictability, and professionalism (Bamber et al., 2013; QAA Scotland, 2014; QAA 2020). Other participants reflected on how the time between UG and PG studies had led to uncertainty about student identities and their feelings about letting go of their workplace traits. I suggest that some consideration for how specific PG skills are communicated prior to and during studies would enhance the experience for students; in a remote space this might include using infographics, video recordings, sample assignments, or Q&A forums.

There is a lack of literature concerning transitions related to organisational and academic domains together, particularly as experienced throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Research reports the multiplicity of resources provided to students preparing to depart for the workplace (employability skills embedded in the curriculum, study skills workshops, and apprenticeships). When the transition is reversed, however, there does not appear to be sufficient information about preparing skills for use across domains. The current research contributes valuable insight into the experiences of learners returning to higher study for prospective learners. The findings convey the varied experiences of PGs as they encountered remote learning, 'multimembership', and becoming autonomous learners, amongst other things, with insight into the coping mechanisms employed to overcome institutional assumptions. These issues are not only relevant for the Covid-19 context, however.

The research also has implications for workplace organisations planning to support colleagues to fulfil further study. Returning to study to upskill or retrain is increasingly common, but little research explains how workers can be supported by colleagues to persevere in their multiple roles, not least during a pandemic. For instance, in the current study, the participants recalled the emotional support of colleagues who encouraged their studies and showed an interest (Harley), practical support was also available as work schedules were flexed to accommodate classes (Harley, Charlie). Opportunities to intermittently return to work offered a confirmation of expertise, which boosted their self-belief (Emery). For some participants, continued participation in the workplace was not optional, providing financial support that

enabled their studies (Arlo). Further research on the benefits of this dual commitment on the workplace might have implications for the support structures of learners.

Finally, this research highlights the importance of recognising students' former experiences of learning (in the academy and beyond), so that they can be supported to build on existing knowledge. This might include understanding former levels of academic study, experiences with learning types (formal, informal, non-formal), disciplines and interests, their country of study, or indication of assessment styles or critical engagement encountered. Techniques that enable reflection or recall may foster connections with prior knowledge, helping them to recontextualise it, while sharing information in collaborative activities may scaffold learning and stretch understanding. This will help academic staff to identify the different needs and strengths within their cohorts, which may in turn help students to overcome barriers faced during their return.

6.5. Key take-aways: Call to Action and Further Research

6.5.1. Recognising Diversity: setting aside assumptions

The participants' narratives revealed the heterogeneity of PG cohorts as they disclosed different professional roles, how long these roles lasted, and their rationales for pursuing study through alternative modes, incorporating both in-person and virtual provision, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Examples of these differences included the influence of existing work communities on the participants' development of an academic community, and the different levels of accountability experienced in their professional roles. Despite the evident differences in learner expertise and experience, the participants disclosed feeling unsupported in their adjustment, largely owing to the continuation of assumptions made about them by the institution. Therefore, an exploration of transition models employed externally to academia might unearth ways to support students to employ skillsets from the workplace to enrich their participation.

6.5.2. Multimembership: the new norm

'Multimembership' became evident as participants disclosed taking on additional roles beyond the university. While alternative modes of study offered considerably more flexibility, the part-time students still had issues with managing conflicting pursuits, suggesting that their lived realities had not been considered in the design of teaching and learning, which indicated the urgency for institutions to distinguish between full-time and part-time programme design, so that students' needs are addressed and that they feel included. A series of recommendations are offered to address this (see 5.6.2.). Given the effect of the pandemic and the intermittent participation of part-time students, asynchronous resources may offer greater access to relevant information, supporting students to learn at their own pace; this may take the form of an infographic or termly study pack containing key information, schedules, links, events. Offering part-time students a balance of synchronous and asynchronous study options (including sessions in the evenings or weekends) may accommodate their lives better, as would ensuring that live classes are recorded to avoid conflicts, which appeared helpful in the current study. Indeed, creating reliable

streams of communication for students should also be prioritised to support them to sense connection with the culture and community of the institution.

6.5.3. Becoming autonomous: ready or not?

While some participants basked in regaining control over their time and the choices they made about academic tasks, there remained some doubt about the implicit expectation that they would be autonomous learners. Some had little experience exercising autonomy in their former roles, which impacted their confidence with independent practice. This uncertainty encouraged the participants to hold on to existing skills and qualities from the workplace. I recommend further enquiry into how universities support PGs to become autonomous, through an exploration of independent practice; it is hoped that this would develop a clear and consistent definition across the landscape. Despite having been students in HE before, some participants reported that their undergraduate studies had not prepared them to be independent learners, suggesting that this issue could be addressed earlier on when learners are inducted into PG practice (QAA Scotland, 2013; Hockings et al., 2018).

6.5.4. Accessing institutional practice: the role of induction

The data revealed that induction played a considerable role in transition for students during the pandemic. While not explicitly referred to in the data, the participants explained how they were encouraged early on to access resources pertaining to the academic and social facets of PG study. They suggested that the information available did not address the ambiguities of PG study, impacting their participation throughout the year. I suggest that relevant resources are disseminated at timely intervals throughout the year so that information is not misplaced by students, and that induction becomes year-long; the induction resources and dissemination timeline should also be considerate of the wider circumstances, such as disruptions to usual practice.

6.5.5. Increasing participation, but reducing satisfaction

The diversity of the PG population is telling of the success of widening participation initiatives. However, the difficulty that students faced in locating relevant resources speaks to the under-preparedness of the institution to accommodate learners once

enrolled. The issue of balancing demands was most evident in part-time students, who argued that an understanding of what students need in order to persevere is required to support their participation.

6.5.6. Technology: creating a more inclusive space

Lastly, the participants reported how remote study impacted their studies, an inevitable consequence of dealing with the pandemic. For some, this strategy helped with balancing demands, while for others the experience led to isolation and an absence of community. The data indicated that to develop a less fragmented experience, training should be provided to those facilitating and participating in virtual spaces to accommodate the social, pastoral, and academic aspects of learning; in this study, these involved issues with interacting about course content and developing relationships remotely. Students in the research did not find informal ways to maintain contact with one another, thus better understanding of the needs of students interacting via learning platforms warrants further research into belonging and community building in virtual environments.

6.5.7. Summary

This research has confirmed and developed existing lines of thought about the return to study for PG students from the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic, where previously there was little understanding about these learners. It has further contributed to what is known about transition characteristics for this population and offered insight into the ways that identity renegotiation is experienced by individuals returning from or continuing in the workplace; with this information, consideration can be given to how provision is developed for different levels and modes of study. The research has exhibited the non-linearity of transitions within the PG landscape as individuals return to study between professional roles, creating a transparent and realistic representation of present-day PG study; this information about the varied circumstances of learners can be drawn upon to enrich the design of PG events, as well as tailoring supervision. The knowledge created by this project hopes to positively impact the preparedness of prospective learners as they plan to return to HE; the insight of participants has demystified the expectations of academic practice, attributes of PG students, and strategies for managing competing demands. These

findings have also spoken to some of the specific preparations required by learners and staff during a global crisis. Not only has this research helped to characterise the PG experience, but it has also provided a platform for participants to reflect on their studies and the developments encountered within, and to feel seen and heard within a large institution, thus enriching their understanding of their transitional experiences. Lastly, this information may also be helpful for the communities and individuals supporting students pursuing lifelong learning, as it is likely that these findings will assist organisations to enhance professional development.

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8. Appendix

Appendix 1: Information Sheet [Diaries/Storytelling/Interview]

You are invited to participate in the research: **Adult Learners' Transitions from the Workplace to Higher Education**.

Who is carrying out the research?

I am a research student working within the department of Education, Practice and Society at the UCL Institute of Education. My name is Kristy. I am interested in the experiences of students returning to study from a workplace.

Why are you being invited to take part?

You have been invited because you meet the criteria for this sample:

- - you must be enrolled on a full-time postgraduate programme within one of the 11 UCL faculties;
- - have previously completed a bachelor's degree or equivalent (not exclusively at UCL);
- - and prior to your return to study, you must have undertaken a minimum of one year of work;
- - please do contact me if you are interested in taking part but you are not sure if you meet the criteria.

What will happen if you choose to take part?

You are asked to supply **3 written diary entries** each accompanied by sources of **digital story-telling** over the academic year (2021-22). You will be asked to answer 3 questions per submission.

First submission: November 2021

Second submission: March 2022

Third submission: July 2022

Upon completion, you will be offered the opportunity to participate in a **single interview** to discuss the visual submissions in more depth.

In agreeing to participate in this research, you will be asked questions based on your experience of returning to study after employment. The digital storytelling artefacts will offer the opportunity to explore other means of giving your narrative a voice, through photography, craft, and other creative methods. All aspects of this research are being undertaken remotely, online.

This research does not intend to deal with any sensitive issues, however all entries from participants will be treated with respect and confidentiality, and will be made anonymous. Any questions or reflections that pose any discomfort are not required to be completed, this will not impact your opportunity to part-take. All data will be stored anonymously in encrypted drives, and will be destroyed following completion of the thesis (expected 2024).

You maintain the right to withdraw from the research at any stage, and can request that your data is not used.

Participants can be assured that all data collected in this study will be kept secure and will be destroyed at the end of the project; it will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). I have completed GDPR training.

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this research. Researcher contact details:

Kristyna Campbell

(dept. [redacted])

Email: [redacted]

Notice:

The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at [redacted]

This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our 'general' privacy notice:

For participants in research studies, click [here](#)

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices.

The lawful basis that will be used to process your personal data is 'Public task' for personal data.

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [redacted]

Appendix 2: Participant Recruitment Poster

The poster is divided into three main color sections: a top orange section, a middle dark blue section, and a bottom light orange section. The left side features a large red-to-orange gradient shape. The right side of the middle section contains two white circles. The bottom right section contains a blue rectangular box.

Adult Learners in Transition

This research explores the experience of returning to higher education study after a period of work.

Participant criteria

- Currently enrolled on any full-time Postgraduate programme at UCL
- Have completed a BA (or equivalent, at any university)
 - Completed 1+ year of employment between the two programmes of study (part-time or full-time).

Can you help?
Recruiting students for 3 written and visual entries over 1 academic year (Nov 2021 - July 2022).

Apply by 1st November 2021

Researcher Contact Details-
Kristy Campbell

Appendix 3: Thematic Map

Examples of **Thematic Maps** developed over the year-long study.

Key:

Blue text: Initial codes

Red text: Generating themes

Question: 2.1 Discuss the experience of your current role as a student. Reflect on any conflicts, developments, ambiguities, similarities/differences with your prior role at work or in the workplace.

Participant	Quotation	Code / Interpretation: code with descriptions, categories, then code analytically/interpret
Finley	“Overall, as a student is much happier than at work. It could be less responsibility as a student” “This might be the most significant difference between a student working for a company. Students are only responsible for themselves. They have the choice to say no. They do not have to consider other things, such as leaders, salary and family. Their mainly ‘job’ is study.”	Assessment / Control Responsibility Considerations Role conflict Flexibility Adaptation Role adjustment Reclaiming power, control, independence, distinction between working for someone and for yourself – drives become clear.

Finley	“Thus, they have more chances to try the things they are really interested in. when working for a company, you hardly do something you are really interested in because companies have to survive, which need the employee to struggle to satisfy their client.” “This might be the most significant difference between a student working for a company. Students are only responsible for themselves. They have the choice to say no. They do not have to consider other things, such as leaders, salary and family. Their mainly ‘job’ is study.” “But also at the same time, I didn't feel such pressure. I felt felt more freedom, in in in that sense.”	With this, comes opportunity! Opportunity Autonomy ‘really interested in’ Becoming Belonging Transforming - reaching
Finley	“Overall, as a student is much happier than at work. It could be less responsibility as a student”	Emotional State Sense of purpose Meaning / Mattering
Jessie	“When I worked, I felt way more control and the pressure and the tensions and at the same time, I felt way more relevant as a person that matters and whose work matter.”	(Schlossberg p.221 - existential factors: meaningless/isolation/not valued)
Jessie	“Contrast when I start in university in one side, I think I felt - but I think it's his unique to the UK system, to be fair, I	Community of practice Culture Merging

	felt or or to this particular circumstance and UCL - I felt that in one side I was not being much, like that the work I did didn't wasn't that important. If I do it wrong or right, or adequate or not."	Transition Recognition, acknowledgement, impact on productivity and well-being. Impact of culture / support.
Jessie	"I'll say that my role as a student is very, very different than my role as a as a a person that works"	Role change / Previous life experience

Question: 3.1

Reflecting on your transition from the workplace to higher education, describe any structures (e.g., family, peers, institutional programmes, etc.) that have supported you.

Participant	Quotation	Interpretation: code with descriptions, categories, then code analytically/interpret
Arlo	"My partner has supported me significantly throughout my transition. Since I moved from ***** to pursue graduate studies in the UK, the only person by my side was my partner who also moved with me."	Aid – affection, exchange of resources / close personal relationships – not institutional related / culture shock in new location / significant multiple changes
Arlo	"While friends and family provided some support virtually, it was no where as near	Virtual connections – actually 'being there' / human connection /

	as the emotional and financial support my partner could provide me.”	feeling the same as they did, empathy
Harley	“my friends and boyfriend have supported me morally where needed, especially when I simply needed to rant.”	A place without judgement, a place to remove hats, to exist and air feelings
Harley	“I would say my employer has been supportive in my transition back to university. My manager always allowed me to flex my schedule to be able to go to classes and take time off when it was needed, even if last minute. And it is done in such manner that I feel he wants me to do it and is impressed that I decided to study again, rather than treated as inconvenience.”	Organisational support / flexibility / on-going support / continuation of familiarity and practice / no interruption to support system / facilitated various memberships / encouraging – motivating.

Adult Learners' Transitions from the Workplace to Higher Education

[Diary Entries/Digital Storytelling]

Participant Consent Form

If you are happy to participate in this study please complete this consent form by ticking each item, as appropriate, and return to the researcher via the contact details below:

- 1) I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet, and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have had these questions adequately answered. ☐
- 2) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. Any personal data I have provided up to that point will be deleted unless I agree otherwise. ☐
- 3) I understand that all personal information will remain confidential and that efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified. ☐
- 4) I know that I can refuse to answer any or all of the questions/tasks assigned ☐
- 5) I agree for the diary entries and visual submissions to be stored digitally, and will be kept secure and destroyed at the end of the project. I know that all data will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). ☐
- 6) I agree that direct quotes may be used in reports (these will be anonymised). ☐
- 7) I agree that visual submissions/images may be used in reports (these will be anonymised). ☐
- 8) I am aware of who I should contact should I wish to lodge a complaint. ☐
- 9) I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report and I wish to read what will be written about me before it is submitted.

YES / NO

Name:.....
.....

Signature:
Date:

Name of
researcher:.....
.....

Signature:
Date:

Contact details



Concerns or complaints:



Appendix 5: Participant Consent Form (Interview)

Exploring Adult Learners' Transition from the Workplace to Higher Education [Interview] Participant Consent Form

If you are happy to participate in this follow-up interview please complete this consent form by ticking each item, as appropriate, and return to the researcher via the contact details below:

- 1) I confirm that I have read and understood this information sheet, and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have had these questions adequately answered. ☐
- 2) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. Any personal data I have provided up to that point will be deleted unless I agree otherwise. ☐
- 3) I understand that all personal information will remain confidential and that efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified. ☐
- 4) I know that I can refuse to answer any or all of the questions and that I can withdraw from the interview at any point. ☐
- 5) I agree for the interview to be recorded, and that recordings will be kept secure and destroyed at the end of the project. I know that all data will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). ☐
- 6) I agree that short direct quotes may be used in reports (these will be anonymised).
☐
- 7) I am aware of who I should contact should I wish to lodge a complaint. ☐
- 8) I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report and I wish to read what will be written about me before it is submitted. **YES / NO**

Name:.....
.....

Signature:
Date:

Name of
researcher:.....
.....

[Principal Investigator contact details]

Signature:
Date:

Contact details



Concerns or complaints:



Appendix 6: Email Diary / Digital Storytelling Task 1

Adult Learners in Transition

Task 1

Diary Entries

1.1 Which term most accurately represents the working pattern you undertook in your previous work role:

Standard work (Mon-Fri, 9-5)

Flexible work (flexible hours, worked around other commitments)

Shift working (working around the clock in shifts)

Agency work (short-term work)

Self-employed (specialist work / own business)

Please provide a brief description of your regular working pattern.

1.2 Reflect on the organisational culture in your previous workplace (before enrolling onto your current programme). To what extent has it impacted your approach to learning during your time at UCL so far?

1.3 How have you found the experience of moving from the workplace to higher education?

Digital Storytelling

Take two photographs to represent your old and new organisational cultures. Examples of these could be objects, scenes, gestures.

[Please do not include any obvious identifiers of the contexts, such as names, faces, or slogans]

Please return your diary entries and digital storytelling task to the researcher (contact details below) by 28 11 2021
Thank you!

Researcher Contact Details-
Kristy Campbell



Adult Learners in Transition

Task 2

Diary Entries

2.1 Discuss the experience of your current role as a student. Reflect on any conflicts, developments, ambiguities, similarities/differences with your prior role at work or in the workplace.

2.3 Give an example of a time during your postgraduate learning that you have felt your experience from the workplace has benefited or hindered your studies.

2.3 How has the 'blended' learning approach impacted on your transition into higher education? (Blended = mix of synchronous/asynchronous learning)

Digital Storytelling

Draw/represent your unique identity transition process, including all factors that you felt contributed to the experience.

Examples of this could be in the form of a collage, a drawing, a cycle or graph.

Please return your diary entries and digital storytelling task to the researcher (contact details below) by 28 03 2022
Thank you!

Researcher Contact Details-
Kristy Campbell



Appendix 8: Email Diary / Digital Storytelling Task 3

Adult Learners in Transition	Task 3
Diary Entries 3.1 Reflecting on your transition from the workplace to higher education, describe any structures (e.g., family, peers, institutional programmes, etc.) that have supported you. 3.2 Can you describe your experience of acculturation (assimilation into a different culture) and whether this has impacted your learning? 3.3 Please describe the [institutional/work/study/social] culture you identify with at present.	Digital Storytelling What does a support structure look like to you? How does it function within this context? Choose a method of presenting this: photography, drawing, collage, graph, timeline, other. Please return your diary entries and digital storytelling task to the researcher (contact details below) by 28 07 2022 Thank you!
	Researcher Contact Details- Kristy Campbell

Appendix 9: Interview Questions

Interview Questions (follow-up)

Task 1

What do you think this photograph says about organisational cultures?

Can you describe any other examples of photographs you considered taking?

What assumptions are we making here about the differences between cultures?

Task 2

Please explain what you've drawn.

What are you implying by the composition of this drawing?

Looking at this picture now, is this how you envisioned your transition would go?

Task 3

Why did you choose to present a support structure like this?

From this artefact, what can we assume?

How does the artefact support the comments you are making? How do these ideas come across?

Concluding Questions

How did you find the experience of this digital story-telling exercise?

Do you feel as though you have had the opportunity to explore and express your experience thoroughly?

If you were to revisit the three tasks, is there anything you would do differently?

Appendix 10: Doctoral Studies Ethics Application

Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form

Anyone conducting research under the auspices of the Institute of Education (staff, students or visitors) where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants, is required to gain ethical approval before starting. This includes preliminary and pilot studies. Please answer all relevant questions in simple terms that can be understood by a lay person and note that your form may be returned if incomplete.

Registering your study with the UCL Data Protection Officer as part of the UCL Research Ethics Review Process

If you are proposing to collect personal data i.e. data from which a living individual can be identified **you must be registered with the UCL Data Protection Office before you submit your ethics application for review.** To do this, email the complete ethics form to the [UCL Data Protection Office](#). Once your registration number is received, add it to the form* and submit it to your supervisor for approval. If the Data Protection Office advises you to make changes to the way in which you propose to collect and store the data this should be reflected in your ethics application form.

Please note that the completion of the [UCL GDPR online training](#) is mandatory for all PhD students.

Section 1 – Project details

Project title: [Exploring Adult Learners' Transition from the Workplace to Higher Education](#).

Student name and ID number (e.g. ABC12345678): Kristyna Campbell / 14078847

***UCL Data Protection Registration Number: Z6364106/2021/06/68**

Date Issued: 05 06 2021

Supervisor/Personal Tutor: [REDACTED]

Department: [REDACTED]

Course category (Tick one):

PhD ☒

EdD ☐

DEdPsy ☐

If applicable, state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.

Intended research start date: 01 07 2021

Intended research end date: 01 08 2022

Country fieldwork will be conducted in: [United Kingdom](#)

If research to be conducted abroad please check the [Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(FCO\)](#) and submit a completed travel risk assessment form (see guidelines). If the FCO advice is against travel this will be required before ethical approval can be granted: [UCL travel advice webpage](#)

Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?

Yes ☐

External Committee Name:

Date of Approval:

No ☒ **go to Section 2**

If yes:

Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.

Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.

Note: Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.

Section 2 - Research methods summary (tick all that apply)

- ☐ Interviews
- ☒ Focus Groups ([for preliminary study](#))
- ☐ Questionnaires
- ☐ Action Research
- ☐ Observation
- ☐ Literature Review
- ☐ Controlled trial/other intervention study
- ☐ Use of personal records
- ☐ Systematic review – **if only method used go to Section 5**
- ☐ Secondary data analysis – **if secondary analysis used go to Section 6**
- ☐ Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups
- ☒ Other, give details: [Diary entries \(2-3 throughout academic year\)](#), [Digital Story telling \(imagery submissions\)](#)

Please provide an overview of the project, focusing on your methodology. This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection (including justifications for methods chosen and description of topics/questions to be asked), reporting and dissemination. Please focus on your methodology; the theory, policy, or literary background of your work can be provided in an attached document (i.e. a full research proposal or case for support document). *Minimum 150 words required.*

Aim/Purpose

This research sets out to explore the experience of transitioning from the workplace to higher education. The research design employs a framework of Transitioning, Organisational Culture, and Identity. These themes will further acknowledge liminality and boundary crossing, identity development and possible selves, and acculturation and the person-environment fit. This research is being pursued to advance the knowledge of communities of learners, looking closely at how previously established organisational cultures and workplace identities impact the individual's experience of transitioning.

Guiding Question 1

How does the experience of an organisational culture (within a workplace) impact on an individual's approach to learning on returning to higher education?

Guiding Question 2

How can information of individual-level transitions contribute to the literature on facilitating the challenges of acculturation and adjustment during a transition?

Research Design / Methods / Data Collection

This work will be pursued from the developmental perspective, employing a theoretical lens comprising of Schlossberg's Transitioning theory (1981; 1984; 2006) and Handy's model of Organisational Culture (1976; 1993; 1995). In particular, Schlossberg's stages of 'moving from, moving through, moving out' will help explore the experience of moving between domains and liminality.

A literature review will be compiled, offering an overview of how these theories have been conceptualised, making critical connections between schools of thought.

Preliminary research will be undertaken; focus groups will produce data to guide the design of questions and tasks assigned to participants in the main study. The researcher will act as both a moderator and facilitator, administering questions and responses to support the running and regulation of the group (Robson and McCartan, 2016). These groups will run remotely via Zoom.

The main research methods are diary entries and digital storytelling - submissions will be required at three points during the academic year (2021-2022) to document change over the duration of the participant's study. Digital storytelling offers an alternative means of

communicating experience; often these accounts have numerous entry points to access narratives, acquiring representative and symbolic data.

Following on, participants will be asked to take part in focused semi-structured interviews (Robson and McCartan, 2016) based on their digital storytelling submissions; this aims to reduce bias of the researcher's interpretation and acquire a richer understanding. These interviews will be held remotely over Zoom.

The research has employed a mixed methods approach, enabling triangulation, enhancing the validity of the holistic data obtained.

Qualitative data is being collected to obtain in-depth narratives; this is advantageous when exploring perceptions of individuals in particular contexts, allowing themes and concepts to unearth from the data (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Robson and McCartan go explain that "...there are as many realities as there are participants" (ibid: 24), indicating the value of interpretation and collecting a breadth of data.

All aspects of data collection will be undertaken remotely, there is no face-to-face element to this research.

Analysis

Data will be uploaded and stored on the computer programme NVivo, as well as a password protected laptop and the UCL N-Drive.

Data will undergo a thematic analysis; themes can be recognised through repetition, similarities and differences, theories, and phrases (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Once categorised, these themes can be explored in greater depth, employing the knowledge from the data and the researcher's interpretations. While the themes will be informative, looking at the data holistically will aid in understanding the data in the context in which it is considered and/or discussed. Additionally, a narrative analysis will ensure a "...focus on the stories that people use to understand and describe aspects of their lives" (Robson and McCartan, 2016: 373), presenting valuable first-hand data depicting lived experiences.

Participants/Sample

The sample will comprise of returning adult learners who have completed a minimum of one year of employment (part-time or full-time) following the satisfaction of a bachelor's degree (or equivalent) from any university. These individuals will be enrolled on any full-time postgraduate programme at UCL, across the 11 faculties commencing in September 2021 (September 2020 for the preliminary group). The preliminary research will only be conducted within the UCL Institute of Education, throughout six departments.

Department leads and administrators will act as gatekeepers, who will be asked to distribute the information sheet and poster among their cohorts via email.

A non-probability sample will be employed, and it is expected that snowball sampling will enhance the reach of this opportunity. Upon a student expressing an interest in participating, they will be issued with an email from the researcher attached to which is the information sheet (so to ensure participants are fully aware of all aspects of the research) and a consent form which will require reading, signing prior to participation.

Dissemination

The thesis will be available to participants of the study (on request), the supervisors of the researcher, and the exam board. It is expected that the research will produce valuable insight pertaining to unique transitions in to higher education and so will be made available through the UCL research depository.

Handy, C. (1976) *Understanding Organizations*. Penguin.

Handy, C. (1993) *Understanding Organizations*. 4th edn. London, UK: Penguin Books Ltd.

Handy, C. B. (1995) *Gods of management: The changing work of organizations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Schlossberg, N. (1984) *Counseling adults in transition*. New York: Springer.

Schlossberg, N. K. (2008) *Overwhelmed: Coping with life's ups and downs*. 2nd edn. Lanham, MD: M. Evans.

Section 3 – research Participants (tick all that apply)

- ☐ Early years/pre-school
- ☐ Ages 5-11
- ☐ Ages 12-16
- ☐ Young people aged 17-18
- ☒ Adults please specify below
- ☐ Unknown – specify below
- ☐ No participants

Adult learners returning to education, following the completion of 1+ year work placement and a bachelor's degree (or equivalent).

Note: Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC).

Section 4 - Security-sensitive material (only complete if applicable)

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?

Yes* ☐ No ☒

Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?

Yes* ☐ No ☒

Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?

Yes* ☐ No ☒

** Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

Section 5 – Systematic reviews of research (only complete if applicable)

Will you be collecting any new data from participants?

Yes* ☐ No ☐

Will you be analysing any secondary data?

Yes* ☐ No ☐

** Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

*If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g. systematic review, literature review) **and** if you have answered **No** to both questions, please go to **Section 8 Attachments**.*

Section 6 - Secondary data analysis (only complete if applicable)

Name of dataset/s:

Owner of dataset/s:

Are the data in the public domain?

Yes ☐ No ☐

***If no**, do you have the owner's permission/license?*

Yes ☐ No* ☐

Are the data special category personal data (i.e. personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation)?

Yes* ☐ No ☐

Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?

Yes ☐ No* ☐

***If no**, was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?*

Yes ☐ No* ☐

***If no**, was data collected prior to ethics approval process?*

Yes ☐ No* ☐

** Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

*If secondary analysis is only method used **and** no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to **Section 9 Attachments**.*

Section 7 – Data Storage and Security

Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.

Data subjects - Who will the data be collected from?

Adult learners, postgraduate students across UCL.

What data will be collected? Please provide details of the type of personal data to be collected
Qualitative data will be collected in the form of written and spoken accounts, and imagery through digital story-telling. No identifiable data will be presented in the research.

In the focus groups it is possible that participants will indicate reasons for returning to study at master's level, they may discuss the duration of their time away from higher education/in employment, and potentially refer to their role/occupation – this data can be considered personal; however, the researcher will uphold anonymity of the participants. It may be useful to include this information in the research so to enrich narratives and provide differentiation in experiences; participants will be issued pseudonyms.

Is the data anonymised? Yes ☒ No* ☐

Do you plan to anonymise the data? Yes* ☒ No ☐

Do you plan to use individual level data? Yes* ☒ No ☐

Do you plan to pseudonymise the data? Yes* ☒ No ☐

* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

Disclosure – Who will the results of your project be disclosed to?

The results of the project will be disclosed in the thesis compiled as a result of the project, however, none of the results will be identifiable on a personal level.

Disclosure – Will personal data be disclosed as part of your project?

Personal data will not be disclosed as part of the project because all data will be anonymised and then assigned pseudonyms.

Data storage – Please provide details on how and where the data will be stored i.e. UCL network, encrypted USB stick**, encrypted laptop** etc. Encrypted USB, UCL n-drive?

Password protected laptop, UCL n-drive.

** *Advanced Encryption Standard 256 bit encryption which has been made a security standard within the NHS*

Data Safe Haven (Identifiable Data Handling Solution) – Will the personal identifiable data collected and processed as part of this research be stored in the UCL Data Safe Haven (mainly used by SLMS divisions, institutes and departments)?

Yes ☒ No ☐

How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format?

5 years, in digital format on encrypted drives.

Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area? (If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with GDPR and state what these arrangements are)

No

Will data be archived for use by other researchers? (If yes, please provide details.)

No

If personal data is used as part of your project, describe what measures you have in place to ensure that the data is only used for the research purpose e.g. pseudonymisation and short retention period of data’.

Text and imagery data used as part of the project will be fully anonymised with pseudonyms. The researcher will strive to ensure that data is not identifiable on an individual level. Regarding imagery, things like places, faces, and unique details that connect with an individual will not be presented in the final research, and hand-writing, names, and locations are examples of things that will not be disclosed from the diary entries. The participants will be asked to consent (on the consent form) to understanding that sensitive information that may come up within the focus group is not to be discussed beyond the focus group. The recording of the focus group will also be made into an audio file following transcription so that voices are not identifiable, and it will be stored on a password protected laptop.

** Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

Section 8 – Ethical Issues

Please state clearly the ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research and how will they be addressed.

All issues that may apply should be addressed. Some examples are given below, further information can be found in the guidelines. *Minimum 150 words required.*

Methods

Sampling

Recruitment

Gatekeepers

Informed consent

Potentially vulnerable participants

Safeguarding/child protection

Sensitive topics

International research

Risks to participants and/or researchers

Confidentiality/Anonymity

Disclosures/limits to confidentiality

Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)

Reporting

Dissemination and use of findings

The researcher will abide by the UCL Principles of Integrity and by the Professional Code of Ethics as outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA).

Recruitment

To recruit this purposive sample, a request to disseminate the research opportunity will be administered to UCL department leads, containing an information sheet and a poster; they will act as gatekeepers to their cohorts. The preliminary focus groups will be advertised throughout UCL Institute of Education, and the main study will be advertised across the 11 UCL faculties.

Informed Consent

Informed consent will be sought. The researcher will be available to answer queries or concerns throughout, ensuring that participants understand how their data will be used and what the purpose of the research is - this information will also be available on the information sheet and consent form.

Sample

Participant criteria:

- have completed a Bachelor's degree (or equivalent) (not exclusively at UCL);
- completed a minimum of one year of employment (part-time or full-time) prior to returning to university;
- be enrolled full-time on a postgraduate programme at UCL.

Methods

The preliminary research focus groups will comprise of five students in each, lasting up to an hour.

In the main study, diary entries and submissions of digital storytelling will be required at three points over the academic year.

Participants will be asked to take part in interviews held remotely over Zoom. These will discuss the visual submissions, with an aim to reduce the bias of the researcher's interpretations and acquire a richer understanding of the experiences. These will be recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate collection of data.

Anonymisation

All data will be anonymised and allocated pseudonyms to protect individual identities, and presented accurately to ensure the research is honest and representative- this anonymisation includes place names. Participants of the focus groups will be reminded not to discuss the content of the focus group outside of the research setting in order to maintain confidentiality. Measures taken to reduce the recognition of individuals include pixilation of imagery containing faces or identifiable locations, and typed diary entries to ensure that hand-writing is non-identifiable and legible.

Withdrawing

Individuals can withdraw, stating whether they wish for their data to be included or destroyed. Participants may withdraw from the preliminary focus groups at any point, and from the main study up until 01.02.2022.

Risk

The research is considered low risk. The population of participants will be adults. The methods issue no additional risk to the individual and are not seeking to collect sensitive or personal data. Care and respect for all participants will be upheld for the duration, ensuring avoidance of any potential harm. The researcher is aware that the durational nature of the research may become a strenuous commitment, and will be aware of how participation might impact on other areas of the participant's life.

Sensitive Topics

The topic of research is not sensitive; participants will not be asked to reflect on any experiences that may cause discomfort. The researcher has completed GDPR training and will ensure confidentiality of all data.

Disclosure

If any information disclosed from a participant is illegal, or insinuates that harm, abuse, or terror is involved, the researcher will inform their supervisor on the matter to decide whether confidentiality should be broken to inform the necessary authorities.

Data Storage

All data will be stored digitally on an encrypted laptop, and the UCL N-drive.

Dissemination

The thesis will be available to participants, supervisors of the researcher, and the exam board. It will be accessed through the UCL research depository, and open access platforms in the form of shorter articles; these publications will portray an honest representation of participants and the research design, as well as continued good practice regarding referencing and acknowledgements – this is in keeping with the transparency in research expectations.

The researcher has completed GDPR training and is familiar with the UCL Research Ethics framework and Principles of Integrity, and will be held accountable for their actions throughout the research. The researcher will strive to maintain the highest "...respect for people's autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice" within the study (Wiles, 2013: 14).

In addition to these guidelines, the researcher has aimed to design a piece of research that is inclusive, adopting creative and appropriate methods in order to acquire rich and valuable data. The research places respect and trust at the forefront of its design. The research will holistically take in to account "the person; knowledge; democratic values; the quality of educational research; and academic freedom" (BERA, 2018: 5), and views the establishment of trust between participants and researcher as integral to developing a thorough and reliable piece of work.

British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, fourth edition, London. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>

Please confirm that the processing of the data is not likely to cause substantial damage or distress to an individual

Yes ☒

Section 9 – Attachments.

Please attach your information sheets and consent forms to your ethics application before requesting a Data Protection number from the UCL Data Protection office. Note that they will be unable to issue you the Data Protection number until all such documentation is received

Information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research (List attachments below)

Yes ☒ No ☐

Enter text

Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee Yes ☐

The proposal ('case for support') for the project Yes ☒

Full risk assessment Yes ☐

Section 10 – Declaration

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge the information in this form is correct and that this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of this project.

I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.

Yes ☒ No ☐

I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.

Yes ☒ No ☐

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name [Kristyna Campbell](#)

Date [16 06 2021](#)

Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor for review.

Notes and references

Professional code of ethics

You should read and understand relevant ethics guidelines, for example:

[British Psychological Society](#) (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*

Or

[British Educational Research Association](#) (2018) *Ethical Guidelines*

Or

[British Sociological Association](#) (2017) *Statement of Ethical Practice*

Please see the respective websites for these or later versions; direct links to the latest versions are available on the [Institute of Education Research Ethics website](#).

Disclosure and Barring Service checks

If you are planning to carry out research in regulated Education environments such as Schools, or if your research will bring you into contact with children and young people (under the age of 18), you will need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) CHECK, before you start. The DBS was previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). If you do not already hold a current DBS check, and have not registered with the DBS update service, you will need to obtain one through at IOE.

Ensure that you apply for the DBS check in plenty of time as will take around 4 weeks, though can take longer depending on the circumstances.

Further references

Robson, Colin (2011). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers* (3rd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

This text has a helpful section on ethical considerations.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

This text has useful suggestions if you are conducting research with children and young people.

Wiles, R. (2013) *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?* Bloomsbury.

A useful and short text covering areas including informed consent, approaches to research ethics including examples of ethical dilemmas.

Departmental Use

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, the supervisor must refer the application to the Research Development Administrator via email so that it can be submitted to the IOE Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A departmental research ethics coordinator or representative can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the REC. If unsure please refer to the guidelines explaining when to refer the ethics application to the IOE Research Ethics Committee, posted on the committee's website.

Student name: Kristyna Campbell

Student department: EPS

Course: PhD

Project Title: [Exploring Adult Learners' Transition from the Workplace to Higher Education](#).

Reviewer 1

Supervisor/first reviewer name: [redacted]

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research? No

Supervisor/first reviewer signature: [redacted]

Date: 17th June 2021

Reviewer 2

Second reviewer name: [redacted]

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

Focus groups always present a challenge to the anonymity and confidentiality of participants as the actions of other participants are beyond your control. I'm sure you can talk this over with your supervisor and agree a statement at the beginning of the focus groups with expectations around confidentiality to address this.

Second reviewer signature: [redacted]

Date: 18 June 2021

Decision on behalf of reviewers

Approved ☒

Approved subject to the following additional measures ☐

Not approved for the reasons given below ☐

Referred to the REC for review ☐

Points to be noted by other reviewers and in report to REC:

Comments from reviewers for the applicant:

Once it is approved by both reviewers, students should submit their ethics application form to the Centre for Doctoral Education team: [redacted]

Appendix 11: Preliminary Study

Focus Group Questions for Participants

1. How have you found the experience of moving from the workplace to higher education?

1a) Has anyone undergone this type of transition before? Or experienced something of a similar nature? (If so – how do the experiences compare?)

2. When I use the term 'organisational culture', what does this mean to you?

How familiar are you with this term?

2a) Do you feel as though the organisational culture in your previous workplace has had an impact on your approach to learning during your master's programme?

3. When I mention 'identity', what comes to mind?

3a) Describe your experience with identity during this transition.

4. Did the process of settling in to a new culture have an impact on your transition to your programme?

4a) Reflecting on the unprecedented circumstances of this year (Covid-19), how well acquainted with the new culture do you feel?

5. Reflecting on your move from the workplace to higher education, describe any support you experienced. (e.g., family, peers, institutional programmes, etc.)

5a) Did your relationship with any of your supports or resources change throughout your time on the programme?

6. Is there anything else you would like to add to the discussion that we haven't covered?

Appendix 12: Autobiographic Excerpt

'Fri-ends'

[An early memory]

When I was twelve years old, I begrudgingly moved from my childhood home in the city to the countryside with my family, where my grandmother lived. This was the timing of my first notable change. Guarded by the embrace of tall, crooked trees and fields of root vegetables planted in long relentless rows, was her house stationed still in the quiet of the sepia-washed landscape.

I had fond memories of visiting her during school holidays; we would cycle down the lane beside her house, racing over the awkward hunks of stone and dirt, all the long listening out for the call for tea-time. We would dress up in her hefty, tired coats and shoes and play the organ in her guest room. Visiting the countryside was a long drive from home, it was like the slow decent into sleep as you flick through a fairy-tale transporting you away from reality. And yet somehow, this was becoming my reality.

By this time, I had only spent one year in my new secondary school. I recall taking an entrance exam in the old school hall, my seat facing a grand stage with a heavy deep blue curtain draped over it. I was nervous, I'd never been to an independent school before. As students, we had to wear blazers, this made me feel proud and united. The heels of my shoes would knock against the wooden floor as we vacated down corridors to classrooms to be greeted by stern and somehow inspiring teachers.

As the end of the first year arrived, I felt confident navigating the grounds and had established myself within the small cohort. The duration was both taxing and exciting. Acquainting with new faces required bravery and willing, something I would remind myself as I searched anxiously for the part in their cast of peers that I could play. The year seemed to go slowly until it suddenly came to an end. Every encounter was happening for the first time - establishing sports teams, learning Latin, participating in a drama club, and having my mouth measured for a mouthguard. These activities, amongst others, had become routine and ritual for my peers over the duration of their time at the school, and there I was reining in my reactions to the unfamiliar happenings in an attempt to seem 'the same'. Despite my awareness of this, I had hoped to make an impression during my short stay.

Beyond school, I was very fond of my immediate surroundings; my bedroom was a time capsule and every mark on every wall conveyed a narrative from my short but full lifetime. When we moved our rooms up into the attic, I had pleaded with my parents for a cabin bed so that I could efficiently compile all my possessions in one corner of the room. I loved curating space and organising my belongings.

Letting go of this sacred space was not easy.

The news of relocating was met with dread; I couldn't have prepared for this unanticipated transition.

Summer came and our living room was populated with inflatable furniture while the new furnishings arrived. It's a funny thing to look back on, but it was a happy time. My mother tells me it felt like camping, and that everything seemed quite transitory until the school year started over. The summer was spent adjusting to the new family home, stripping wallpaper, inviting old friends to visit, and discovering the neighbouring villages. I could see my world changing shape. Before now, the beach was a place reserved for holidays only; it had become a peaceful and familiar place to us. Feelings of 'independence' and 'confidence' slowly surfaced as the holidays passed.

In time, the meaning of the experience had changed all by itself, or so it seemed. The memories we were beginning to make in the countryside enabled us to make connections with the places that surrounded us in this new and obscure setting. Until school began again, we were very reliant on our family unit for company and support.

As I boarded the school bus on the first day of term, I remembered a conversation with my mother from just before we departed the city. She told me I could wear my hair in all sorts of new styles, because no one knew what my hair usually looked like. She was suggesting that the move was an opportunity, a chance to grow and change and discover new things. This time around, I wore a tie to school. There was that sense of pride again, that sense of belonging.

I continued to study at this school until I left for university. My time was spent participating in sports teams, acting as student representative, and spending most of my allocated homework hours on my art assignments.

'Letting go and letting in'
[A peak experience – a high point in your life story]

I can almost feel this memory heavy in my stomach like I did the apprehension I had that morning. I gripped the banister tightly, skipping over multiple steps, as I hurtled down the stairs to the family computer. The UCAS results were out.

Heart racing, I sat staring at the screen. My bare feet impatiently tapping away on the surface of the cold kitchen tiles, trembling fingers hovering over the keyboard as the website loaded.

Moments later I charged back up the stairs again in full force to alert my parents. I stood tall at the end of their bed and announced my fate. The two of them shot up in a panic.

I had been offered a place to study for a BA (Hons) in Fine Art. Against all the uncertainty, I had met the requirements to continue practicing a subject that I felt so connected to. A discipline that I had been drawn to since I was introduced to poster paints and sugar paper clipped to a plastic easel during my years at nursery as a child. The sense of accomplishment was overwhelming, it was so unfamiliar – uplifting, it felt like acceptance. I had been granted the opportunity to belong and to flourish in unity, amongst other creatives. I felt taller, like I was evolving or entering a sort of rite of passage.

On the spattering of occasions that I have recalled this time in my life, there remains a vision of a teacher, light shoulder-length wavy hair and cardigan, leaning over a banister in the sixth form centre telling me that I'll never be accepted at university without doing an Art foundation degree first. She wasn't an art teacher. I had proved her wrong – I was enough.

Despite relocating a mere hour up the road from my family home, I struggled to let go of the comfort it provided and to prescribe genuine meaning to the strange new terraced building that housed me and a hand-picked selection of my favourite possessions. I often drove home at the weekends during the first term. These visits got less frequent as time went on, and I found more and more reasons to ground myself in one place at a time for longer.

I gradually became part of a new culture - I had made friends that shared my interests and had taken up new hobbies and habits that were unique to the new surroundings. Bumping into someone in the kitchen no longer filled me with imposter syndrome, the rapport was authentic. When I would arrive in the studio each morning, there was a chair and a couple of white plasterboard walls in place of me, I'd often leave artwork or books scattered at the scene. Sliding into the chair accompanied by a steaming cardboard take-away cup of breakfast tea, I would empty my satchel of notebooks and loose pencils out onto the desk. In this space I could curate and arrange, it was malleable, a holding place for my new chapter. This was vastly different from the bounds of a sketchbook that I had formerly known.

Enrolling at university after high school was a culturally on-time transition. My former peers had done the same thing. Society had determined that I had reached an age where I should become more independent. But it wasn't long before the 'strangers' in my seminars became comrades. We would mirror the behaviours of staff and academics in our field that we looked up to. I had begun to match my surroundings.

'Unborn tadpoles'

[A nadir experience – a low point in your life story]

Four years frittered away, and I was now a Master of Fine Art. I had received my certificate and well wishes and had descended the steps of the grand entrance for the final time. I found this entryway to be particularly symbolic; through this door I experienced my first studio, and I discovered the people that I call 'friends' to this day. Through this passage I became someone, an artist, a teacher, a bartender, an assistant, and I gained the skills and knowledge to continue activities of the like beyond this context. Through these doors I would race across the road to the workshops or the university gallery, throwing off one hat and readjusting another. I would dive through the doors out of the rain and into meetings, and when my peers went home for reading week I would saunter in and out of the building with a packet of biscuits in my slippers, to continue grafting in my studio.

By the time I had completed my degree I felt like part of the tapestry of the city. I could walk the cobbled lanes morning and evening, passing by familiar faces and waving into shop windows. It was the most splendid feeling to feel seen.

Upon completion, I departed from the city and returned to my family home. I waved goodbye to the nightlife and the bounty of take-away outlets, said adieu to the taxis and the train station and the continuous pitter-patter of pedestrians, and parted ways with the house where we would stay up all night talking and painting, drinking buckets of tea, dreaming of the people we could be. Returning home was an exciting prospect for a short while. I crammed my world into my little red car and headed back to the countryside.

The 'big fish' diagnosis didn't take long to wear off. I spent weeks, months even, at the desk in my old bedroom, the floor piled high with books and artwork, traces of a version of self. Dispatching job applications and CVs into the unknown was a demanding undertaking, with little feedback or affirmation to uphold my motivation.

I was no longer a student and grappled with the fragments of identity that remained in our family home. I can recall gathering materials to design new artwork on my bedroom floor. The space was confusing, muddled with a fusion of characteristics I had gathered from different roles and stages of my life.

This change was reminiscent of when we relocated from the city to the countryside some ten years earlier.

Opportunities to work came and went, and so I spent much of the next year commuting to other cities to become temporarily part of 'something'. In my satchel I gathered pamphlets and business cards, they were glimpses of another time, a hopeful and possible time that I could play a role in. The temporary nature of my work made becoming part of team a complex undertaking.

I went on to play a host of roles in different contexts taking on a variety of working patterns that I believed would drive me closer to my professional goal. I was the ‘portfolio career’ personified. I would work in different galleries on different days, stay in different hostels, and offer different types of support to different organisations. Variety and flexibility proved key to the success of this practice, until I began to feel as though I didn’t really belong anywhere. This partial inclusion lacked the stability and security that I craved.

‘Anticipation’

[A ‘Turning point’ – an episode where you underwent a significant change in your understanding of yourself]

After much encouragement by former peers and colleagues, I returned to higher education to pursue a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE): Teaching and Learning, specialising in Art, Design, Architecture and Media.

This was triggered by former employment as an Art Technician in a high school, where I facilitated Art and Design classes using my esoteric knowledge of creative media. There were always plenty of opportunities for me to learn; I trained in the wood-workshop so that I was able to prepare materials for classes, I also nurtured my capabilities of technical computer programmes so that I could both use and teach others to use the specialist tools. While this enabled the continuation of my identity as an artist, amongst a department of artist-turned-teachers, the role brought about limitations to my professional growth.

The PGCHE programme was the key (to the lecture theatre, at least). I had longed to study again for some time but the prospect of returning to academia grew increasingly daunting. I was apprehensive – I hadn’t been a student for so long. I thought about what it meant to me to be a student, how I would be perceived as a student, and how that role might have changed during the time I had spent away from the institution. Owing to my (temporary) participation in various organisations, I had become accustomed to being recognised in a staff role. As a returning learner, a mature student even, I had to let go of that vision of myself to fit in with my cohort. This was difficult because I sensed that people expected more of me due to my life stage, as if I had a bank of exciting stories from the field.

At first, the change seemed sudden. I was ‘suddenly’ in a classroom behind a desk. There was nothing outstanding about the desk, it was grey, and my rich Prussian blue notebook lay strikingly upon it. The ceiling of the room towered over us, amplifying our voices, elevating our ideas. The meaning I attached to this qualification seemed to evolve throughout the year. In some respects, it was a practicality that would exhibit my competence as a practitioner. But I also found myself thinking much more deeply about teaching, and the resources and characteristics that I could draw on to support others.

The size of my cohort contrasted drastically, comprising predominantly of a few select members of the university staff. The sessions thrived because of the diversity of backgrounds and experiences that were shared through anecdotes and praxis.

I can easily muster up the emotions I felt returning to study; the excitement of wanting to share every aspect of what I had been learning, and the apprehension of meeting my peers and teacher. She was the head of the programme. She often taught from the back of the classroom narrating the slides on the board, making connections between our observations

and remarks. The five of us sat locked into her speech, arms shooting upwards like fireworks as we competed to answer her questions.

Many moons before returning, I had entered the very same institution to embark on a bachelor's programme. Quietly, I had hoped for a similar experience – the sense of nostalgia guided me. The place had impressed firmly on my perceived value of academia.

I went on to complete a master's at UCL the following year, where I was encouraged to consider embarking on a PhD.

'Re-entry'

[An important adult memory – a memory that stands out from age 21 onwards]

The MPhil begun. Of the hurdles I had faced in getting to this point, I at last encountered a final unexpected situation standing in the way of the usual solitary doctorate experience, the Covid-19 pandemic.

The timing of the pandemic made me uneasy; there was no way of knowing the extent to which it would impact on my learning experience. There were gaps in our understanding of how we would continue to be supported, how knowledge would be transferred, and how we would become affiliated with the institution and with our peers. A continuous reel of correspondence from the university informed us about their actions, decisions, and facilities to enable us to cope during this strange time. Mentor groups and regular meetings with supervisors were invaluable as they offered clarity and guidance. These individuals were paramount in facilitating my progression throughout the remote experience.

I was able to control my immediate environment by returning home to my family which offered a sense of security and a small but reliable network of individuals, with whom I could live and work with side by side in unity. The pandemic had prevented me from relocating to the city, but the countryside issued a sense of serenity amidst the chaos. I persevered, like my peers. Together but apart, we studied from home. I grew used to the stillness of my situation, and fond of the company of my family with who I would have dinner and churn over the micro events of the day. They remained a constant throughout this time, an unexpected primary support network, which relieved the stress of the sparking up and dying down of short-lived communities realised through the university virtual environments and glimpses of 'normal' life between the nationwide lockdowns.

Studying from home was reminiscent of completing homework after long school days as a teenager. My brother was also studying for university and also remained at home, so we developed our own community or 'cohort'.

When the university began inviting students back onto campus this was an exhilarating time. Individuals were allowed to attend campus to access facilities, and eventually book desks to work at in various study rooms. Although this didn't necessarily mean making contact with peers or attending meetings in person, my interactions gradually increased, and I could reacquaint myself with the environment again. I found it funny how even saying 'good morning' to the security guard at the library reception desk made an impact on how I related to the institution. These connections that I forged with the site helped modify the experience; I felt less alone knowing that others were fulfilling similar rituals, taking precautions akin to my own. Looking back, the opportunities to build support networks with other doctoral students arose predominantly through advertisements for webinars and training programmes. In these virtual spaces, we would connect over shared interests and exchange knowledge and

experiences in break-out rooms to broaden our perspectives. It was difficult to maintain these relationships beyond the frame of our computer-screens and one-off synchronous sessions because we wanted stable, consistent and tangible relationships, and this wasn't something that appeared to be in sight. As we acclimatised to this way of working and living, we interacted empathetically and often would be pleased to have the company of another person if only acquainted with them for a short period.

The relationships I had formed with members of the academic body, or staff, were more consistent. Although our meetings were formal, the atmosphere was welcoming and the structure of these meetings was less rigid, allowing us to 'catch up' and offer one another the human aspect of our communities that we felt so distant from. We would share anecdotes of experiences from our different parts of the world, providing updates of the circumstances, normalising the concerns we raised.

During the MPhil I was appointed Postgraduate Teaching Assistant (PGTA) within one of the departments at the university, which opened new opportunities for networking. I was involved in several meetings and taught sessions which permitted me to contribute to discussion and activities within synchronous classes. I quickly became familiar with the staff facilitating the department and a sense of rapport was realised. This helped enormously with developing my relationship with the institution. I also fulfilled a purpose within the department.

The present day.

As lockdown lifted, we crawled out from behind our screens – many individuals remaining necessarily cautious and continuing to work from home. The re-opening of the university campus helped me to situate my role and my knowledge, and I could divide up my living and learning spaces more definitively. My determination to participate in relevant learning experiences and encounter interactions with peers encouraged me to sign up to research training programmes that facilitated my development in various areas - the need for this was enhanced through the new blended learning approach.

Looking at the learning resources and classes available for doctoral study, a vast amount is still predominantly taking place in online environments, whereas my role as a PGTA requires that I attend synchronous sessions both in person and remotely. This position has offered me experience in teaching and designing learning resources, which has enhanced my professional development and the feeling of being part of a team. Observing the students' interactions within the classroom, they appear to have adjusted to the new norms and ways of behaving within the university; they are asked to sit distanced from their peers, to use hand-sanitizer upon arrival, and to keep their masks on throughout classes. While these practices seemed peculiar at first, they enabled social learning, they allowed knowledge to be disseminated and questioned in real-time with all the utterances and reactions that give life to learning.

My studies often involve the use of technology, my laptop or phone for instance. This has transformed the way I perceive the university campus and whether these encounters are

situated; I can feel partially or fully included in activities simply through my virtual presence. The idea that I can contribute or belong to a group or practice and carry this about in my pocket allows me to feel connected; despite the distance, I am able to stay informed and continue discussions that encourage my knowledge to grow, the lines dividing my various practices become blurred.

Appendix 13: Additional Case Studies

Morgan

Morgan returned to postgraduate study after four years working as a recruitment resourcer in a UK-based SME business. Feelings of stagnation had led to the change in direction. He was a mature home student studying full-time, having left the workplace entirely. Morgan's case below is informed by a single submission of data in November 2021, drawing on an email diary entry and a single digital storytelling task.

Situation

Morgan had departed the workplace entirely to pursue PG studies as a full-time home student, after sensing that his career had come to a standstill. During his time working as a recruitment resourcer in the public sector, he had fulfilled a standard working pattern that involved regular weekday hours at an SME business. His rationale for re-enrolling in higher learning after four years stemmed from a desire to regain control of his career journey, through participating in more rewarding work by exploring his passions, which he hoped would be self-fulfilling and future-focused.

Returning to study as a mature student, Morgan encountered culture shock as he made comparisons between his 'fit' in the workplace and in academia. Notably, he encountered structural barriers upon leaving his professional community and attempting to develop connections with peers. Morgan reported that he was accustomed to the working-class nature of his earlier pursuits, and that the diversity of his new classmates was a reminder of who higher education had historically been designed to accommodate. In his reflections on feeling different from peers, Morgan displayed characteristics of imposter syndrome; this was owing to a lack of representation within the university, and his struggle to identify with his peers' backgrounds and experiences.

Morgan's former and present organisational cultures were illustrated in contrasting artefacts (DS.12, DS.13). His experience of isolation was conveyed through the comparison of two similar venues, home to socialising and consumption of food and

drink, but the second appeared to significantly lack company. The two settings give off conflicting atmospheres, despite the continuation of earthy warm tones, they play on absence and presence. The latter appears still, muted, and solitary.



Digital Storytelling (DS) 12



Digital Storytelling (DS) 13

Morgan's earlier experience as an undergraduate (UG) student had laid the foundations for his expectations of returning to study. While this had led him to feel unprepared for developing a community in the new setting, he felt able to build on his memory of studying by employing skills from the workplace. The time that Morgan had devoted to practicing in the public sector had supported him to develop various organisational skills which helped with time management and eventually re-gaining control over any stress amounting from his studies.

Self

Morgan had brought to the academy a cultural philosophy that he had hoped to find mirrored in his peers. He sought sameness, people that would relate to his experiences and to his background, through which he could sense belonging. He revealed that these traits had formerly existed in colleagues at work, and during his UG studies, but that these values and behaviours were now nowhere to be found.

The lasting impression of these strands of identity made renegotiation difficult for Morgan early in his studies, and adjusting these layers of characteristics was made more complicated by participating in PG study remotely, owing to the absence of feedback from peers and staff.

The exclusion that Morgan felt was reinforced by the difficulty he had in understanding academic language and terminology, which hampered his ability to participate. He admitted being unfamiliar with this, as such, holding on to old knowledge and ideas to stabilise transition, detaching him further from the academic community and future identity.

Support

In Morgan's reflections on losing his workplace community, he mourned the stability it brought him, the consistency of their interactions, and how these relationships had spilled over into his personal life.

As the Covid-19 pandemic broke out and remote study was enforced, existing networks became invaluable. But no longer associated with his workplace practice and unable to gather in-person, Morgan sensed a distance growing between him and his former colleagues. At a time when he had struggled to become acquainted with new peers, and was unable to sustain his friendships, he felt increasingly isolated.

In the first term of study, Morgan reported that connecting with his peers remotely was challenging, and that this was not helped by the limited support available from his programme to induct individuals into the academic community. Despite pursuing PG studies to invest in his interests, Morgan found the social aspect was creating a deficit, influencing his motivation.

Strategy

Morgan drew heavily from his bank of skills developed in the workplace to modify and manage the challenge of studying remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. Notably, he found that various soft skills had helped him to create boundaries around time assigned to studying and time to spend resting. This also supported his adjustment to independent practice, which was made more complicated as his environment did not change until returning to campus. Thus, the standard working pattern was revived.

Returning from a professional role, Morgan exercised his ability to be disciplined, which led him to create new routines to manage time better. At work, he had fostered

these skills by self-managing tasks and by working closely with colleagues to develop effective behaviours, which helped to develop his autonomy.

Charlie

Charlie was a home student returning to postgraduate study after six years working with a design consultancy in the UK. She maintained her professional practice alongside part-time studies, adjusting her working hours as the master's course unfolded. Her case below is made up of two rounds of email diary entries, accompanied by two digital storytelling tasks. Charlie's participation in the research spanned November 2021 – March 2022.

Situation

Six years after completing her bachelor's degree, Charlie decided to return as a PG student to study part-time, which she considered a timely change for self-fulfilment and professional development. To manage her on-going competing demands, she fulfilled a standard working pattern with flexible hours, which initially totalled 35 hours throughout the week. The flexibility of her working hours meant that she was able to attend meetings, be available to colleagues, and to accommodate tasks that were being shared across time zones (Email Diary). This also helped her to participate in her studies, to complete 'life admin', and to make use of seasonal weather (Email Diary).

Charlie had a lot of experience with working remotely, as her company had promoted this approach prior to the pandemic as a more sustainable working method (Email Diary). This gave her the opportunity to self-manage her tasks and time, which was particularly beneficial given her preference for working in the evenings. The trusting relationships that existed between her and colleagues allowed her to practice being independent and autonomous. Charlie expressed being able to manage her demands through clear and continuous communication with colleagues using shared calendars, which allowed her to define time assigned to work tasks and time for lectures and seminars (Email Diary). As a student, the option to participate remotely benefited her work-life balance and feelings about 'multimembership' (Wenger, 1998), however the literal distance she experienced between peers reportedly hampered how she felt about building human connections and cementing knowledge

shared in classes. This was occasionally made more challenging when she encountered 'technical glitches' (Email Diary).



Digital Storytelling (DS) 14



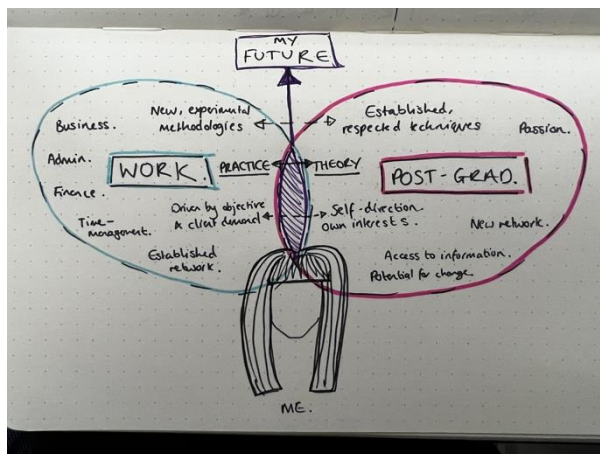
Digital Storytelling (DS) 15

In her first set of artefacts (DS.14, DS.15), Charlie portrayed the objects assigned to her roles in the workplace and as a student. Interestingly, she also captured the remote nature of both. She claimed preventing the spillover of her personal and professional lives by creating a physical distance between where tasks and identities were situated. Despite attempts to keep the two roles separate, Charlie explained that often the timings of demands from the two roles conflicted. She explained having opened different accounts on her devices to manage her tasks, but that her university studies could be accessed across all tools, while also being neatly captured in a separate notebook. Lining the various objects up, Charlie depicted the metaphorical bridge she had created, whereby the different branches of identity spoke to one another (Email Diary).

Her allegiance to the workplace was evident in her ability to identify with the role at unconventional times of day, in remote locations, and without the need for contact with colleagues. This skill was invaluable when the nation went into lockdown, and the felt distance between strands of identity grew. Under the circumstances, Charlie reported experiencing greater care from colleagues, reflecting their efforts to support one another to manage tasks and avoid over-working (Email Diary). These behaviours were mirrored by Charlie to her peers, as she showed compassion to others during the trying time. Where she was required to complete group work with peers, she showed consideration for their different commitments and planned work

tasks around this to prevent role conflict, so that it would “work for everybody” (Email Diary).

Keen to adjust to academic practice, she found that time was a great healer. In her second artefact (DS.16), Charlie illustrated a Venn diagram that detailed the different strands of identity that she was engaging with during her return to study. She claimed that,



“I wanted to represent how I’m feeling my working and studying lives as two (sometimes) opposing parts of my brain, experience, and expertise [...] I see myself moving forward as a blend between the two; able to speak both languages, use both skillsets and benefit from the experience and fluency with both” (Email Diary).

Digital Storytelling (DS) 16

A gradual understanding of PG student expectations supported Charlie to identify with a student identity. By becoming familiar with peers and student norms, she felt more confident about moving between roles by employing behaviours that would enrich her experiences with both.

Self

In her new role as PG student, Charlie was keen to share some of the knowledge she had acquired from industry over the past six years. She offered anecdotes that she perceived to be relevant to their studies, including reflections on methods and approaches to research, and offering alternative perspectives to the academic norms shared in seminars (Email Diary). Although Charlie felt that her expertise was relevant and could be drawn upon to enrich the collective experience, she sensed that this told her apart from her peers, having not observed the same level of professionalism from them.

These behaviours illustrated Charlie's on-going relationship with strands of identity she had developed in connection to her professional role. It took a little while for Charlie to feel accepted by her immediate academic community, as she received so few responses to the traits and knowledge she projected onto the new setting. All the long, Charlie was also adjusting to the influence of academic expectations, the use of academic language, and having to navigate the two pursuits side by side (Email Diary).

She claimed that her feelings of impostership stemmed from how she believed her peers perceived her, this included seeming arrogant and dominating. The knowledge that Charlie was imparting in academia appeared superior to that of her peers, but she struggled with how this divided them, delaying affirmation and identification with a student identity.

As time went on, Charlie was informed by peers that her input was 'useful and interesting', and academic staff had begun requesting her views when exploring certain topics. This recognition changed how she felt about her connection with and belonging to the academic community (Email Diary).

Acceptance by the academic community led Charlie to feel closer to the identity she was adjusting to. The clarity this offered helped her to build boundaries around her roles, to 'change mental gears' (Email Diary), and to take on characteristics and behaviours that enabled her to tend to competing tasks.

Support

Charlie's on-going professional pursuit gave her access to a familiar network of colleagues that she had developed over six years of working together. In the first instance, the support she received from them was largely practical, as they collaborated to develop schedules accommodating her growing demands.

While Charlie's decision to return to academia was motivated by a personal interest and desire to professionally develop, she explained how her employers had recognised the significance of this development to the organisation, reflecting their willingness to support her. Importantly, she negotiated work hours with her employer

as the programme developed which helped to avoid feeling overwhelmed by the expectations of each role. She reported that “35 ‘over-tired’ hours are less productive than working fewer but ‘rested’ hours” (Email Diary).

Openly communicating about her studies with colleagues helped her to plan and navigate participation in different tasks. She explained how giving access to a shared calendar allowed her colleagues to understand her situation better, so that they may consider ways to include her at work (Email Diary).

Strategy

For Charlie, remote study offered her the flexibility needed to manage her continued membership in the workplace. She explained how participating in the two roles virtually meant that she could win back commuting time, by participating in classes or meetings from her computer (Email Diary). The experience of fulfilling these two roles and actioning different branches of identity was made easier for her without the pressure of time constraints. At work, Charlie and her colleagues had been allowed to flex their hours at their leisure, as this helped accommodate the cost of travel, worker stress, and sustainable working (Email Diary).

Charlie also acknowledged the significance of having the option to be remote when she experienced bouts of illness. She found that joining in remotely helped her to feel included when situations were out of her control or unplanned (Email Diary). This allowed Charlie to continue developing relationships with members of the academic community, to contribute to classes, and to feel as though her contribution mattered.

Harley

Harley was an international master's student studying part-time in the UK. She completed her bachelor's degree at another Russell Group university and had lived in the UK for five years at the time of data collection. Before returning to study, she had worked with an agency for two years and had chosen to continue in her pursuit. Harley's case below comprises data collected from three email diary entries and three accompanying digital storytelling tasks. These spanned November 2021 – July 2022.

Situation

Harley studied part-time while maintaining her role as an agency worker. The nature of this work had previously led her to structuring working hours around the needs of clients, but upon returning to academia, she found that the flexibility of these temporary roles also supported her to participate in PG study. Harley's employers responded positively to her choice to return to study, offering recommendation letters and acknowledging the change to her availability (Email Diary).

When the seasons changed, Harley and colleagues were able to modify their hours to navigate the weather. She explained how the standard working pattern with flexible hours was further adjusted to accommodate workers' needs when the nation was hit by Covid-19, exhibiting the care permeating the organisation's culture.

At the start of term, Harley felt unsure about what to expect from her PG studies, particularly as she had chosen to pursue a different subject from her bachelor's degree. This was not helped by the absence of information detailing the distinctions between levels, timetabling, what remote study would be like, or what to expect from student-staff relationships. She was aware that developing alternative skills might be challenging but ultimately conveyed that she found the overall change from professional to student role was quite disappointing (Email Diary).

This dissatisfaction was evident in how Harley held onto existing behaviours to accomplish tasks in the new role but found that these told them apart from peers. She found that PG tasks often had a teamwork element, something she had

experienced to an 'extremely high standard' at work (Email Diary), but that her peers did not always mirror the same commitment, nor did they work at the same pace. As a result, Harley moderated the effort she put in, making sure to be productive in individual assignments, but stepped down from motivating peers where they were uninterested in being responsible (Email Diary).

Harley illustrated the contrast between the interactions she had with colleagues and peers in her first set of artefacts (DS.17, DS.18 ((faces covered in DS.18)). The physical closeness of workers and the visible tools used for tasks in DS.17 represent the norms informing her expectations. Whereas in the second photograph, the students appear estranged, and in disagreement.



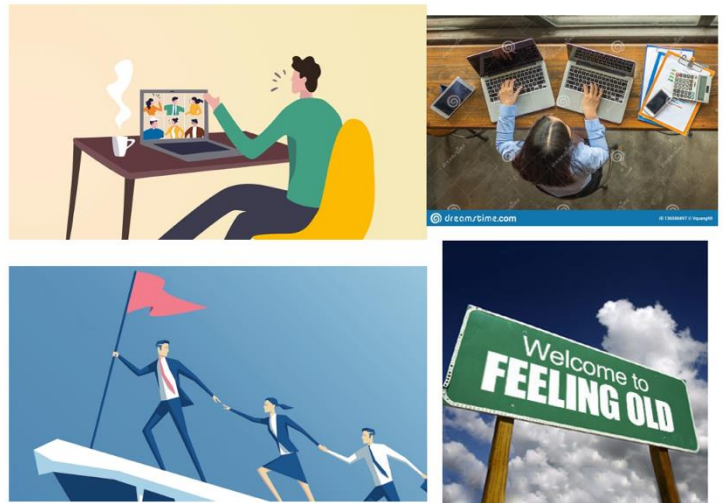
Digital Storytelling (DS) 17



Digital Storytelling (DS) 18

Harley's frustration could also be attributed to poorly organised student schedules which made it difficult for her to manage external commitments, which led to part-time students missing out on opportunities when they were unable to adjust plans. She reported that working with peers was problematic when she felt unable to contribute or be present in classes (Email Diary).

In her second artefact (DS.19), Harley gathered four illustrations to depict her experience of identity renegotiation. These portrayed the experience of remote study, multi-tasking or being a multi-member, feeling different from peers, and leading by example by exhibiting several workplace traits that enriched her ability to fulfil demands.



Digital Storytelling (DS) 19

Often, Harley participated in her studies remotely to stay on top of her work tasks. This allowed her to feel included in the different roles and communities, without losing time to commuting (Email Diary). Despite feeling able to complete the demands of both roles remotely, Harley explained how remote study “made it more difficult to meet classmates” (Email Diary). Remote study was largely out of her control owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, however the difficulty she experienced with developing connections with the academic community pointed to some of the additional support she may have benefited from on the virtual platforms.

In addition to some of the institutional barriers that Harley faced, she also reported cultural barriers as an international student studying in a second language. Although she claimed to have lived in the UK for five years prior to her PG studies, Harley explained that “the British English has so many local variants, including accents and phrases characteristic for regions that till this day I find myself not understanding certain references or wording” (Email Diary). The interactions Harley encountered in class were made more challenging by inaccessible terminology or language choice, which “In the past, it has stopped me from asking questions because I was afraid of not understanding the answer” (Email Diary). This points to the assumptions made about learners, with little acknowledgement for diversity.

Self

Notably, Harley’s approach to her PG studies was mostly informed by behaviours and skills she had acquired during her time at work; this could be seen in the way

she managed individual tasks and in her attitude towards group work. The decision to maintain and employ these characteristics significantly impacted her perception of peers. Over her studies, Harley described experiences of collaborating on group projects which comprised about 80% of their programme. She identified that many of her peers had not previously experienced a work or professional setting, creating fewer commonalities between them (Email Diary). Harley's dedication to her work traits also showed her perceived value of these in a student role.

Sometimes Harley's peers refused to take responsibility in group projects. This was a significant source of frustration, particularly as she had been accustomed to working in teams with clearly defined roles and boundaries. In turn, the hurdles she faced during group interactions considerably impacted her outlook on the return to study, and the importance of these projects to her development. She reported that, "coming from professional background my attitude to assignments has been more structured, and often commercial knowledge (related to degree I study) benefited me in the class" (Email Diary).

Support

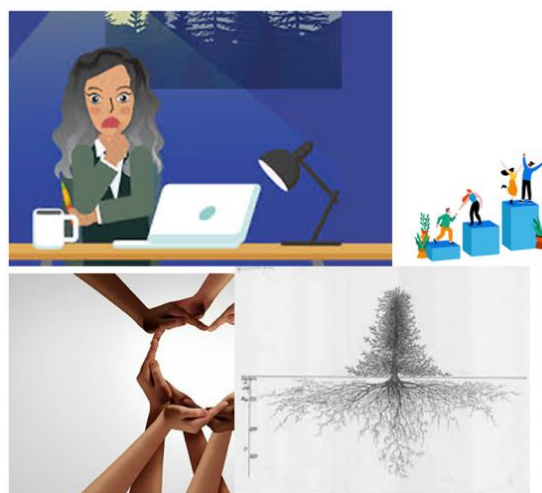
Harley reported having two key support networks during her return to study. Firstly, the continuation of support from her partner created an informal space in which she could reflect and respond to the experience; she referred to the importance of their moral support. Along with this, Harley had developed a friendship group of predominantly international students, with who she felt able to benchmark PG studies. She reflected on going through the return *with* her peers, unpicking expectations and assignments with them, and learning from one another (Email Diary). As an international student, Harley found that weathering the return to study with others helped her to feel less isolated.

She explained how despite having lived in the UK for 5-6 years, she struggled to identify with the country or the people in it. The barriers to understanding and language use had been particularly problematic as she attempted to build connections. Simultaneously, she reported feeling increasingly distant from her country of origin. In a liminal way, Harley shared, "I miss the Europeanness of

midland Europe without knowing what it really means to me or feeling any sense of belonging to a particular country” (Email Diary).

Outside of academia, Harley was part of an ongoing network of workers at the agency. Her employers were eager to support her pursuit of lifelong learning and to enable her continued participation at the organisation. They showed compassion and understanding and allowed Harley to increasingly flex her hours to accommodate conflicting events (Email Diary). Their desire to help Harley achieve balance led to a greater allegiance to the workplace and attempts to reciprocate the care shown. Her employers respected the choice to return to study which helped to maintain Harley’s motivation and dedication to building on existing knowledge.

In the third digital storytelling task (DS.20), Harley was asked to provide an illustration of her support structure. Four images have been collaged depicting the different support received during the return to study. The image of the girl working alone in low lighting shows Harley’s efforts to manage her competing roles by working early in the morning and late at night.



Digital Storytelling (DS) 20

The building blocks of individuals reaching out to help one another may have represented the belonging she felt from sharing the experience of study with other international peers, which appeared to be the strongest connection she had to the academic community. She felt compassion from colleagues who helped her to manage the two roles. Finally the tree appeared isolated, much like Harley had felt at the beginning of her studies upon sensing difference between her peers, but the on-going support provided by the workplace sustained her.

Strategy

Having returned to study after two years working in various roles with an agency, Harley found that she was able to draw on different skillsets to self-manage as a student. Characteristics of her professional role influenced how she behaved as a

student; for instance, the way she prepared for, and planned assignments was based on an existing model she had implemented at work, to ensure that she stayed on top of deadlines. Referring to the 'attitude' she took to her studies, offered insight into how she thought about her tasks, and the significance of her chosen approach to achieving balance and managing the stress of change (Email Diary).

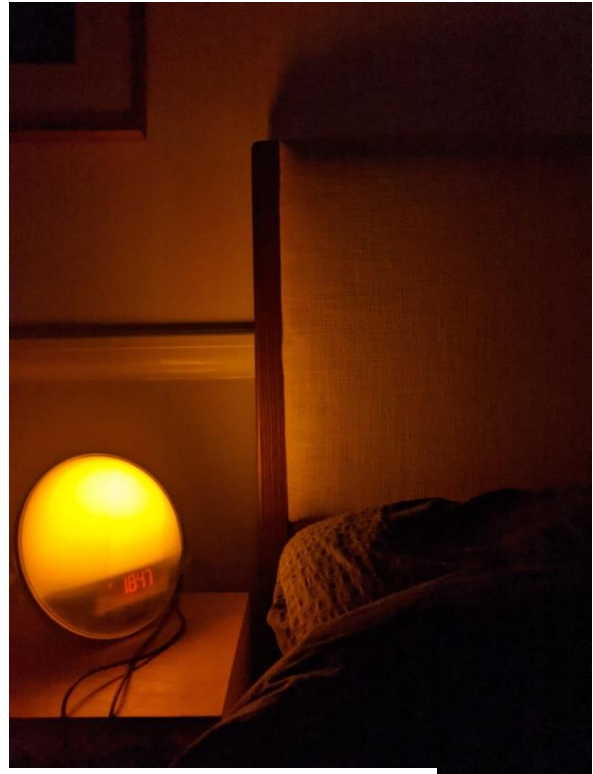
Harley also conveyed that her commercial knowledge closely related to her studies, providing first-hand experience to draw upon. She felt able to contextualise her experience and the expertise acquired in classes, which affirmed her suitability to the setting, while helping her to build on existing learning. She explained how she felt considerably more productive during her master's study than she did during her BSc, and that she was creating outcomes faster and to a higher standard (Email Dairy).

Appendix 14: Additional Digital Storytelling Artefacts

Emery (November 2021)



Digital Storytelling (DS) 21

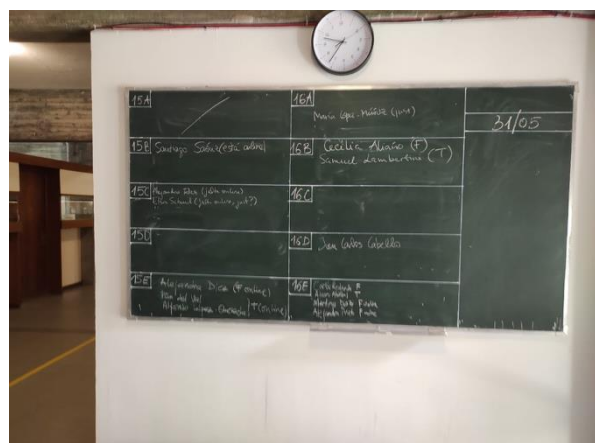


Digital Storytelling (DS) 22

Jessie (November 2021)



Digital Storytelling (DS) 23



Digital Storytelling (DS) 24

Aubrey (November 2021)



Digital Storytelling (DS) 25

Your weekly updates on Unitu

Hope you've had a great week. Here's a summary of what happened in your feedback board in the past seven days:

IOE PGT Feedback Board



1 Posts



46 Views



2 Comments



6 Votes

Digital Storytelling (DS) 26

(March 2022)

Cooperation in working experiences---help me cooperate with classmates.

Teaching experiences---help me understand the educational theory more profound and comprehensive.

Time management skills in working experiences---help me manage my time during my postgraduate studies.

Digital Storytelling (DS) 27

Appendix 15: Case Studies / Narrative Thematic Analysis

Participant	Quotation	Code / Interpretation: code with descriptions, categories, then code analytically/interpret
Arlo	“It was my previous university experience was in a language I was comfortable with, in a place that was familiar to me. And so everything felt very familiar and comfortable, and I knew what I had to do step by step. Um! And then coming here to see how I just felt like completely lost, in a place that isn't familiar to me. London is a pretty scary city to if you don't know where to go, or I didn't know anybody. and it seemed like the staff, and my department weren't it's all they didn't they didn't want to help me. It's just that they didn't know the answers. It's like Nobody knew the answers of like great basic stuff” (Interview) “My institution in ***** did things very differently than we do. So	Situation Circumstance change – frustration, challenge, disempowering Previous experience / Role change Studying in another language, meeting expectations of UK studies, process/length Control / stress

	getting used to a whole new academic system” (Interview) “But through that experience. I realized that so far my life has been very easy, because I, you know, lived in the same town. Ah stayed in spaces that were very familiar to me, and didn't grow as a result.” “I live with my partner, and it's a lot more fun than being stuck in a cubicle”. (Interview) “It's not a very creative space. It's very gray um like navy blue colors. And um Yeah, it's a very sterile environment compared to your house where you can wear what you want, and you're surrounded by things that you love things that make it happy. My space really affects me like aesthetics, really um! And so, being able to work in a place where I curated the space makes me almost focus more” “My experience as a student has been up and down. Sometimes I wonder if I made the right decision to return to school. I am	Out of comfort zone, personal growth, stayed in familiar/safe environment Working from home with partner Control / assessment Shared space, impersonal, other's impressions on the space. Ordered, clean, usable. Autonomy over composition Triggers / assessment / control Assignment of tools to different roles, creativity, involvement, spillover Time constraints, need for control, assigned zones, symbolic items

	always exhausted trying to balance school with part-time work. I am living in financial precarity with student loans. I remind myself that doing a PhD is what I always wanted and that it will be worth it in the end.” (Email diary) “the organisational structure was very stratified. I was a policy analyst, and above me was my manager, and above her, a team manager [...] I joined the federal government as a young student, eager to bring about change within the system. But alas! I quickly learned that bureacracy moves slower than molasse. My manager once told me that we need 13 signatures to get anything approved.” (Email diary) “Since I was an MA student not too long ago, being a student is still fresh in my mind. The transition was fairly easy. I know the kind of routine I need to focus on my academic work” (Email diary)	Regaining control, fostering independence, former hierarchical culture Role change / control / previous experience / assessment Temporal distance from academic study > remote study was different Previous experience / assessment / duration
Arlo	“While other, younger students had difficulty understanding the	Self

	concept, I felt my previous experience in the policy world has benefited my understanding. I could apply my first-hand experience to abstract scenarios.” (Email Diary) “writing professional emails, cold calling, networking” (Email diary) “...it's historically been a discipline that bourgeois people study. I do feel that it's very white for raw dominance in my department [...] I've come from a working-class background, and I do have to work, like my parents don't give me money to go to school or to pay my rent, so for her to say, 'you should go part time because you have to work' to me was insensitive” (Interview). “I upgraded fine, and I managed to do the same work as everyone else, because I can manage my time properly” “I found that yeah, it. It was very difficult to connect with people, regardless of my participation. And all these events and	Workplace behaviours/experiences, build on knowledge, transform knowledge to understand concepts in new context Behaviours, traits / resilience Financial precarity, lack of stability, scholarship, financial and structural barriers. Multimembership! Resilience / outlook / self-efficacy Supervisor's doubt influenced their relationship – overlooking Arlo's professional capabilities, excluding Arlo from culture Drawing on formerly weathered experience In control / characterising resilience Participating in other PG activities to overcome distance,

	activities and committees because everything was, and I'm also at fault. Sometimes they met in person, and I tuned in virtually, because, just like you know, it's a thirty-minute ride to campus just for one meeting, so I just often like, do not make the effort to meet people on campus, and I do think that this affected. How like our bonds, and how close we got.” (Interview)	helped develop student identity, meet cohort (virtually) Commitment / behaviours / in control
Arlo	“I love my department, but I do feel like the relationships between staff and students isn't great there aren't too many events like social events planned. The department is always like out of money [...] my own relationship with my supervisor isn't great, we barely meet once a month – I've actually never seen her in person” (Interview). “when she mentioned this [<i>part-time study</i>], I just felt like she was kind of out of touch with my reality, and insensitive to my situation” (Interview).	Support Literal distance > emotional distance Interrupted support system Issues with connecting – isolation? Lack of clarity? Disagreement / conflicting beliefs

	“building up a new life [...] a new place for the help and support for my partner, friends and family.” (Interview) “the stones, could represent either individuals or specific situations specific individuals that contributed to solidifying the entirety of the wall” (Interview) “I don’t think the wall is ever complete. I think it’s a constant life process [...] collecting and assembling them means it’s a process [...] It’s like accumulation over time, and it’s never just one person who builds on it” (Interview). “My partner and I always tell each other when something terrible happened.. We’re just like, <i>What are you gonna do?</i> He’s got to pick up the pieces and move on. And this is how I see the wall, even though it falls apart” (Interview). “Since I moved from ***** to pursue graduate studies in the UK, the only person by my side	DS3 > meeting people, learning norms, communication, moving knowledge around, inconsistent support Affect / aid / connection Ongoing learning Stability Symbolic structure relationships pre-existing relationships, connection to home not disrupted / reliable In-person, human connection

	was my partner who also moved with me. While friends and family provided some support virtually, it was no where as near as the emotional and financial support my partner could provide me.” (Email Diary) “a wall made of stones is something that you build over time [...] you may take a walk, and they collect a few rocks, and then you add to it [...] In ***** we have some similar. It's like a people make like these sculptures [...] It's like coming from the Inuit tradition, and whenever you see rocks [...] then you go by the water, and you create this like alarm [...] the Inuit would like put by the water, so that fishermen could see that there was a village nearby” (Interview).	Aid / continuum / in-person / connection to home Familiarity, process, homeland, boundary objects Community / continuity / affect
Arlo	“I was the student's representative. My, So I was a student rep of my coord, and I created this like Whatsapp Group for all the Pg. Students, and then we kind of realized that everyone in the cohort was facing similar issues. many of	Strategy International community Support network commonalities affirmation / relationships / institutional / identification Modifying the situation / reducing the stress

	them, were lost. A lot of them are international students coming to ***, so they they felt like they were lacking support. They were always like confused like, for instance, about the ethics process. We didn't have a lot of help" (Interview) "In my previous experience in academia and also in work, it's always been very clear what was expected of me. What I need to do, where I need to go. I was never in a managerial position. I was always told what to do in my jobs and also in my school" (Interview).	Expectations, academic tasks, adjustment, transparency Organisational / spillover / identification / connection Address the meaning
Finley	"Moving from the workplace to higher education is a previous chance for me. It gives me the opportunity to suspend for a while. To be honest, work is not a funny thing, there are many things you have to deal with, just like endless meeting, communicating with colleague and so on." (Email diary) "Especially after I have worked five years and almost I arrived at	Situation Relief, change, adjustment Role change / trigger / control / assessment Spillover, dominance, overwhelm, control

	the company and 8am and I left the company, sometimes even 11pm I think the work time is too much for me, and I even do not have the weekend and sometimes the And sometimes the holidays.” (Interview) “the atmosphere in this office is quite depressing” (Interview) “had to obey some criteria, for example, you cannot be too critical” (Interview) “Overall, as a student is much happier than at work. It could be less responsibility as a student. This might be the most significant difference between a student working for a company.” (Email diary) ‘Freedom’ (Interview) “you write them down and you modify that draft again and again and again. And the modified draft to your leader and the leader gave you some comments and then you modified it then at last, it was published this process is quite	Control / stress / assessment Culture, hierarchical, position, autonomy Previous experience / timing / role change Assessment / stress / duration / timing Similarities with former roles > attitudes / behaviours > transformation of knowledge/skills > negotiate identity Trigger / assessment / stress Conflicting with academic expectations

	similar with what I have learned in the educational assessment program I wrote it is almost the same.” (Interview) “My previous report usually needs to be descriptive and try to be vivid and attract readers to go on reading. But essays, which require more critical thinking, will conflict with the way I used to be” (Email diary) “It all said that your assignment too descriptive, I not critical” (Interview) “...they only gave the feedback just really based on what you have done not based on who you are [...] they just gave you the suggestions or instructions according to your assignment [...] they do not criticize you as a person.” (Interview) “feedback frequency is not as much as what they taught us [...] she even leave me a totally one month and did not respond to my email” (Interview)	Conflicting feelings about writing styles > unsuitable Influence relationship with institution / community > response to feedback Stress / duration / assessment Misaligned expectations Stress / assessment

	“more interaction with your students, you had to give instant and meaningful feedback [...] And do not feel as though they do that.” (Interview).	
Finley	“woman at this age, the best way is to have a stable job, a stable family and keep this balance until they die. But he supports my choice to go abroad. He said that if you want to go, then go, without regret.” (Email diary) “students are only responsible for themselves [...] They do not have to consider other things, such as leaders, salary and family. Their main ‘job’ is study” (Email diary) “I am the person who contact with my leader frequently. But here, my tutor even ignores my email one month. This is a frustrating feeling indeed. I know they are busy, but who is not busy?? They said welcome to communicate and do that in another way. I cannot	Self Internal conflict Expectations of others in shared context > lifelong learning Stage of life / culture Resilience Commitment Outlook / commitment / values / behaviours Doubt > influence on mental health > institutional barriers > prevented development of academic traits Outlook / resilience / traits / blame / proactive?

	understand. Responsibility for students is a rare quality.” (Email diary) “I am fully familiar with what I have done, I am familiar with this industry [...] And I am I'm good at ***** writing” (Interview)	Doubt > sought feedback Resilience / traits / control
Finley	“curious status, about the bird and they explore the world together, no matter, it is in the water or outside the water [...] They just keep curious I in demand and they want to know more about” (Interview) “Me and my husband both like this movie. We even use these two children as our WeChat background.” (Email diary) “He is always there, supporting me and encouraging me to be myself. Also, he is my best friend to explore everything.” (Email diary)	Support Inside/outside academia, consistent support, reliable/stable Relationships / affect / affirmation / aid / continuation
Finley	“I still keep to finish my work as soon as possible. My experience to deal with work is,	Strategy Workplace behaviours Modify stress Reduce overwhelm

	dividing them into small part, and finish them step by step, one by one. It will reduce my pressure when facing lots of assignments.” (Email Diary)	Meeting expectations Modify the situation Manage the stress
Hunter	Previous experience of working from home (Email diary) “Although I think it’s important for the university experience for students to be on campus, reality is we’re still living in abnormal times. The blended learning approach has allowed me to live a full academic experience. It also has added more flexibility and forgiveness to life. In my undergrad, if we were off classes for sickness, we just missed class.” (Email diary) “I felt I have a place, and I felt good” (Interview) “In the past school was an environment where I thrived and felt I was doing something meaningful. It’s made me very	Situation Former experience, weathering, wisdom Assessment / control Positive outlook Remote platforms – technical literacy Manage stress Duration / assessment / trigger Control, autonomy, outlook Existing relationship / perception, identification, values Timing / assessment / role change / duration

	happy to see that sensation hasn't changed. I feel much more appreciated as a student than I ever did at work." (Email diary) "found it very easy to assimilate into ***'s culture, as I have always felt at home in an academic environment [...] I felt generally very motivated and willing to take part in activities at ***. Compared to past work cultures I have dealt with, *** has been a breath of fresh air and, unlike those work cultures, I identify with its values." (Email diary) "At present I identify with a culture that challenges the <i>status quo</i>, promotes free thought and intellectual development and helps me grow as an individual" (Email diary)	Acknowledgement, recognition, affirmation, meaning Duration / assessment / role change / previous experience
Hunter	"Being back at university has reminded me of how irrelevant those companies and jobs are outside of their own small world. At the same time, I feel like I still carry in me a lot of the	Self Expectations of self / comparison to others Ego development / outlook / resilience

	competitiveness and unforgiveness I learnt in those jobs, especially towards myself. If I get anything below a “distinction”, my instinct is to insult myself, question my intelligence and compare myself to my peers. I’m slowly learning to accept myself and constantly reminding myself I am more than a number on any performance record.” (Email diary) “My experience from the workplace has definitely helped me multitask different aspects of my course. This has been particularly important this term, as I’ve had to juggle modules and their assessments with getting started with my dissertation.” (Email diary) “I find it quite bizarre when someone (lecturers, colleagues, etc.) take hours to reply to an email, because at work, anything longer than two minutes to acknowledge a message was seen as rude or could even affect performance.” (Email diary)	Transformation of knowledge / Existing skills to use in returned to setting Commitment / values / control / resilience Assumed significance of behaviours > misalignment Beliefs / blame / resilience

Hunter	“At the start of the academic year I was feeling quite anxious, so reached out to ***’s Student Psychological and Counselling Services. Within a week I had had an initial checkup session, followed by six weeks of CBT for free. Most importantly, I felt those sessions were highly effective and I had no need for further assistance, despite the demanding year.” (Email diary) “January makes sense, because it was also the time when I was handing in the first essays, and I was they worried. Oh, my goodness! Am I doing a good job? And so on. I was trying to apply all the lessons I learned, but the the anxiety kept going up.” (Interview) “I thought it was the best way to show the journey of the ups and downs. I thought maybe I could draw something, but at the time I thought it wouldn't, it would only depict a specific period, whereas a graph could show from July to march everything.” (Interview)	Support Anxiety Pandemic Institutional New support owing to disrupted support Aid Doubt Insecurity Emotional rollercoaster, accepting place/enrolment

	“then I remember at that time I um before I started, about two weeks before I started, the easier I thought I was starting to feel more anxious. So I thought, I’ve got to do something about this before it gets worse, and it impacts my studies” (Interview) “It was like a whole new world was opening up to me, and at the time again, Yeah, I wasn't even able to go to Brazil. [...] That whole meeting just started making me feel very excited [...] I had an idea for my dissertation” (Interview). “I'd always thought about doing a PhD. People would tell me, 'yeah, you're smart. You should do it'. But it was like she was someone who really has specific ideas and plans for me. So, she really wants it. It's not just me imagining [...] She actually wants it, and she knows what she's talking about. It was a confirmation of Yes, I belong here”. (Interview)	Felt duration Negative outlook Visiting lecturer > previously studied abroad > weathered before Affect / affirmation / institutional acknowledgement > affirmation > representation > shared values > self-efficacy

	“I got to see her as someone who's been through things in life, and she's persevered, and she's independent. And she's curious about the world and all those traits. I really look up to.” (Interview) “her institution was also my institution” (Interview) “I was already living in London when I started at ***, so I'd read the experiences, and then with the pandemic, and being remotely it just, I think it just made it worse, in a way, because everyone's at home. But for me, especially at the start *** was, in a way, an extension of those feelings of - it's really big. It's not easy to feel it home, because everyone's always on the move in one way or another.” (Interview)	Connection > identity > community > familiarity Isolating > estranged > inconsistent support
Hunter	“It's been a relief to move back to academia and take a break from the corporate environment and high-stress jobs. Although I often have the sense of urgency I mentioned above, it feels	Strategy Transformed knowledge – recontextualised skillsets > attitudes > risk-taking Community, connection, inclusive practice, mattering

	healthy to be in a more laidback environment, where investigating matters deeply is valued over rushing through a dozen tasks. I've had no difficulties in transitioning so far, if anything I should slow down and not be in a hurry, as I often am." (Email Diary) "full academic experience, while remaining relatively safe in largely unsafe times" (Email Diary) > "Class recordings supported participation, which reduced the pressure to align with rigid schedules, particularly when falling ill" (Email diary).	Address the meaning Manage the stress