

**Phenomenographic research on adult students’
experiences of learning and conceptualisations of success
in their online postgraduate programmes**

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This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

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Signature *Olga Rotar*

Abstract

The rapid development of online distance programmes has increased the popularity of higher education among adult students. Despite the suggested benefits of online higher education (OHE), adults may experience various challenges and barriers when adapting to it. Yet, research tends to oversimplify adults' learning experiences to fit historical assumptions.

This study examines qualitatively different ways of experiencing online learning and conceptualising success by adult students. A detailed picture of these variations was drawn from primary interviews made with the participants of two online postgraduate programmes. The chosen phenomenographic research design embeds a principle of diversity, assisting in uncovering qualitative variations in students' accounts and leading to two hierarchically structured models.

In response to research question one, the analysis demonstrated three ways of experiencing online learning: as *an investment*, as *a process that brings structure*, and as *a process that enables and empowers*. The context in which learning is conceptualised is proposed to explain the identified variations. The second research question uncovered the structure of the concept of success, in which a more complex perspective on success - *success as self-actualisation* - embraced the features of more simplistic ones. To highlight the nature of identified variations and situatedness of adult students' learning aspirations, I provide an analysis of contextual backgrounds within which the notions of success has been discussed. Research question three hypothesises relationships between two phenomena under question.

Within the confines of levels of evidence collected in this study, generalisations cannot be made, but it provides a more detailed empirically grounded picture of the phenomenon of online learning as experienced by adult students than it has been previously offered.

Furthermore, it offers a holistic view of students' diverse conceptualisations of success. In this way, the study makes a distinctive contribution to the research literature on adult students' learning experiences in OHE and to discourse on student success.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents,

Irina and Yuri

Without your boundless love, I would not be the person I am today.

Посвящается моим родителям.

List of Abbreviations

OHE	Online Higher Education
OL	Online Learning
GPA	Grade Point Average
OU	Open University
TMA	Tutor Marked Assignment
HE	Higher Education
ELT	Experiential Learning Theory
SDT	Self-Determination Theory

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“One can state, without exaggeration, that the observation of and the search for similarities and differences are the basis of all human knowledge”.

Alfred Nobel

1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

Online education has become “an integral part of mainstream society” (Harasim, 2000, p.59). The rapid development of online distance programmes has dramatically increased the popularity of higher education (Bates, 2018; Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2018), with a significant demand coming from adult students (Dabbagh, 2007; Kuo & Belland, 2016; Park & Choi, 2009; Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017; Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler, & Stürmer, 2015). The online mode of learning is often promoted as an attractive option for adults due to its flexibility (Stone, Freeman, Dymont, Muir, & Milthorpe, 2019), alternative mode of delivery and affordable cost (Carnoy et al., 2012). In some instances, online distance learning is discussed as the only feasible option to gain a university degree for time-poor mature students (Owusu-Boampong & Holmberg, 2015). However, despite the suggested benefits of online education, past research shows that adult learners may face various challenges when adapting to it (see Simpson, 2013; Stone, O’Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016; Rotar, 2018; Rotar, 2020; Xavier & Meneses, 2020).

In this light, the experiences and perceptions of adult students in online higher education (OHE) became a topic of interest for two main reasons: first, due to the large proportion of mature learners among the online student population (Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017); and secondly, due to the continuing concern regarding high rates of online student dropout (Woodley & Simpson, 2014). Accordingly, research on adult students in OHE has expanded in the past decade, providing a complex and multifaceted picture of students' experiences and barriers to participation, and emphasizing the importance of successful adaptation to an online learning environment to avoid the negative consequences of dropout (Lee, Choi, & Kim, 2013; Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

Researchers acknowledge that the reasons for student dropout are complex (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Xavier & Meneses, 2020) and that the dropout problem may not be an issue concerned with individual achievement, but a function of an inadequate educational system (Woodley & Simpson, 2014). Furthermore, an analysis of factors that may influence adults' online learning yields contradictory results, suggesting that there are differences in how adult students experience integration into an online learning environment, how they experience their learning (Rotar, 2020), and academic success (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006).

Students' academic success and learning progress, often contrasted with attrition or dropout, has been actively discussed within the predominant neoliberal discourse (McArthur, 2019) and from perspectives of scholars, educators, or policymakers. Although students' experiences and perceptions of learning outcomes have been considered in the past (Gerritsen-van Leeuwenkamp, Joosten-ten Brinke, & Kester, 2019; Pérez-Pérez, Serrano-Bedia, & García-Piqueres, 2020), little attention has been paid to examine academic success through the students' voices and from their own perspectives (see O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018, for students' perspectives on success in campus-based universities across Australia). Moreover, there has

been scarce research interested in uncovering qualitative variations in how success is conceptualized by adult students within the field of OHE (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Consideration of the differences in adult learners' views on success is critical as their opinions can advance an understanding of the learning outcomes that are anticipated and valued by the learners themselves and what pedagogical practices can support adult students' needs.

Although the emerging scientific discussion on the diversity of adult student accounts emphasises differences among adults regarding their perceptions and experiences (see, for instance, Baloyi, 2013; Kuo & Belland, 2016, Waller, 2006), acknowledging these differences without taking them into account is not enough. Despite the growing evidence that an adult learner population is a highly heterogeneous group, there is a lack of research that specifically focuses on and investigates variations in adult learners' experiences and perceptions in OHE in depth. Rather, this diverse group itself and adults' learning experiences and perceptions are over-simplified (according to Waller, 2006) to fit historical assumptions. In this study, I argue that adult learners should not be treated as a homogenous population. In contrast to previous research, this study embeds the principle of diversity into the research design, intending to examine qualitatively different ways of experiencing online learning by adult students in their online postgraduate programmes; and to identify variations in their conceptualisations of success. By utilizing a phenomenographic approach to research, I examine the underpinnings of qualitative variations in regard to each of two phenomena - online learning and the concept of success - rather than merely describing them. Lastly, drawing on the empirical evidence from this study, I compare qualitatively different ways of experiencing learning and conceptualising success to analyse relationships between the two phenomena.

This study aims to provide insights into a range of experiences of the online learning process as derived from the accounts of adult students and to explore their conceptualizations of

success. As adults represent the largest percentage of the OHE demographic, by examining multiple aspects of their learning experience and perceptions of success this study offers additional insights into how to improve the existing model of online higher education and design online courses that address the needs and expectations of the adult student population.

1.2 Research Problem

With the expansion of OHE the number of online students continues to grow (Donovan, Bates, Seaman, Mayer, Martel, Paul, ... & Poulin, 2018; He, Xu & Kruck, 2014). Online distance education has been discussed as an unprecedented opportunity for adult learners who often have multiple responsibilities to study anytime and anywhere, and at a chosen pace (Coomey & Stephenson, 2001). However, available evidence on students' learning experiences, graduation rates, and the consequences of dropout show that the proffered benefits of OHE are not always realised (Grau-Valldosera, Minguillón, & Blasco-Moreno, 2018; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Sosu & Pheunpha, 2019; Xavier & Meneses, 2020).

Although it is not possible to obtain clear figures on dropout rates due to the inconsistency of the definition and lack of publicly available data, the literature suggests that graduation rates in online programmes are much lower compared to those offered on campus. For instance, Simpson (2013) and Woodley and Simpson (2014) emphasise that graduation rates for distance programmes providers are between 0.5% and 20%. In the University of South Africa, graduation rates are at a level of 6%, whereas only 5% of students successfully graduate from the University of Phoenix, a large online institution in the United States of America (Woodley & Simpson, 2014).

Extensive research has been conducted with the aim to examine students' experiences and perceptions in OHE in order to understand what contributes to their learning progress and to

address the dropout issue (see Berge & Huang, 2004; Hart, 2012; Park & Choi, 2009; Simpson, 2004). Different theoretical models have been developed with an intent to highlight students' experience and behaviour in online learning and represent paths to success or withdrawal (see Bean & Metzner, 1985; Falcone, 2011; Kember, 1995; Rovai, 2003; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). Drawing upon Durkheim's theory of suicide (1952, 1961), both Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) argued that the causes of dropout are "insufficient collective affiliation" and "malintegration" into the life of an educational institution (Tinto, 1975, p. 91). Despite of its theoretical importance, the issue with the application of Tinto's model in online education context is that it names the main forced withdrawal as "insufficient levels of academic performance (poor grades)" or "the breaking of established rules concerning proper social and academic behavior" (p. 92). Yet, past research suggests that online students are likely to faced additional, external barriers for continuation of their studies.

Addressing this limitation, Bean and Metzner (1985) proposed a Model of Non-traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition which stressed the influence of the external environment, e.g., financial and familial difficulties, and professional workload, on adult students' socialisation, persistence, and a level of goal commitment. Another comprehensive theoretical framework for the analysis of adult students' progress in distance learning has been proposed by Kember (1995). His longitudinal Model of Student Progress explains that an adult student's decision to persist in learning is a result of deliberation between the cost of continuation and the grade point average (GPA). Later, Rovai (2003) synthesised two models of Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985) and proposed a Composite Persistence Model. This model stresses that personal characteristics and skills, as well as internal and external factors, all affect students' online learning experience and persistence. Lastly, Falcone (2011) reviewed dimensions that have been missed in the previously developed models and suggested new elements important

for successful completion of a higher education programme, namely self-efficacy, different forms of capital (social, economic, cultural), and students' belongingness to various communities within and beyond the educational institution. According to Falcone, these factors determine students' goals and educational and social commitments and consequently influence their decision to withdraw or retain.

There is no doubt that scholars have succeeded in analysing a wide variety of persistence and dropout factors and in developing theoretical models to understand students' decision-making processes. However, although the problem of online students' attrition and retention have been subjects of analysis for many years, there is still a lack of in-depth understanding concerning the actual, lived experiences and perceptions of adult students in an online learning environment (see Gravani, 2015; Meyers & Bagnall, 2017). Furthermore, the analysis of the literature in the area of adult students' success showed that there have been hardly any attempts to investigate students' perceptions and unique conceptualizations of success. Instead, a dominant approach is to relate successful outcomes of the learning process with satisfactory grades, assessment, and exam results, or students' employability (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015).

Past research showed that adult students are rarely given voice to speak. The articulation of this concern is important since the development of online education without including learners' first-hand experiences and perceptions may create a conflict between an educational offer and students' expectations and needs. Given the nature of existing limitations, there is a strong need for in-depth qualitative research on adult students' experiences and perceptions in OHE.

1.3 Research Questions

To address gaps in the past research, this study aims to uncover: i) various aspects of adult students' experiences of their online learning in two identical postgraduate programmes in the UK and in Russia; ii) the complexity of adult students' conceptualisations of success, and iii) the relationships between how online learning is experienced and adult students' conceptualisations of success.

To achieve the aims of this research, the following research questions have been posed:

1. *What are the qualitative differences in adult students' experiences of their learning process at a UK university and its partner institution in Russia?*
2. *What are the qualitatively different ways in which adult students conceptualise success?*
3. *How do the different ways of experiencing learning by adult students relate to the different ways of conceptualising success?*

These questions will be explored through a phenomenographic analysis guided by the principle of diversity. Phenomenographic methodology has been chosen as the most appropriate approach to an in-depth investigation of the differences in adult students' experiences and perceptions due to its focus on uncovering "the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood, perceived and apprehended" (Marton, 1994, p.4424). The principle of diversity and a developed conceptual framework will guide this investigation in a way that does not allow an influence of any theoretical perspective.

1.4 Research Context

This study has been conducted within two online postgraduate programmes offered by a UK university and its partner institution in Russia. These programmes have been specifically designed for working professionals from a broad range of professional areas and with different backgrounds. According to the topology suggested by Allen and Seaman (2007), both programmes could be described as taught online since more than 80% of interactions and activities take place at a distance, with the use of the Internet.

In the considered programmes, learning takes place in groups of 16-20 students, facilitated by a tutor. The tutor provides tuition, professional and mentoring advice, regular feedback, and support on an individual basis. Students occasionally participate in group discussions, but mainly work online following a structured schedule of activities. These activities typically require participation in an online environment over two- to six-week periods and aim to engage students in group discussions, promote reflective practice and contribute to assignments. Tutor-marked assignments are scheduled at regular intervals (approximately every six weeks) throughout each module and are based on the students' work during the relevant period. Tutors provide extensive feedback on all submitted work.

The course is delivered in English by a UK university and in Russian by a Russian partner institution. Although a Russian partner institution is allowed to modify up to 25 per cent of the course materials to fit the national conditions, at the time of conducting this research the considered programmes had similar structure apart from the provision of additional face-to-face tutorials by the Russian partner institution.

Students in both programmes are required to participate in a four-day residential school, from 9 am until 8.30 pm each day. During the residential school, students are offered an opportunity

to meet with their tutors and peers, and work in small groups on a case study. Provided case studies focus on the development of problem-solving skills, team working skills, and application of the main theoretical concepts in real-life situations. The students are offered an alternative to participate in an online equivalent of the residential school. Specifically, the students require to work on the provided case study for about 1.5 hours each day within the period of twenty-one days. During their learning, apart from an individual tuition, students benefit from a regular engagement with their peers, access to the university library, and to the variety of designed for the programme or selected by tutors written resources, articles, case studies, audio-visual materials, available in print and online. Most of the teaching-learning process is designed to encourage students' independent work.

To register for this module, a student must have a UK honours degree or equivalent professional qualification and have a working experience in a managerial, professional, or technical role for a minimum of three years. This usually means that students are at least 25 years old and can be referred to as mature or adult learners.

1.5 Motivation for This Research

For the last nine years, I have been working in higher education sector. Before starting my full-time PhD study at Lancaster University, I was an associate lecturer at one of the higher education institutions in Russia, delivering practical seminars for campus-based and distance learners, and a college lecturer. Before coming to Lancaster, I have been also working at the Centre for Information and Communication Technologies at the Saint-Petersburg University of Economics as a distance learning specialist. Reflecting on my experience of working with distance learners in higher education, I developed a commitment to the idea that adult students require a specific pedagogical approach. I believe that teaching practices should be informed

by research that acknowledges adult students' differences and considers the variety of their learning and professional experiences and aspirations.

Therefore, my motivation to investigate adult students' experiences in online programmes and their perceptions of success has been determined by my professional interest to contribute to a deeper understanding of online distance learning based on the perspectives of adult students. In my research, I wanted to examine multiple aspects of adults' experiences and perceptions in online learning contexts, and to gain insights into how to improve the existing model of online higher education so that it ensures a more inclusive and supportive online learning.

Besides, my interest in examining adult students' experiences and conception through the means of phenomenographic methodology was related to its "pedagogical potentiality" (Marton, 1981, p.178). The opportunity to investigate the phenomena of online learning and success from a second-order perspective, as perceived by the study participants, seemed to me an exciting direction of the research. I believe that by being allowed to speak, student can make a real contribution to a further development of online teaching and learning practices.

1.6 A Principle of Diversity

The principle of diversity plays an essential function in this research. It served as a woven into the research design guiding principle, used as a lens for the critical analysis of the literature, influenced the approach to data collection and analysis, and determined the presentation of the research results. In the following part of this section, I thoroughly explain the principle of diversity and its application in this study.

The idea of diversity was a starting point of this research. The population of the interest of this research possesses diverse characteristics and responsibilities that may affect their learning in

different ways. Applied to the study population, the idea of adult students' diversity assists in: i) questioning assumptions associated with mature students; and ii) ensuring that multiple voices are included into the analysis when developing the maps of two phenomena from students' perspectives. It is assumed that adult learners tend to be more autonomous and self-directed, and expected to take the initiative in directing their learning (Cercone, 2008). It has also been suggested that adults learn best when content is relevant to their goals, and when new information can be immediately integrated with previous knowledge and applied in practice (Cercone, 2008; Knowles, 1973). Contemporary scholars, however, acknowledge that in their online learning adults may require as much guidance and motivation as their younger peers (Cercone, 2008; Hashim, Ahmad, & Abdullah, 2011). Cercone (2008) points out that adults' preferences for self-directed learning do not always mean that they possess skills necessary for successful learning in an online environment. Moreover, there is evidence that older students may find it challenging to adjust to online learning (Ke & Xie, 2009; Simpson, 2013). Ke and Xie's (2009) study illustrates that adult students tend to feel insecure about their ability to succeed when learning online, requiring additional support and technology training. Lack of interest in uncovering the diversity of adult students' experiences and perceptions overlooks an opportunity to gain a more expanded picture of the phenomenon of online learning. Thus, an examination of the variety of adult learners' experiences and perceptions is crucial, and this requires an approach to an investigation that seeks to bring the existing diversity into the foci.

When designing the study, the adherence to the idea of diversity meant a selection of the appropriate methodology that would allow uncovering variations in experiences and perceptions of the study participants, in their own words and from their own perspectives. It presumed a critical evaluation of evidence within the literature on OHE to support the importance of the varied perspectives and their benefits for both students and the development

of the mode of online education. The application of the principle of diversity to the literature review allowed the identification of contradictory results which further supported my argument of the need for an in-depth investigation. Application of the principle of diversity to the data analysis engendered a conscious commitment to the search for alternative perspectives that have been previously neglected. Finally, implementation of the principle of diversity when documenting empirical results allowed a coherent presentation of the different aspects of adult students' experiences of learning and conceptualisations of success, and their consequent comparison and analysis.

1.7 Structure of this Thesis

This research consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research problem and context, presents study aims, objectives and research questions, and explains the principle of diversity that guides this research. Chapter 2 offers a critical review of the relevant literature in two research areas, namely online students' attrition and retention and adult students' experiences in OHE. It also provides a brief historical overview of the development of online education and existing conceptualisations of success in higher education research. Chapter 3 describes a conceptual framework that has been developed for this study. It provides an interpretation of selected concepts and explains their use in this research. Chapter 4 introduces the selected methodology, justifies its choice, deals with its methodological issues, and discusses theoretical and analytical frameworks utilised in this study. This chapter also explains the processes of phenomenographic data collection and analysis. Chapter 5 presents the answer to the first research question and discusses relevant research results. Chapter 6 answers the second research question and provides a discussion of the findings. Chapter 7 discusses the research question three and offers an overall conclusion for the current research. Additionally, it provides an evaluation of the research and demonstrates conformity of the research to criteria

of validity, reliability, and credibility. Lastly, it discusses ethical concerns, articulates limitations of this study and signpost directions for further research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Neither online students' attrition nor adult learning are new phenomena of scholarly interest. However, it is an intersection of these two areas that is not fully explored. In the field of OHE, adult learners tend to be conceptualised as a homogeneous population that possesses specific characteristics, and little attention has been paid to the investigation of variations in experiences and perceptions that exist among them. Scarce research has been focused on exploring in-depth students' perspectives on the online learning process and their accounts on success (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019; Kuh et al., 2006; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018).

In this chapter, I would like to further extend my argument by providing a critical analysis of relevant studies. The scope of the analysis is located at the intersection of the research on online students' attrition and retention and a scholarship dedicated to the examination of adult students' experiences in OHE. These two areas have been chosen due to their direct alignment with the study aims and posed research questions. I also provide an outline of the evolution of online education and finish with an overview of the dominant conceptualisations of success within the higher education field. Within the scope of the analysis, particular attention is paid to the biographical, narrative, and experiential learning research in adult education. A literature map (Figure 2.1.) shows areas of significant interest for this study.

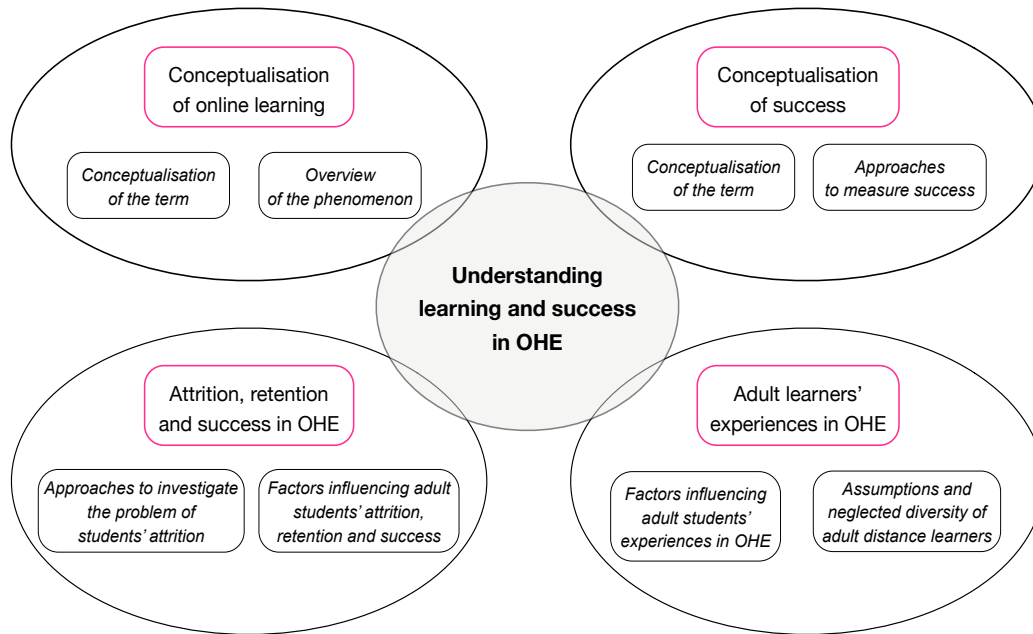


Figure 2.1 Literature map

Another area of research that has been considered but not included in the analysis is that of adult students' needs and reasons for enrolling into online programmes. This scope has been omitted as the initial analysis showed that adult learners' needs and motives for learning often discussed in relation to the Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1978). Therefore, a decision was made to critically consider the principles of the Adult Learning Theory that shape dominant perspectives on adult learners' characteristics, needs and reasons for learning within the developed conceptual framework. Lastly, the literature review does not offer an analysis of theoretical and pedagogical models on attrition, retention, persistence or academic progress in OHE since the chosen methodological approach requires avoidance of an influence of any theoretical perspective. For such a review, see the working paper by Rotar (2020).

2.2 Online Education: from Emergence to Marketisation

An expansion of online education started in the 1990s with the invention of the world wide web. The new model of educational delivery initiated the emergence of unique pedagogical practices. Further development of educational technologies created favourable conditions for the revolutionary expansion of collaborative learning and research without geographical boundaries. All this contributed to the genesis of the knowledge-based economy. The emergence of the higher education (HE) “marketplace” initiated further propagation of OHE as the means for acquiring knowledge and skills in order to secure an individual position on a labour market (Folkers, 2005). Folkers (2005) emphasised such trend of the development of online education as its explicit linkage to lifelong learning. This resulted in the appearance of the “new majority of students”, who are “older and more diverse than their younger counterparts” and favoured flexible and relatively cost-effective online education (Folkers, 2005, p. 62).

A rapid increase in enrolment of mature learners with full-time jobs into online programmes reflected the shift to the neoliberal politico-economic agenda. The commodification of the educational offer reversed orientation of HE from the public good and individual and societal development towards economic targets (Komljenovic & Robertson, 2016; McArthur, 2019; Reyes & Segal, 2019). Prioritisation of the income-generating processes created new challenges for ensuring social justice and equality of opportunities (Reyes & Segal, 2019).

Not surprisingly, emerging concerns around economic and business models of OHE question commercialised HE culture that restricts aspirations for nourishing critical thinking and personal growth whilst promoting job and career advancements (McArthur, 2019). Despite claims that online education provides a democratic environment, promotes inclusion and social

justice, social justice scholars point out that those claims are lacking empirical evidence (see Öztok, 2013). As Reyes and Segal (2019) conclude,

With the transition to neoliberal efficiency, online courses are viewed as advantageous because they tend to be developed in a universal structure conducive to the attainment of employment skills while being delivered in a consistent manner by different, often part-time, instructors. While this is a highly cost effective strategy, the technology underlying online courses does not automatically accommodate the needs of students with diverse learning styles without significant changes that would require the new allocation of resources. (p.379)

Nowadays, we observe a paradigm shift in the perception of OHE as a mainstream mode of educational delivery (Harasim, 2000; Cook & Grant-Davis, 2020). Recently aroused aspiration of online education of being open, accessible and supportive requires more research on how an online learning environment is experienced and perceived by the learners and what constitutes their academic success. I agree with Reyes and Segal (2019) that the neoliberal course of discussion needs a counter-narrative that includes multiple voices and perspectives. By aiming to examine adult students' voices, I hope to contribute to the emerging counter-narrative and generate insights on how to design and deliver online programmes that nourish growth and development of the individual and, consequently, a wider society.

2.3 Research on Adult Students' Experiences in OHE

Online distance learners, to a large extent represented by mature students of 25 years old and older (Moore & Kearsley, 2012), can gain numerous benefits from embarking on online education. Khlaisang and Songkram, (2019), suggests that can facilitate the development of 21st-century skills (Fadel, 2008) by enhancing learners' critical thinking, fostering

communication and collaboration proficiency, and assisting in developing such skills as personal initiative and self-direction in learning. Furthermore, online education provides unique opportunities to learn synchronously or asynchronously, at a convenient time and pace and without geographical boundaries (Bates & Sangra, 2011). Ironically, the potential benefits of online education may also create negative experiences for adult learners. Challenges such as lack of sense of belonging to the community, lower level of interactions (Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010), inadequate and depersonalised support (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016), insufficient course content and quality of teaching has been commonly reported in the empirical studies on online students' experiences and perceptions.

This section aims to critically analyse research on adult students' experiences in the field of OHE in more detail. To search for the relevant studies, I used Scopus database and Google Scholar search engine. The variety of search terms and term combinations, including words "adult student", "non-traditional student", "mature student", and "online education", "online higher education", "online learning", "distance education", "distance learning" were used to identify potentially relevant studies. Following inclusion criteria were applied:

- The student population (adult learners),
- the study setting (online higher education),
- the focus of the research on students' experiences and perceptions concerning their learning, and
- studies published in the English language.

To ensure the inclusion of influential studies in the area of adult online learning, I also applied a "snowball" method (Webster & Watson, 2002) using the reference lists in the selected papers.

Table 2.1 Summary of the results of the research on adult learners' experiences in OHE.

Author	Year	Approach	Sample size	Findings
Meyers and Bagnall	2017	Qualitative, Phenomenography	10 students	The authors suggest that older students may experience difficulty with the use of technology in learning, especially with regard to writing, reading and numeracy skills.
Loizzo et al.	2017	Qualitative	12 students	The results of the research showed that adult students held various expectations from their online learning experience, as well as various preferences towards the level of engagement and interactions.
Shapiro et al.	2017	Mixed method	26 students	The authors demonstrated that students with lower levels of formal education are more likely to feel lost and frustrated in their online learning. Findings indicated stronger resilience and general optimism among students from less affluent countries. Lack of time, past negative learning experience and lack of financial and technological resources, were common barriers for student continuation of their studies.
Bourdeaux and Schoenack	2016	Qualitative	22 students	The study findings suggest that students expect respect, clarity, and considered pedagogical approach from their teachers, and experience a feeling of frustration if their expectations are not met.
Kuo and Belland	2016	Quantitative	167 students	The results of the research showed correlation between learner satisfaction and academic performance; and between Internet self-efficacy and student interactions with peers, tutors and the learning environment. The study findings indicate that a learner-content interaction is a most significant predictor of satisfaction with learning.
Botha and Coetzee	2016	Quantitative	1,102 students	The study findings suggest significant differences among learners in the level of their self-directedness, depending on their gender, race, and age groups.
Stoessel et al.	2015	Quantitative	4,599 students	The study results suggest that older students are generally stronger motivated.
Malinovski et al.	2015	Quantitative	198 students	The authors argue that adult students' satisfaction with learning is predicted by motivation to attend similar online courses and is facilitated by the ease of participation in learning activities and an efficient learner-teacher interaction.
Ilgaz and Gülbahar	2015	Mixed method	2,334 and 2,288 students	Findings indicate that students' satisfaction is affected by the quality of a provided content and its usability, frequency of, as well as by the teaching process and students time management skills.
Gravani	2015	Qualitative, phenomenography	16 students, 8 educators	The study findings suggest that adult students' learning experience might be influenced by the interconnected personal, social, and situational, or contextual, variables, that can either facilitate or hinder the learning process.
Coetzee	2014	Quantitative	1102 students	The author found that students' self-directedness is positively correlated with their scholarship, global/moral citizenship, and attributes of lifelong learning.
I-Jan et al.	2013	Quantitative	178 students	The authors suggest that adult students age have an influence on their preference towards online environments, whereas gender does not. The findings also demonstrated that younger adults are more confidence with using technology for learning than their older peers.

Author	Year	Approach	Sample size	Findings
Ransdell	2013	Quantitative	52 students	The results of the study showed that so-called baby-boomers interact learning technology with more meaningful engagement compare to millennials.
Lee and Choi	2013	Quantitative	169 students	The findings of the study indicate that students who persist in their online courses have higher level of academic locus of control and metacognitive self-regulation skills compare to students who make a decision to drop out.
Dwyer et al.	2013	Quantitative	97 students	The study results show that students viewed distance learning as the best opportunity to enter higher education. Female students expressed a significantly more favourable attitude towards distant learning than their male peers. Another interesting result is that perceived benefits of online learning varied depending on student gender.
Ke	2013	Mixed method	463 students	The study findings showed that a carefully planned online discussions with the inclusion of three types of interactions (student-student, student-content, student-instructor) facilitate students' self-reflection and self-regulation. The findings also show that older students contribute less in online discussions.
Nagelsmith et al.	2012	Quantitative	297 students	The authors found a strong corelation between motivation, volition, and academic success.
Ismail et al.	2012	Quantitative	182 students	The study results indicate a positive and active attitude in students' readiness to use e-learning.
Boling et al.	2012	Qualitative	10 students, 6 course instructors	Findings revealed that in online courses with little or no interactions, students may experience feeling of disconnection. Among the identified favourable aspects of online learning were communication with peers and working on real-world assignments.
Carnoy et al.	2012	Quantitative	29,700 students	Study findings suggest that adult students' age does not influence the online course completion or duration of enrolment, while number of children does.
Hashim et al.	2011	Quantitative	169 students	The findings of the study showed that adult students' cognitive engagement in online learning processes is weaker that in their younger peers, and that, despite of assumed self-directedness, adult learners required as much guidance as their younger counterparts.
Cheng et al.	2011	Mixed method	12 students	The study results showed positive effect of support in learning and support with communication and cooperation, on students' intent to engage with online learning system.
Kim and Frick	2011	Quantitative	368 students	The study findings indicate that a perceived quality of teaching, and an initial motivation to begin the course were the best predictors of motivation in a self-directed course of learning.
Ke	2010	Mixed method	16 students	The authors found that in online learning environment students experienced a superficial level of interactions, driven by the desire to obtain satisfactory grades rather than the need for meaningful socialisation.

Author	Year	Approach	Sample size	Findings
Ke and Xie	2009	Quantitative	51 students	The study findings indicated that age does not predict adult students' academic performance and satisfaction with learning. Close-ended discussions did not facilitate students' progress, whereas support integrated into the course design did.
Kim	2009	Qualitative	12 students	The study results suggest that the lack of extrinsic motivators in a self-directed learning may affect student learning and motivation in both ways, positively and negatively. The author explains that these results reflect individual differences among adult students in motivation and learning behaviour.
Park and Choi	2009	Quantitative	147 students	Authors conclude that an individual characteristic do not affect students' decisions to discontinue the study, while external factors (e.g. support from family and at the workplace), satisfaction with learning and the relevance of the course have a significant influence.
Conrad	2009	Qualitative	18 students	The study findings showed that learners acknowledge the importance of emotional side of the learning process and showed a good self-knowledge in adapting cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The author emphasised the importance of external support for facilitating students' ability to continue learning after their absence.
Knightley	2007	Qualitative	79 students surveyed, 15 interviewed	Adult students valued an opportunity to create personal study space, benefited from online conferencing experience and felt positive about an opportunity to develop an identity that will not be judged by others. Yet, the process of reflection on the learning process and articulation of a subjective experience was a new, challenging, experience for adults.
Mansour and Mupinga	2007	Qualitative	12 students from a hybrid and 41 from an online course	Students valued an opportunity to study following an individual schedule, whilst being able to work full-time. Yet, the feeling of isolation was one of the main negative experiences.

Source: adapted from Rotar (2018).

Table 2.1 shows the most relevant empirical studies focused on the experiences and perceptions of adult students in the context of online higher education, with details of the reviewed studies including author (s), date of publication, research method, sample size and relevant findings.

The analysis of the past research suggests three trends. First, there is a noticeable criticism of the taken-for-granted benefits of online education. Secondly, there is a recognition of the complex nature of the factors that may influence adult students' online learning experiences. And finally, there is an emerging acknowledgement of the diversity and heterogeneity of the adult student population.

There is a relatively small number of qualitative or mixed-method studies that explore adult students' perspectives about their experience (see Mansour & Mupinga, 2007; Knightley, 2007; Loizzo et al., 2017; Meyers & Bagnall, 2017). When exploring adult students' reflections upon their learning experience, Knightley (2007) looked for indicators of social exclusion. Adult students emphasised the advantages of online learning, such as an opportunity to create their own learning space, reduce isolation, and to develop an identity that would not be judged by physical disability. The author suggested that an online learning process "enhanced adults' self-assurance", "appeared to have empowered these participants in some way" (Knightley, 2007, p.282) and to have enabled them "to play a greater part in their learning communities" (Knightley, 2007, p.282). However, the author emphasised that although the study confirmed that the flexibility of an online learning mode allowed adults to fit learning and communication with others into their existing commitments, the initial integration into the learning mode might have been overwhelming. Furthermore, it was not easy for the students to reflect on and articulate their subjective feelings (Knightley, 2007, p.278).

Mansour and Mupinga (2007) also examined online students' voices in hybrid and online courses based on their reflections, and found that for those students, an opportunity to follow an individual learning schedule was one of the main positive aspects of learning that allowed students to work full-time and complete course work anywhere where there was access to the internet (p.246). Both Knightley's (2007) and Mansour and Mupinga's (2007) studies report such negative aspects of distance learning as feeling lost or isolated. As Ke (2010) pointed out, adult students tend to spend more time studying offline in their own learning spaces, rather than by participating in online discussions. Ke (2010) suggested that this may be due to the perception of online discussion forums as "more grade-driven than collective-inquiry-oriented" spaces and advocated a "used-adaptive" design of learning and social activities with "built-in flexibility" (p.818). Mixed perceptions on social interactions have been also reported by Loizzo et al. (2017). Drawing on the lived experiences of 12 adults, the authors identified diversity in approaches to learning, pointing out that "while some learners value discussion boards and instructor engagement, others prefer to have limited interaction and focus solely on the course content via videos, readings, and assignments" (p.17).

The considered literature shows that adult students' experiences in OHE have been intensively researched from different perspectives and with the use of various lenses. Findings presented in Table 2.1. suggest that there are variations in adult students' experiences or needs in online learning environments. Scholars recognise that an individual learner's experience is a complex, dynamic, and context-situated phenomenon, yet little research has been done to investigate the variations what exist in-depth. Only a few studies have attempted to examine the variety of adult students' experiences as they return to universities as distance learners (see Gravani, 2015 and Meyers & Bagnall, 2017) or sought adult students' voices and perspectives (Knightley, 2007; Loizzo et al., 2017). Even less emphasis has been placed on questioning the nature of

existing variations (Carnoy et al., 2012; Meyers & Bagnall, 2017; Randsell, 2013; Timsal, Hodgson, & Shah, 2018). The lack of in-depth qualitative research limits our understanding of how mature students experience an online learning process and how their experience influences their academic progress and perceptions of success. This understanding, however, is crucial, since analysed studies suggest that those learners who feel frustrated, lost or unsupported may lose motivation for learning and discontinue their enrolment into the course.

There is a growing body of theory and research on different aspects within the OHE field that focuses on understanding online education from students' perspective. For instance, studies examined students' expectations of online learning (Martin & Bolliger, 2018), their experiences of being an online learner (Howland & Moore, 2002) or learning at a distance (Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014), and students' expectations of the role of a tutor in online learning environment. Although discovering learners' perspectives, these studies were primarily focused on identifying commonalities that existed among learners. This standpoint should be questioned since past research provides evidence that people with different backgrounds may perceive the same phenomenon differently (Schatzman & Straus, 1966). Schatzman and Straus (1966) argue that people from low socio-economic backgrounds perceive reality through the prism of their assumptions. By contrast, middle-class individuals were able to reflect on a given phenomenon from different viewpoints. Although acknowledged by educational researchers, and phenomenographers in particular, Schatzman and Straus's (1966) study, has been placed under criticism. For instance, Buck-Morss (1975) argued that it is impossible to compare people from different socio-economic backgrounds within the same culture. She emphasised that people may have differences in moral judgments or held-conceptions, and these differences can be seen as "different interpretations of the same reality" (Buck-Morss, 1975, cited in Marton, 1981, p.180). Furthermore, Marton (1981) argue that

since the same reality can appear differently to different individuals, there could be “different interpretations of different realities” (Marton, 1981, p.180). These arguments introduce an assumption that variations in previous experience may cause variations in how people perceive and conceptualise reality or a specific phenomenon.

Although there have been some attempts to investigate variations in experiences and perceptions of adults regarding their online learning, the research is still ongoing. In the following subchapter, an analysis of the research on adult students’ in OHE will introduce findings from the studies on online students’ attrition, retention and success and discuss factors that affect adults’ online learning.

2.4 Experiential Learning Research and Adult Learning

Experiential learning research is often associated with the scholarship on adult teaching, learning and development. As Cercone (2008) emphasised, the works of such experiential learning scholars as Mezirow and Brookfield, have their roots in the theory of adult learning (Knowles, 1980). Experiential learning theories posit that the ability to apply knowledge is as important as possessing the knowledge. For adult students, applied knowledge is especially important “as it connects concepts to current experience or events, making them more immediately relevant” (Cercone, 2008, in Sisselman-Borgia & Torino, 2017, p.5).

The literature on adult students’ experiences in online education provides evidence that being a student is not an easy task, due to the additional responsibilities such as the need to look after family and children, financial constraints, and employment. An existence of multiple responsibilities creates additional barriers for mature students’ engagement with and commitment to experiential learning opportunities. However, experiential learning research shows that adult students often bring into learning a wealth of experience and are interested in

the process of learning and its practical application (Brookfield, 2013; Knowles, 1980). Sisselman-Borgia and Torino (2017), who proposed an innovative approach to experiential learning pedagogy to overcome challenges for adult students' learning, argue that the baggage of experience that adults bring with them shapes their expectations about learning outcomes, or the "products of their learning" (Sisselman-Borgia & Torino, 2017, p.4). The innovative pedagogy, they suggest, should integrate adults' joy of learning with clearly set objectives, such as those related to their plans for promotion, professional practice, and job-related requirements.

Experiential learning research related to the domain of adult learning reminds us that higher education and academia have a responsibility not only in sharing knowledge, but also encouraging its application in the context of a broader society (Mezirow, 2000). In other words, experiential learning presumes active engagement not only inside, but also outside, of the classroom (Sisselman-Borgia & Torino, 2017).

2.5 Biographical and Narrative Research and Adult Learning

Much biographical and narrative research is dedicated to the adult learning domain (West & Merrill, 2018) due to its interest in personal stories of non-traditional and marginalised students (Finnegan et al., 2014; Finnegan & Merrill, 2017; Merrill, 2015; Reay 2003; Tett, 2000). Specifically, biographical and narrative research is concerned with how non-traditional adult students cope with their learning and how their previous experience and individual circumstances influence learning or prevent them from participation (West & Merrill, 2018).

In other words, narrative and biographical research engages with "marginalised peoples, seeking to give voice and to challenge dominant assumptions" (Gouthro, 2014, p.90). One example is Magro (2008), who combined narrative and autobiographical methods to trace the

experiences of adult learner immigrants in their English as an Additional Language programmes. Listening to the students' stories, Magro (2008) uncovered the traumatic experiences and concerns related to the complex themes of resettlement, uprootedness, and the learners' identities. In another study, Merrill (2015) looked at the learning trajectories of two adult working class female students and found that their journeys were not straightforward. Due to their social class, students experienced academic and personal struggles and obstacles. However, for those who made it through learning, even without reaching the degree ceremony, the learning experience was transformative for their lives, although in different ways. Merrill challenged a negative, "traditional" view of withdrawal and emphasised "that non-completion is not always a negative act" since the study participants who dropped out shared "benefits they had gained in terms of learning, identity and the development of the self" (Merrill, 2015, p.1859).

A study by Reay (2003) also highlighted the barriers, risks, and costs of returning to a university for mature working-class women. Students' voices revealed a much more detailed picture of risks and learning outcomes than could have been obtained from a mere cost-benefit analysis of university transition. Individual stories uncovered victories and failures during the learning journey, prioritising the process of learning rather than learning outcomes - an emphasised difference between mature students and their younger peers (Reay et al., 2001). The study also found that the working-class female students have less choices and are not as geographically and socially mobile, or "chained to a place" (Bourdieu, 1999, in Reay, 2003, p.308) as their middle-class peers. Furthermore, for working-class women, learning was associated with a sacrifice of social life and that they experienced a specific form of poverty - "a paucity of time for care of the self" (Reay, 2003, p.308).

In another study, Tett (2000) challenged the heterogeneity of non-traditional students and emphasised alternative forms of cultural capital they can bring into the classroom. Students' narratives revealed various forms of "dispositions, linguistic codes, problem-solving skills, attitudes and tastes, only some of which get rewarded or valued by schools so that those with the 'right' (i.e. legitimated) cultural capital fare the best" (Tett, 2000, p.190).

Baker, Irwin and Freeman (2020) sought to track the experiences of one particularly marginalised group of adult learners – students from refugee backgrounds – as they moved into and through university study. Drawing on the conceptualisation of 'time-scales', they found that those students experienced time in very specific ways, as associated with notions of wasting and compressing, and achieving goals within particular time scales. As perceptions of time among student and their host institutions varied, this created challenges rooted in students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The authors emphasised that these challenges "are shared by other 'non-traditional' students who balance multiple responsibilities alongside their studies" (p.528). Specifically, an ongoing lack of time experienced by adult students can create a pressured feeling of urgency of integration into the learning environment, with little opportunity for reflection and deep and critical thinking. Baker et al. (2020) argue that "temporal structure and pace [of higher educational institutions] does not permit the kinds of flexibility needed to accommodate complex lives" and dismiss the educational and organisational efforts of adult students (p.539)

Narrative and biographical research has been discussed as valuable methodological approaches to understand adult students' experiences and learning journeys as they trace adult students' trajectories and often build upon students' reflections on their experience and its relation to learning (Gouthro, 2014). It can be used "to bring more diverse voices and stories into the historical or contemporary social record" as a part of a wider democratising agenda (West &

Merrill, 2018, p.765). Furthermore, through students' narratives and biographies, adult educators can "gain insights into what motivates people to engage in adult learning" (Gouthro, 2014, p.87) and what kind of learning experience they are looking for.

2.6 Research on Student Voices

The research literature provides evidence that in online higher education, the adult student group is heterogeneous, brings a variety of experiences into the classroom and learns in different ways. Yet, the voices of mature students in their online programmes are not strong. Furthermore, the perspectives of adult students on their success in online learning are often neglected.

The importance of student voice and individual perspectives has been emphasised in past research (Basu, 2008; Fielding, 2004). The power of student voice has been recognised by educators as well (DeFur & Korinek, 2010). It has been argued that students' voices can enhance our understanding of what facilitates students' learning and academic progress more effectually (Fielding 2004; Cook-Sather, 2002). Cook-Sather et al. (2014) advocated engaging students as partners in teaching and learning by promoting individual students' voices. The authors found that inclusive and transformative learning is not stationary and linear but is shaped by the students' lives. DeFur and Korinek (2010) exemplified how students can contribute to the development of a more effective schooling by being "expert witnesses" of what works more effectively for them in learning. Furthermore, they found that an articulation of the student voice contributes to the empowerment of the students (DeFur & Korinek, 2010). Thus, a provision of safe spaces that allow an expression of the voice without the risks of rejection, determine the quality of communication and output from the students (DeFur &

Korinek, 2010). Finally, DeFur and Korinek (2010) emphasised the importance of valuing and encouraging the voices of all students and not only those who are active and articulate.

The study conducted by Gjestvang, Høye, and Bronken (2020) discovered adult students' aspirations for competence in a multifaceted everyday life, and four themes: "acquiring professional competence, struggling to manage diverse forms of communication, demanding task juggling and confused student role" (Gjestvang et al., 2020, p.71). The authors emphasised that the time spent in the learning environment was the main element of adult students' concerns in the light of their overloaded lives characterised as "hectic existence in which they had to juggle between different roles, tasks and social activities to fulfil their commitments in the various arenas" (Gjestvang et al., 2020, p.75). However, a common adult students' perception was that they were not "being acknowledged as hard-working students by others" (Gjestvang et al., 2020, p.75). Gjestvang, Høye, and Bronken (2020) provided additional evidence on the hectic character of adult students' lives, challenges in juggling between work and learning, and an unclear and lonely journey of being a student.

In a global landscape, there have been a small number of studies that have focused on online students' voices, with the aim to uncover their experiences and perceptions. For instance, in Australia, O'Shea (2019) conducted a phenomenological study to explore adult students' views on what makes them more engaged in online learning. The author found that the previous experience of learning of a particular subject was a critical factor for a deeper understanding of that subject and a more immersive engagement in learning.

O'Shea's (2019) study discovered a link between an in-depth understanding of the students and the need for specific pedagogical practices. Similarly, research that aims to bring out student voices anticipates that its articulation and consideration will enhance teaching and learning,

and result in the development of transformative practices, more democratic participation and ensure diversity and inclusion (McLeod, 2011). Too often, however, it has been found that there is a transactional approach to collecting students' voices through student satisfaction surveys and questionnaires, as a part of quality assurance practice and with the aim to meet performance standards. This approach leaves the student voice passive and suppressed by the powerful needs of the educational institution (Van der Velden, 2012). Moreover, even when the space for the student voice is given, less powerful voices may still be oppressed if the existing feedback mechanisms or communicative practices do not seek to bring them upfront (Robinson, 2012). Previously considered experiential, biographic, and narrative research has shown that listening to students' voices is not enough. Instead, hearing what individual students have to say is more important. Despite the emphasised importance of the student voice, its quality utilisation is still limited, with a scarce history of research in the online education field (Manefield et al., 2007). Much of the literature is still influenced by psychological research and directed towards examination of student perceptions and experiences across a variety of issues such as student satisfaction, engagement, and motivation. Even more rarely have voices of online adult students been the subject of investigation.

2.7 Research on Adult Students' Success through Attrition and Retention Factors

Previous research suggests that variations among adult students are also found in what contributes to their learning progress and success, as discussed through the notion of retention. Although prior research has tended to take a more factorial and quantitative view, e.g. more psychologically based, it does offer insights into some of the features and factors that influence adult students' online learning and academic success. In this subchapter, I provide an analysis of studies that investigate factors and barriers for students' success in online education in

relation to the phenomena of retention, attrition and dropout. Such analysis will support my criticism of the existing fragmented approach to look at the notion of success in online education and to support a need for a more holistic perspective that will be taken in my analysis of students' perspectives through the phenomenographic methodology and subsequent analysis to derive outcome spaces.

The analysis of research yielded several factors that showed a significant impact on adults' online learning and their learning outcomes. These factors, although discussed individually, do not stand separately. Rather they are closely intertwined, supporting or challenging adult learners in different degrees. When combined, identified factors present a complex picture (see Figure 2.2) and suggest that students' success in online education is a process, rather than an event, that might be negatively or positively affected at different stages of learning.

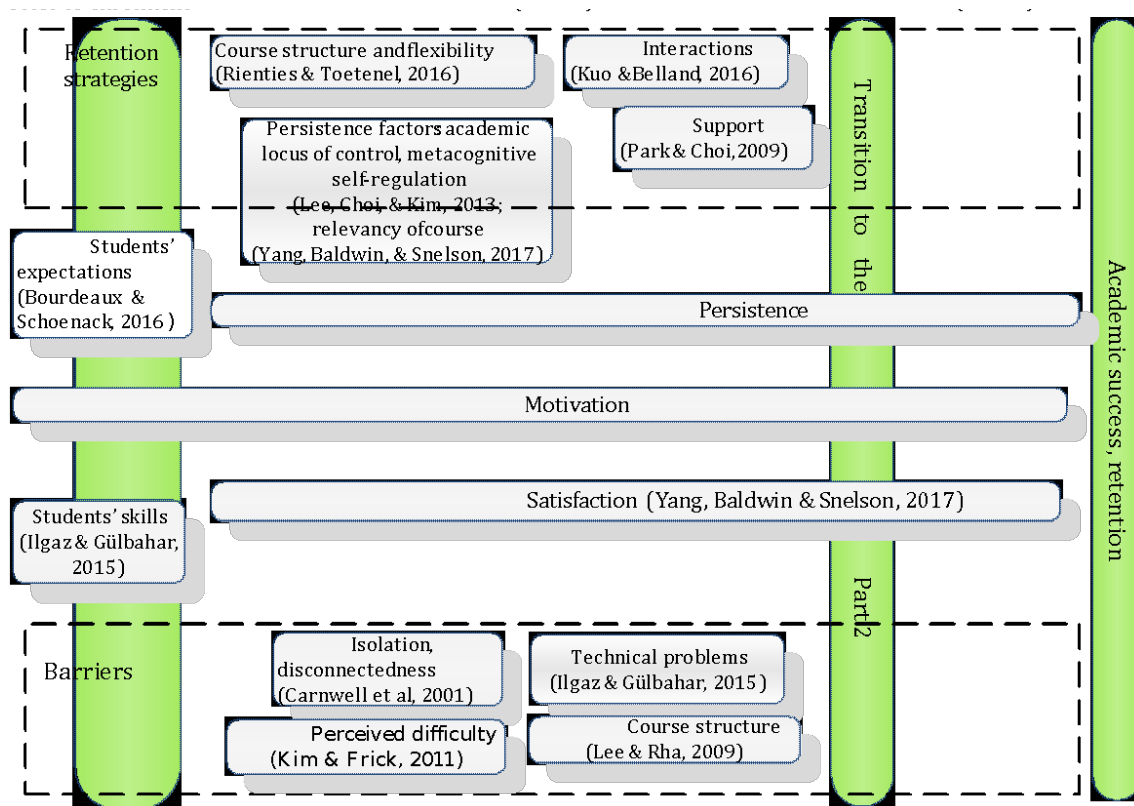


Figure 2.2 Factors influencing students' experiences and learning behaviour in OHE.

A critical review of identified studies uncovered dynamics of discussion around such topics as learners' engagement with, and interactions in an online learning environment, students' motivation and self-directedness, the influence of age, personal characteristics, external factors, and a course design. Below, I provide a detailed account of the emerged themes, main implications of the past research and summarise relevant to this research gaps.

2.7.1 Engagement

Martin and Bolliger (2018) argue that in an online learning context, student engagement enhances student satisfaction, diminishes feeling of isolation, increases motivation for learning, and improves academic performance. Wlodkowski (2008) stressed the importance of student engagement in online education from a different angle. He argued that learning will not happen or will not be valuable if there is no engagement and discuss the notion of engagement in relation to the concept of meaningfulness (Ennis, Hess, & Smith, 2013; Wlodkowski, 2008). Other scholars emphasise that greater engagement leads to a cognitive development of the learner through the process of knowledge generation (Banna et al., 2015; Britt, Goon, & Timmerman, 2015; Meyer, 2014; Ke & Xie, 2009), which, in turn, positively influences academic performance. Ke and Xie (2009) found that class and group discussions on online forums, especially those lead by students, were associated with more in-depth approach learning and a greater student satisfaction. Similarly, Banna et al. (2015) concluded that while the quality of the provided learning materials was a critical element of success in the past, in self-directed learning engagement plays a much more significant role.

Hashim et al. (2013) found that adults' cognitive engagement was relatively weak compared to their younger peers, which seemed to influence adults' academic performance. The authors concluded that, despite the assumptions about adult students' tendency for self-direction, they

need as much guidance and motivation as younger students (Hashim et al., 2013). On the other hand, Randsell (2013) concluded that older adults interacted with learning technology with more meaningful engagement, compared to millennials, a generation of students generally seen as being more familiar with digital tools (Randsell, 2013).

The main summary of the research on engagement is that if learners fail to engage with their online course, the level of participation in their learning activities decreases. In its turn, the lack of engagement may create challenges for adult students to be on track of their learning process. Although highlighting some insight on the variations in the level of engagement among students of different ages, past research did not pose the question concerning qualitative variations in the levels of engagement within a single adult student population.

2.7.2 Online Interactions and Social Presence

The reviewed studies suggest that online interactions is a factor that may influence students' success (often described as academic achievement or performance) (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014; Kuo & Belland, 2016).

Kuo and Belland (2016) found that the frequency of the interactions with the content and with instructors were positively correlated with students' learning satisfaction. Similarly, Martin and Bolliger (2018) stated that online interactions were valued by students, particularly for those who enjoy working on collaborative activities, group assignments or participate in discussions. These conclusions contradict earlier findings reported by Kuo et al. (2014) that interactions between learners do not impact student satisfaction in the considered learning context. Despite the reported positive effect of online interactions, previous research also suggests that adult learners may find maintaining regular interactions challenging (Backs, 2017). When interactions are not maintained, online learners are at risk of experiencing disconnection (Boyle

et al., 2010) and decrease in motivation (Li, & Moore, 2018). Stark and Warne (1999) also found that for adult students, the lack of interactions may contribute to the feeling of disconnection and shift students' focus towards family and other commitments.

A factor, strongly related to the process of interaction, is social presence. Arbaugh (2014) found that online behaviour, described and observed through the social presence, carefully predict student satisfaction and academic performance. Richardson, Yukiko, Lv, & Caskuru, (2017) confirmed that fostering social presence may contribute to the effectiveness of online learning, since it impacts students' satisfaction with learning and learning outcomes.

Overall, past research suggests the importance of social presence and interactions, emphasising multiple benefits for adult learners. It also emphasises that some students may need fewer interactions (Loizzo, Ertmer, Watson, & Watson, 2017), or prefer interactions with course content and instructors to the interactions with peers (Kuo et al., 2014), whereas others enjoy group activities.

2.7.3 Sense of Community

Belongingness to the community purport trust and similarity with the group and is often associated with social presence (Leh, 2001) and connectedness to a particular community (Leh, 2001). Felling a sense of community is another factor that is discussed as essential for a positive online learning experience and student satisfaction (Boyle et al., 2010). It is suggested that sense of belonging to the community can reduce feelings of isolation often reported by online students (Hart, Stewart & Jimerson, 2011), thus contributing to their retention in OHE.

Hodgson and Reynolds (2005) found that online environments can be exclusive. Indeed, in the study conducted by Boyle et al. (2010), students talked about little sense of connection and

belonging to the academic community, reported isolation and difficulty in maintaining engagement with learning activities. Although there are claims that the shift from face-to-face interactions to online communication may remove predispositions for exclusion and discrimination, the process of becoming a part of community presumes adherence of the community norms and values. These norms and values, however, can conflict with those of a student. In other words, for a heterogeneous adult student population, any deviation from the community norms may result in the exclusion or marginalisation (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005).

Overall, a sense of belonging to the community has been suggested to positively impact adult students' experiences, reduce feeling of isolation (Hart, Stewart & Jimerson, 2011) and contribute to students' retention. However, discussions are focused on either a positive effect of being part of a community or on negative feelings associated with the lack of sense of community. The variations in how learners within one online programme can experience a community have not been reported. Moreover, the very concept of community is often simplistically presented through the ideas of shared values and beliefs which do not allow variations or diversity of individual members. The problem of potential exclusion is in line with the argument of Hodgson and Reynolds (2005). The authors suggest that in order to avoid marginalisation of individual community members, it is vital to establish and maintain a community that is inclusive to the beliefs, values, and previous experiences of the diverse student population.

2.7.4 Persistence, Motivation and Satisfaction

Park and Choi (2009) describe persistence as the sum of factors that support a student's ability to progress in and complete an online programme. Xu & Jaggars (2013) found that persistence and learning outcomes vary significantly among students of different gender and race as well

as the level of academic preparation. Similarly, differences in motivation among different subgroups of adult students have been emphasised in the research reported by Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler, and Stürmer (2015).

Motivation is one of the factors strongly tied with persistence in online learning (Moos & Marroquin, 2010). Kim and Frick (2011) suggested that perceived difficulty negatively impacts student motivation. Zaborova, Glazkova and Markova (2017) showed that such factors as a possibility to combine work and studies, time and place flexibility, and tuition fees may influence students' motivation and persistence.

Learning satisfaction was also suggested as an important persistence attribute (Chyung, Winiecki, & Fenner, 1998; Kuo, Walker, Belland, & Schroder, 2013). Specifically, Allen and Seaman (2003) suggest that students' satisfaction with the learning process can lead to higher persistence and greater commitment to the programme. Chyung, Winiecki, and Fenner (1998) also found that dissatisfaction with the learning environment was the reason to dropout across nearly half of the participants of their study. Despite the emphasised importance of student satisfaction with learning, Rienties and Toetenel (2016) in their large-scale study at the UK Open University found that satisfaction and academic retention are not correlated. The authors provided evidence that although a large proportion of online learners were satisfied with their learning, learning is not always a pleasant and comfortable experience. Therefore, Rienties and Toetenel (2016) argued that an exclusive focus on learners' satisfaction might distract institutions from understanding the impact of the learning design on learning experiences and academic retention. This argument also suggests that online learning activities can be designed so that they stretch learners to their maximum abilities, whilst ensuring the successful learning progress (Rienties & Toetenel, 2016).

To sum up, research on adult student persistence, motivation and satisfaction provides important insights:

- Three considered factors have an impact on students' academic success.
- These three factors have various attributes that compose them.
- Attributes of persistence, motivation and satisfaction factors may vary among adult students of different ages, race and with different levels of educational background and experience.

2.7.5 Learner Skills: Self-Direction, Self-Regulation, Self-Efficacy

Evidence from the past research shows that student skills, which range from time management and computer competency to academic self-efficacy (Geduld, 2016), self-regulation, and self-discipline (Lee, Choi, & Kim, 2013), can significantly impact academic progress and achievement. For instance, level of self-regulation may predict the level of achievement (Geduld, 2016). Specifically, Geduld (2016) states that high achieving students are more self-regulated, whereas students who lack self-regulation are at a greater risk of dropout.

Hashim and his colleagues (2015) argued that adult students, despite their assumed self-direction, require a significant amount of guidance and support (Hashim et al., 2015). Botha and Coetzee (2016) suggested four elements of adult learner self-directedness in OHE, namely the strategic utilisation of provided resources, academic engagement, orientation for successful completion of the course, and a motivated behaviour. Their statistical analysis, however, showed significant differences in the level of self-directedness among adult students of different gender, race, and age group. Furthermore, a study conducted by Mayer (2004) within the contexts of unguided and structured learning offers evidence on ineffectiveness of the unguided approach to instruction, especially in new learning situations. Thus, when

encountering unfamiliar learning environments, online students may feel greater need for guidance and support.

Another skill, namely self-efficacy, has recently gained significant attention in the context of adult online learning (Ng & Baharom, 2018). Multiple studies report that self-efficacy, or confidence in own's ability to complete the course, impacts satisfaction (Backs, 2017), engagement (Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, & Killion, 2012), motivation (Harnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011), and may determine academic achievement (Backs, 2017). The lack of self-efficacy, on the other hand, may negatively affect students' performance, cause emotional stress, feelings of isolation and frustration (Artino & Stephens, 2009). Backs (2017), too, points out at the substantial negative impact of a low level of self-efficacy. He argues that students with a lack of self-efficacy for learning in an online environment are at risk of disengagement and academic failure. According to Fey et al. (2008), learners might have so much fear of technology that they are unable to meet online challenges and decide to drop out. However, despite the existing evidence of the relationship between self-efficacy and online learning processes, the nature of these relationships is not unclear.

2.7.6 Age and Personal Characteristics

There is extensive research on the relationships between students' characteristics and their learning behaviour. Pierrakeas et al. (2004) found that students of an age group from 30 to 39 years are at a greater risk to discontinue their learning, most likely due to an exceedingly demanding period of their lives or a need to prioritise. Park and Choi (2009), however, reported no correlation between such variables as age gender, education, and employment and student attrition. They concluded that personal characteristics have little influence on students' academic success. Carnoy's (2012) findings also suggest that age does not relate to online

course completion, whereas, parental responsibilities, and the number of children, in particular, do.

A more recent study by Xu and Jaggars (2013) showed variations in the level of persistence among students of a different gender and ethnicity (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). The authors stated that “males, Black students, and students with lower levels of academic preparation experienced significantly stronger negative coefficients for online learning compared with their peers, in terms of both course persistence and course grade” (p.23). Martin and Bolliger (2018) also analysed the influence of gender, age and previous online learning experience on variations in students’ learning outcomes. They found that in contrast with their male counterparts, female students expressed a need for additional online materials in order to explore the topic in more depth. They also concluded that it was more critical for younger students to receive regular announcements or email reminders from the instructor than for students in the older age group.

I-Jan, Kao, Huang, and Chang-Kuo-Wei (2013) identified that younger adult learners had higher confidences and better Internet self-efficacy than older adults. However, the results of their statistical analysis showed that gender does not affect adult students’ preferences toward online learning. A surprisingly contradictory conclusion has been made by Dwyer, Thompson, and Thompson (2013). The scholars conducted quantitative research in the same year, although in different institutions, and found that female participants had significantly more positive attitudes towards distance education than their male peers. Meyers and Bagnall (2017) in their research specifically emphasised the heterogeneity of adult learners, pointing to a diverse range of their abilities, experiences, and backgrounds. The authors suggest that older students may have difficulty with reading, writing, and numeracy, which arises from limited experience of the use of computers, technological tools for learning.

The results of past research produce contradictory conclusions. Although the diversity of the adult student population has been recognised, more research should be directed towards examining how such knowledge can assist in gaining better understanding of adult students' experiences in OHE in order to improve student retention.

2.7.7 Course Design and Instructions

An impact of the course design on students' online learning has been widely investigated. Past research suggests that course design and instruction can enhance students' learning (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012) and satisfaction (Lee & Rha, 2009; Li, Marsh, Rienties, & Whitelock, 2017; Rienties & Toetenel, 2016). For instance, Lee and Rha (2009) found that learners who participated in a structured course expressed their satisfaction with the level of organisation of the course. On the other hand, Bourdeaux and Schoenack (2016) found that learners in their study preferred creative course design. The authors explained that adult students are aware of the existing variations in their backgrounds, lifestyles and experiences, and advise instructors to meet their diverse levels and need by offering more creative online courses design.

The analysis of studies focused on the impact of the course design on students' persistence or attrition confirms that universal learning design will not be appropriate for the adult student population. Instead, they require more flexible online learning and creative design that can satisfy their different needs and preferences and goals.

2.7.8 Students' Expectations

Students' expectations is another theme that emerged from the analysis and needs mentioning. A mismatch in expectations about the difficulty of the online course, or a required workload

can cause a decrease in satisfaction among adult students' (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016) and attrition (Pierrakeas et al., 2004). Bourdeaux and Schoenack (2016) found that adult students felt less satisfied with their online learning when tutors did not provide explicit instruction and treated students with a lack of respect. Ladell-Thomas (2012) in her study arrived at a similar conclusion. She emphasised that clearly defined objectives, structured content and an offer of the diverse, authentic tasks were crucial expectations held by online students. Gaytan (2015) and Martin and Bolliger (2018) found that feedback from instructors was another important expectation of online learners. Specifically, students expect timely, meaningful, and clear and comprehensive feedback from their tutors so that they can improve their academic performance. Moreover, as Martin & Bolliger (2018) state, online students appreciate the development of more personal relationships with their tutors. In order to improve the level of students' satisfaction with learning, online course designers and instructors are suggested to continuously adjust their teaching practices to fit the needs of online learners.

Part research indicates that students' expectations in online learning environments vary among adult students due to the various reasons for returning to universities as distance learners, individual differences and experiences, unique circumstances and commitments. More research that brings adult students' voices out is needed to better understand what this population expects from their online learning in order to rethink the design of the offered online programmes and develop a more supportive learning environment.

2.7.9 Support

Simpson (2013), Stone (2017a, 2017b) and Stone and O'Shea (2019b) stress the importance of the embedded learning support, arguing that "embedding academic preparation and support in first year online units and courses is the most effective way of reaching all new students"

(Stone, 2017a, p.10). Jones (2010) found that less proactive students rely on support from the instructor in order to develop adequate skills for successful online learning and interactions. These ideas are in line with Russo-Gleicher's (2013) proposal that instructors can support student learning by monitoring and redirecting students to the appropriate support services. As Jones (2010) point out, academic caring is vital for learners who study online. Farrell et al. (2016) also state that online participation can be enhanced if the learners are provided with adequate information, guidance and schedule. Lee, Choi and Kim (2012) found that the perceived lack of proactive student support has a negative impact on student retention, as did the lack of a formal orientation programme for distance education students. Those findings were in line with previous research that indicated that effective student support systems could have a positive impact on student retention (Simpson, 2003).

Similar to other considered factors, there are contrasting conclusions regarding the role that support plays for an individual student's progression in an online programme. Overall, research suggests that external support for online learning can have a positive impact on student retention and progress. However, its effective form and effect on students' learning should be better explored (Simpson, 2003). Although such solutions as personalised support may not be possible (Cheng at al., 2011), the design of online support systems could be better informed with the inclusion of learners' perspectives on what is needed to support their learning into account.

2.8 Conceptualisation of Academic Success in Higher Education

The notion of academic success is one of the most actively discussed ideas among online educators and educational researchers. Due to its ambiguous nature, it is commonly conceptualised in a very vague way, utilising such terms as achievement, retention, satisfaction,

and engagement (York, Gibson & Rankin, 2015) and contrasted with attrition and dropout (Rotar, 2020). Another widely discussed indicators of success are students' increased employment opportunities and an impact of learning on the earned income (York, Gibson & Rankin, 2015).

There is, however, a gradual increase of awareness that indicators of success need to be expanded (Kuh et al., 2006). A need for an alternative definition of academic success arose as a result of a consideration of the complexities of the world and a recognised diversity of the student population (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). To examine with issue, I analysed research that focuses explicitly on conceptualisations of success and students' perceptions of success within the field of HE. I approached the Scopus database with keywords "success", "academic success" and "higher education" and was able to find a small number of studies of that scope (see Beilin, 2016; Gurin et al., 2002; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; Schrum & Hong, 2002).

The term "success", and more specifically academic success, has been frequently used as an equivalent to grades, examination scores, assessment results, graduation rates and other quantifiable elements without almost any questions for an extended period of time (Kuh et al., 2006). As in the research on attrition and dropout, success in the most identified studies has been associated with students' grades, retention and rates of employment (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). This perspective is not surprising due to the strong influence of the neoliberal agenda on higher educational institutions. Arguably, neoliberal, or market-oriented, policy reforms a narrow vision of universities to the economic and business benefits (McArthur, 2018).

The perceptions of students, and in particular adult students, on their success are rarely examined (see Benton, 2015; Donaldson, Graham, Martindil, Long, & Bradley, 1999;

Knightley, 2007). Donaldson et al. (1999) in their study asked adults to define success and found that students made a clear distinction between “success in college” and “success in learning” (p.3). The former was associated with knowledge acquisition, whereas the latter indicated the ability to apply that knowledge in practice. Knightley (2007), who was interested in understanding adult students’ learning, found that adult students were able to greatly benefit from the learning process not only academically but also personally, through increased self-assurance and empowerment associated with the feeling of confidence and agency. Benton (2015) conducted a descriptive study with the aim to give voice to the social and academic experiences of non-traditional students, and to share the lived experiences that influenced their learning progress. In their reflections, non-traditional students revealed issues of “social disconnections and unresolved pain associated with poverty, loss of significant loved ones, and unemployment... coupled with blame and shame, doubt and despair, and other faces of fear as students attempted to re-create a new pathway for success” (p.186). Benton (2015) concluded that for adult students, the main challenges in their pathway to success were not only associated with academic learning, but also with their ability to enter the educational “pipeline” and adopt to the learning culture by “producing transformational change in behaviour that would become the stimulus for their second opportunity for crafting a new life” (p.186).

The lack of research on students’ perceptions of success has been emphasised by O’Shea & Delahunty (2018). The authors explored first-in-family students’ perceptions of their success through the lens of Amartya Sen’s (1992, 1993) capability approach. The capabilities approach defines success as an outcome that is valuable for an individual or as an individual’s ability to find a way of functioning that is valuable (Sen, 1993). Applying this perspective to look at students’ success, O’Shea & Delahunty (2018) found that for some students an opportunity to be able to enrol into the study and to become a part of the academic community was already

an outstanding achievement (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). The authors comment that it is not surprising that students from non-traditional background associate their success with passing the assignments and achieving satisfactory grades. Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) and O'Shea & Delahunty (2018) note that the perception of being an "imposter" is inflicted by the feeling of not belonging to the learning community, the need to work whilst studying, and living away from the campus (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018, p.1065).

Scholars attempt to provide a contrasting perspective on academic success. It has been recognised that there are individual developmental needs that constitute successful learning outcomes for students yet are often neglected by educators. York, Gibson and Rankin (2015) state that the notion of academic success may incorporate multiple elements, ranging from gaining a degree to the development of individual virtues. O'Shea et al. (2018) also suggest that the term success may include aspirations for gaining a status of the learner and confidence to "beat the odds" (p.1072). The authors emphasised the importance of consideration of the emotional domain of the concept of success and pointed out at the complexity of understandings of the term.

It is safe to suggest that if adult learners seek educational experiences for various purposes in mind (Schrum & Hong, 2002), the outcomes they are looking for will also differ from one student to another. The reasons for coming back to university are closely related to, and to some extent, influence students' perceptions of success. However, little attention has been paid to the examination of perceptions of success from adult students' perspectives, apart from studies that looked at the perspectives of first-in-family students (see O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Instead, there is a dominating meritocratic approach to measuring student success through graduation rates and academic outcomes (Oh & Kim, 2016), rather than in terms of gain in knowledge, personal development, or contribution to the public

good. Students are judged by their performance and classified as successful when completing specific tasks with satisfactory results. A meritocratic approach to defining academic success does not consider the impact of the social or cultural contexts of the students' learning experiences and ignores their inclusion into the process of evaluation of the learning outcomes (Oh & Kim, 2016; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Social context, however, has been found to be a critical element in understanding students' motivations and behaviours, and the ways they perceive and conceptualise individual experiences (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). An in-depth exploration of adult students' voices will allow the research community and educators to identify what is missing from the full picture of the concept of success, and balance historically developed assumptions and opinions of educators and professional experts with learners' perspectives.

2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the results of empirical studies on adult students' online learning experiences and perceptions, and the attrition and retention factors in online higher education. The aim of the review was to identify gaps in past research by summarising what is known about various aspects of adults' online learning and what is missing from the research canvas.

The analysis yielded multiple factors that may impact online students' learning and their learning progress. It was found that prior research on online students' attrition and retention has tended to be influenced by psychological studies and predominantly represented by survey-based studies, focused on individual factors or groups of factors that affect online students' learning. The studies with less elaborated research methodologies have tended to explore a specific factor or a specific aspect of online students' success in learning, such as motivation, engagement, or interactions, whereas more methodologically complex studies have reported

more nuanced aspects of students' learning. Considered quantitative studies did not encourage students' voices and unique perspectives on academic success due to methodological limitations. Similarly, qualitative studies, although holding a potential to document students' narratives and a complexity of their learning experiences on the way to success, either have not necessarily accounted for diversity of the adult student population or have not translated the acknowledged heterogeneity of the adult population into the principle that has guided the research process.

Prior research that neglects or minimises qualitative variations that may otherwise be found among the adult online student population, has rarely focused on listening to adult student voices and has not necessarily given adequate attention to the context of their experience. This suggests that when exploring adult students' online learning experiences, the researcher should encourage study participants to reflect on the *process* of learning, and to pay attention to the context to uncover those elements of experience that are foregrounded and backgrounded. Furthermore, a more complex methodology that allows capturing and elaboration of multiple aspects of experiences is needed. Thus, in this study, I advocate a holistic perspective that will be taken in my analysis of adult students' experiences and conceptualisations of success through the phenomenographic research design to derive outcome spaces.

Regarding the existing conceptualisation of success, the approach to measure learning outcomes is predominantly meritocratic. Success is predominantly discussed in terms of graduation rates and academic outcomes (Oh & Kim, 2016) rather than in terms of gain in knowledge, personal development, or contribution to the public good. However, an alternative conceptualisation of success that recognises individual developmental needs has started to develop to contrast a limiting discourse on success as a search for skills and professional

upgrade dictated by the knowledge-based and income-oriented economy (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2002).

In short, the conclusion can be summarised in the following way:

- Adult students’ learning experiences are often associated with the influence of a large number of confounding factors.
- Although the view on adult students as a homogeneous group is questioned, there is a lack of research on qualitative differences that exist within this population in regard to their online learning and conceptualisations of success.

The gaps of the past research include a neglected diversity of adult student population, a lack of in-depth understanding of how online learning is experienced from the adult students’ perspectives, and little attention to the variety of learners’ perceptions on success (Figure 2.3).

In the following part of the chapter, I discuss identified gaps more closely.

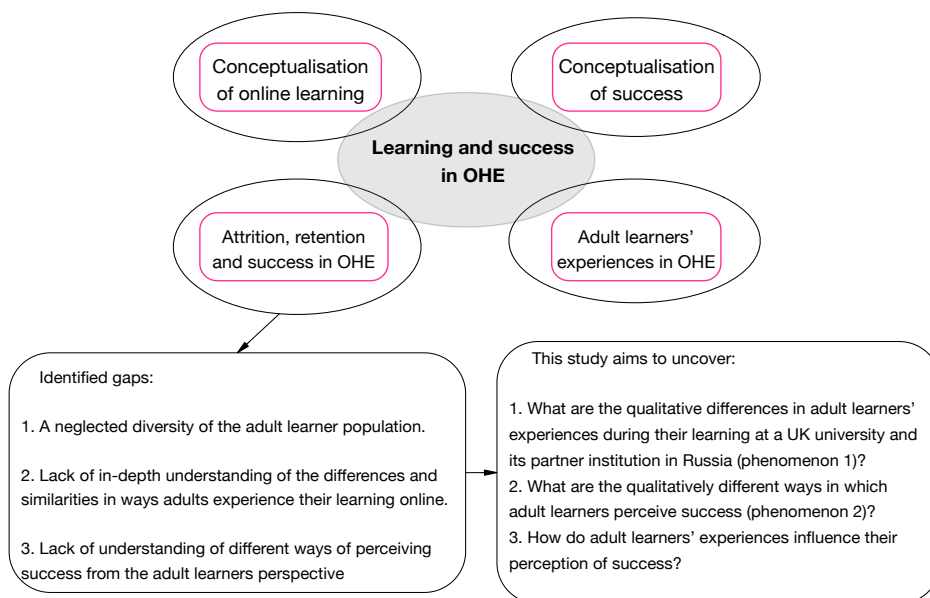


Figure 2.3 Gaps identified in the past research.

2.10 Identified Gaps

The problem of online students' attrition, retention and academic success have been a subject of analysis of many studies. Yet, students' first-hand perspectives on their experiences of online learning have been investigated less frequently (Tyler-Smith, 2006; O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015). Furthermore, past research, especially quantitative studies, tend to hide students' personal stories about their experiences and perceptions by fitting them into statistical figures (Waller, 2006) and historical assumptions. Qualitative studies in that respect are a better position as they hold a potential of providing a more nuanced understanding of adult students' experiences and perceptions in OHE. However, past empirical research did not explicitly challenge the simplistic representation of adult students' experiences. It failed to account for the diversity of adult students within a single group in terms of their experiences, perceptions, skills, motivation and expectations.

In the considered research studies, it was hard to detect any systematic attempt to relate accepted variations in adult learners' profiles to corresponding differences in their experiences and perceptions in their online programmes. Even in the studies that attempted to investigate the phenomenon under question in-depth, adult students' differences have been discussed at a very superficial level. This limitation of the past research can be accounted for by the predominance of two types of approaches to investigation, which, in their very different ways, neglect or minimise qualitative variations that may otherwise be found among the adult student population. On the one hand, the quantitative approach to research neglects qualitative differences. It tends to reduce and oversimplify adult students as a group when examining the effect of a selected for the analysis factor on their learning, behaviour or a decision-making process.

A qualitative inquiry may recognise the heterogeneity of adult students and can even introduce adult learners' voices into the discussion. Nevertheless, in most considered studies, the recognition the diversity was not transformed into the guiding principle of the empirical investigation or a study design. Moreover, adult students are often discussed in contrast to their younger peers and through the prism of historical assumptions. Only a few scholars explicitly showed that the diversity of adult students is taken into account throughout the investigation process (Gravani, 2015; Meyers & Bagnall, 2017).

Apart from methodological limitations, there are also apparent contradictions in conclusions regarding suggested success factors and what has been reported by adult students themselves in context-specific empirical studies. Thus, the lack of in-depth qualitative research does not allow to arrive at any conclusion. What is known is that differences and contradictory results are related to the differences within the adult student group in regard to the variety of aspects, including age, skills, experiences, but also needs for engagement, interactions and support.

An examination of scholarship on attrition, retention and success could not explain what contributes to adults' successful progression in their online learning since they offer mixed and conflicting results. Furthermore, the review of the research on the existing conceptualisations of success showed that there had been hardly any attempts to investigate students' views on what success means to them. Instead, there is a dominant interpretation of the concept from the meritocratic perspective, as dictated by policymakers and educators. Such discourse marketises the view on the results of the learning process and compares online learners with consumers.

Lastly, the review of the literature showed that adult learners - the largest student group in online higher education - had been rarely given voice to speak. The articulation of this concern is important since the development of online education without including voices of the main

student population can be problematic. Past research shown little interest in the online learners' first-hand experiences, which creates a need for a more in-depth investigation of adult students' accounts, rather than a search for universal explanations of online student retention or dropout. Specifically, more research is needed on how adult students experience their learning process, discuss their success, and conceptualise anticipated learning outcomes in order to equilibrate the dominating economic line of discussion in the field of OHE.

2.11 Implications for the Current Research

In this research, I argue that attempts to understand online education should involve examination of the phenomenon as its main population - adult students- experience it. I oppose an exclusive concentration on factors that may or may not influence students' experiences, behaviours and decision-making process. Nevertheless, I believe that the examination of what is meaningful for online students is a substantial and exciting area of research. This research supports endeavours to identify factors that affect adult students' success in OHE, but rather than taking any specific factor as a starting point of the investigation, this study adopts an open approach in order to uncover the meaning of success for adult students.

Past research tends to discuss the concept of success from the perspectives of scholars, educators, educational institutions, or through the predominant neoliberal discourse that exists within the OHE field. Therefore, there is a call for rethinking the concept of success by exploring its meaning from students' perspectives. This research aims to question the simplistic understanding of the notion of success, bringing to the discussion the voices of adult students and acknowledging the diversity of perspectives of the adult learner population. A developed for this research principle of diversity ensures more details on variations in how adult students experience learning and conceptualise their aspirations. Thus, this study contributes to the

development of a more complete picture of the online learning phenomenon and its potential benefits for learners, allowing to see the picture in a different light and without an influence of dominant discourses or theories.

3 Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework helps to consider the complexity of the phenomena under investigation (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). It can be seen as a route or a direction of the research or present a product of thinking about the phenomenon from multiple viewpoints. It can also be a framework for mapping a territory that is being studied (Miles & Huberman, 1994) or a lens for a better focus (Maxwell, 2005). Application of the conceptual framework to the study helps to illuminate assumptions (Maxwell, 2005) and examine the relationships between various elements of the research, maintaining the consistency and rigour throughout the research process (Polit & Beck, 2012).

In this research, I utilise a conceptual framework in two ways. First, I use it to provide a theoretical clarification of the research problem and what I intend to examine. Secondly, within a conceptual framework, I provide information to the reader about how I approach this research project. What is important to note is that although the conceptual framework applied in this study aimed to benefit the research process, it did not inform my research in any way. Instead, it served as a tool for the meaning-making process, assisted me in shaping a research problem, mapped the areas of this research, indicated the literature that I consult, and added to the justification of the employed methodology.

Figure 3.1 shows main elements involved in the development of the conceptual framework. On top of Figure 3.1, I placed a concept of learning to emphasise alternative ways of conceptualising learning within phenomenographic research. On the left side, there are two concepts, learning and experience, that suggest that consideration of learning through

experience can assist in its better explanation. I used philosophical principles of the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) to broaden the perspective on adult students' online learning and to view it as a holistic experience that covers all dimensions of students' lives. The adult learner - one of the central concepts of my research and adult learning theories - is placed at the bottom of the framework to discuss existing conceptualisation of the adult student population. On the left side of the model, there are theoretical concepts that assisted me in data interpretation and used to discuss the results of this research. Finally, what shaped an overall approach to this highly interpretative phenomenographic study is a reflective practice framework developed on the basis work of John Dewey "How We Think" (1910). I will now go through the indicated areas of the conceptual framework and discuss their relations to this study.

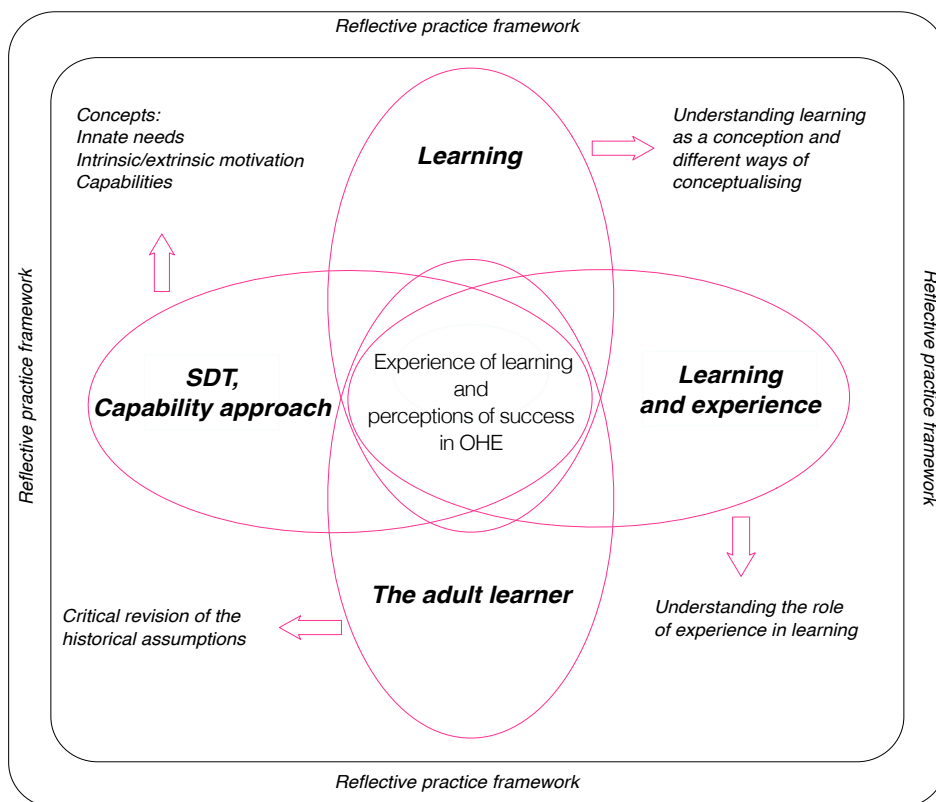


Figure 3.1 Conceptual framework.

3.1 Learning as a Conception

In this research, I approach the phenomenon of online learning through the examination of how adult students conceptualise their learning process. By employing a phenomenographic methodology, I also explore variation in the existing conceptualisations. As a phenomenographer, I was guided by the assumption that the phenomenon of learning can be experienced in a (limited) number of different ways. By accepting this assumption, I argue that learning is a complex concept that directly concerns learners and their experiences, and thus, should be examined through the learners' accounts.

Learning conceptions are essential themes and units of description in any phenomenographic study. They are associated with students' awareness of the different aspects of the phenomenon. In fact, many empirical studies that were interested in investigating conceptions of learning utilised phenomenographic methodology (see, for instance, Ashwin, 2005; Paakkari et al., 2011; Täks et al., 2016). While many learning theories refer to learning conceptions from cognitive or incentive perspectives, in this research conceptions of learning are seen as ways of experiencing or being aware of the phenomenon (Marton, 1986; 1994). In other words, conceptions articulated by participants in this research are representations of particular ways of experiencing reality (Marton & Booth, 1997).

In phenomenography, the term "conception of learning" describes how students see learning, what learning is for them and how they go about learning (Marton & Booth, 1997). Tynjälä (1997) identifies two approaches to examine conceptions of learning, namely cognitive and an experiential. The author further explains that a phenomenographic study adopts an experiential way, aiming to "capture the different ways in which people understand and describe phenomena" (Tynjälä, 1997, p.278).

The interest in conceptions of learning emerged from empirical studies that looked at the relationships between conceptions of learning and students' learning behaviour and approaches to learning (see Chiou, Liang & Tsai, 2012; Marton & Booth, 1997). Marton and Booth (1997) found that conceptions of learning held by students had a considerable effect on how they approached their learning. It has also been suggested that conceptions of learning are closely linked to the quality of learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Ellis, Goodyear, Calvo, & Prosser, 2008; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991). Ellis et al. (2008) who found that students' conceptions of learning determine the quality of their learning experience and learning outcomes, which can be conceptualised as either "understanding" or a "reproduction" of knowledge (p.279). This research project aims to further investigate the discussed above proposition. Not only do I intend to uncover adult students' conceptions of learning and success in their online postgraduate programmes, I also intend to uncover whether there are relationships between different ways of experiencing online learning and various conceptualisations of success.

3.2 The Role of Experience in Learning

Experience is a process whereby people consciously assimilate the reality and operate their understanding of and relation to it (Olesen, 2001). This process can happen within an individual or collectively. Among the various theories of learning, the one that places prevailing emphasis on experience more than the others and suggests that experience plays a decisive role in the process of learning is the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) developed by Kolb (1984). The Experiential Learning Theory has its roots in the works of such prominent thinkers as Dewey, Piaget, Lewin and others (Kolb, 1984), who located experience within constructs of human learning and human development. Within the Experiential Learning Theory Kolb proposed a coherent model of adults' development named the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). The learning

cycle presumes that the path of an individual's development is designated by learning. Kolb argues that "learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes" (Kolb, 1984, p.26). Thus, his learning cycle model suggests that for the efficient learning process students need to be able to involve themselves into four stages, or modes, of learning: a concrete experience, a reflective observation, an abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

Kolb also developed the principles according to which learning is a continuous and holistic process grounded in the experience and involves reflection and interactions between the learner and the environment. Other principles elaborated by Kolb & Kolb (2005) are following:

- In order to enable effective learning, the emphasis should be placed on the learning process rather than on learning outcomes. Within the process of learning, feedback plays an important role.
- Learning involves relearning. The process of learning is enhanced if it involves an examination, testing and revision of learners' ideas and beliefs.
- All learning involves disagreements and conflicts that serve as a driver for the learning process. A resolution of the conflict presumes a continuous move "back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p.194).
- Learning is not just a mental process; it is a holistic functioning of the different process (e.g. "thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving", Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p.194) within a person that results in the person's adaptation to the world.
- Learning emerges from interactive transactions between the individual and the surrounding environment, during which new experiences assimilate into the existing conceptions, while newly developed conceptions integrate into the new experiences.

- Learning is the process of knowledge construction. It is the process of knowledge creation and recreation by the learner, rather than a mere “transmission” and reception of the known facts. (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p.194).

Kolb also provided a typology of four forms of knowledge, distinguishing assimilative, accommodative, convergent and divergent knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p.196). The first two forms are borrowed from Piaget (1971), and the last two arrived from the research on creativity and intelligence reported by Guilford (1967). While assimilation and accommodation in principle presume addition and adaptation of knowledge, convergence has its focus on the development of a specific outcome from a given input (knowledge deduction). In contrast, divergence relates to the development of several various outputs from any given input (creative process). Assimilation and accommodation can be extended into the other two types of knowledge, convergent and divergent, since the learning process can be forwarded in different directions and, thus, lead to various outcomes (Illeris, 2007).

Illeris (2007) argues that experiential learning covers not only cognitive dimensions of learning (as in Kolb’s learning cycle) but also includes such elements as a content and incentive and social components. In other words, the most effective learning appears when the content is relevant to the student personally or professionally, when it is emotionally and motivationally appealing, and when it is related to an individual’s life or society.

The ideas and philosophy of experiential learning theory are often misunderstood and misused, being seen as a “set of tools and techniques to provide learners with experiences from which they can learn” or as a way of a “mindless recording of experience” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p.193). However, above all theoretical propositions and principles, ELT also holds distinguishing philosophical ideas (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), two of which I utilise in this research.

First one is the idea of the wholeness of experiences. ELT presumes that experience that leads to the individual's growth refers not only to a direct learning experience but also to the learner's lifeworld, e.g., spaces and experiences outside the educational institution (Kolb, 1984). This includes the learner's experience of the physical and social environment during and outside the learning process and quality of relationships with others. Secondly, the ELT advocates inclusion of individual differences into the learning process. Individual variations in expertise, experiences, backgrounds, values and beliefs can create challenges for the learning process of an individual learner (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) and, thus, must not be neglected. Instead, these differences should be recognised, acknowledged, and embraced in the very early stage. This research encompasses the discussed philosophical positions of ELT. It intends to acknowledge and examine individual differences in how adult learners experience their online learning, within their academic as well as non-academic environments

3.3 Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation and Innate Psychological Needs

The role of motivation in students' online learning has been extensively discussed. Woodley and Simpson (2014) and some other online educators (Anderson, 2008; Tait, 1994) went further, arguing that the only important factor for maintaining online learners' retention is their motivation for learning. The analysis of past research on adult students' experiences presented in the previous chapter also showed the importance of students' motivation for their persistence (Kim & Frick, 2011; Moos & Marroquin, 2010; Zaborova, Glazkova, & Markova, 2017).

Deci and Ryan (1985) explain that to be motivated means to be moved towards an action. However, the authors argue that the phenomenon of motivation is not simple. In their self-determination theory, Deci and Ryan elucidate why people act in a particular way and make particular choices without any direct external influences (Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995; Ryan

& Deci, 2000). They also explain that people vary not only in regard to how much motivation they have but also can experience different orientations of motivation. That feature of motivation - its orientation - concerns underlying attitudes and goals that initiate an action. For instance, a student may be motivated to work on an assignment due to personal interest or awareness of the potential utility of knowledge. Alternatively, a student's actions may be a result of seeking the approval of a teacher, satisfactory grades or fear of punishment. In these examples, the amount of motivation does not necessarily vary, but the nature of motivation does (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In Self-Determination Theory (SDT) Deci and Ryan (1985) distinguish between different types of motivation, from intrinsic motivation to amotivation, based on what is a stimulus for action. Different types of motivation may affect the quality of learning experience and performance in different ways (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Intrinsic motivation drives an individual towards action for the good of positive experiences and expectations of personal development, rather than for instrumental reasons. Such voluntary activities result in high-quality learning and contribute to the individual's growth in knowledge and skills (Ryan & Stiller, 1991). Intrinsic motivation is a central element in human cognitive and psychological development as it ensures an effective performance, persistence and well-being (Ryan & LaGuardia, 2000).

Extrinsic motivation is typically contrasted with an intrinsic one and is often discussed as an impoverishing type of motivation (e.g., deCharms, 1968). What is significant for the current research is that SDT offers an explanation that there are very different types of extrinsic motivation. Some forms of extrinsic motivation can indeed forcefully propel a learner into action and, thus, hinder growth and development. In that case, a learner will perform extrinsically regulated actions with the lack of interest or even with resistance and resentment. Yet, there are forms of extrinsic motivation that represent a result of internalisation and

alignment of external tasks with a learner's values. In such a situation, an externally set goal is accepted volitionally.

For the current research, being aware of these different types of extrinsic motivation bring a broader perspective on what enhances adult students' learning. Since many educational tasks involve the performance of the inherently challenging or unpleasant activities, understanding what promotes or hinders volitional learning is essential for understanding how learning is experienced. For such a diverse student population as adult learners, variations in how the learning tasks are perceived are inevitable, resulting to the alignment of the educational tasks with values of some students, and causing a rejection in others.

Ryan and Deci (2000) showed how educators could guide students to internalise the responsibility and sense of value for extrinsically set goals. By introducing a concept of innate psychological needs, they explained that some form extrinsic motivations that would typically cause rejection, lack of interest and low persistence could be fostered. Three needs that the authors distinguish are the need for competence, the need for relatedness and the need for autonomy. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), the psychological health of the individual will not be ensured without the satisfaction of these needs, as they are critical for the individuals' psychological health and well-being. The concept of innate psychological needs explains that the behaviour of an individual concerned not only with set goals but with the urge for development and well-being.

In SDT, the needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy are understood not as for psychological deficits that trouble an individual until they are satisfied, but rather as growth-directed urges. When those needs are satisfied, an individual is intrinsically motivated and participate in learning activities with interest. Indeed, past research shows that people who

follow their intrinsic motifs have better persistence, performance and creativity (Deci & Ryan, 1991), higher level of vital energy (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999) and self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995). Nevertheless, although intrinsic motivation initiates a natural propensity towards learning and exploration, this form of motivation can be effortlessly hindered by an unsupportive environment and conditions.

A cognitive evaluation theory (CET), a subcategory of SDT, elaborates on the variability of intrinsic motivation through the consideration of different social and environmental factors and contexts. CET explains that actions that confirm an individual's competence, e.g., feedback, can positively influence intrinsic motivation. However, according to CET, the feeling of competence can reinforce intrinsic motivation only when it is supported by the feeling of autonomy (deCharms, 1968). Finally, the last element of intrinsic motivation is the need for relatedness.

Overall, the CET suggests that a supportive social environment can foster and facilitate intrinsic motivation by supporting an individual's inner needs. In other words, intrinsic motivation can be better enhanced in a supportive and encouraging environment. By contrast, in the context of learning, Ryan and Grolnick (1986) provided evidence that those students who experienced their teachers as uncaring and cold were less intrinsically motivated. However, the principles of CET only apply for tasks that already align with an individual's intrinsic interests and values and will not work if there is no such appeal.

Interestingly, Ryan and Connell (1989) found that different types of motivation associated with differences in experiences and learning outcomes. The students with greater external regulation showed less interest in learning activities and put less effort into learning. As a result, they were more inclined to blame a teacher or others for the adverse outcomes of their learning. Moreover,

according to SDT, failure to foster three essential psychological needs lead may cause distress and affect well-being as a result of needs deprivation. By contrast, those students who were able to internalise an internal regulation had a more substantial interest in learning, put more effort into it and experienced joy and satisfaction from the process, or “eudemonia” (Deci & Ryan, 2001, p.141).

SDT emphasises an enormous power of the social context to either foster or diminish a learner’s motivation. For instance, in one context, learning experience may be enhanced by the greater sense of being part of a community than in the other. In the third context, learners may face excessive control and lack of support (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The SDT and its CET sub-theory add a new theoretical perspective on the nature of differences in adult students' motivation in their online programmes and suggest the importance of a closer exploration its types. For the current research, the SDT theory offers three crucial implications:

- 1 It explains the importance of a closer look at both types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, rather than a simplistic application of two types as contrasting ones.
- 2 It offers an explanation of the process through which external regulations, such as learning tasks, can be internalised, facilitating the emergence of intrinsic drivers.
- 3 It brings into light the potential of the learning process to fulfil individuals’ inner needs directed towards personal growth and well-being.

3.4 The Adult Learner: Historical Perspective and Assumptions

Perhaps the most important concept of this study is the concept of an adult learner. This concept has been largely discussed in the research literature from different standpoints and in various

contexts, including online higher education. The development of online education has a potential to serve the needs of adult learners more effectively. Even though the recent trend in online higher education is that more young students enrol in online programmes (Venable, 2020), adult learners still present a significant proportion of the overall student population in OHE. Thus, if we want to understand the processes and the nature of distance learning better, we should look at how adult students experience them (Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

The first educator who attempted to develop a comprehensive theory of adult learning was Malcolm Knowles (1970). Knowles hypothesised that adults learn differently from children and proposed a concept of andragogy to summarise the developed ideas and principles of adult learning into a theory. Knowles suggested andragogical principles of adult learning, or assumptions about adult learners and the way they learn, that distinguish them from children. In this chapter, I discuss the concept of the adult learner, critically analyse four initial andragogical assumptions and discuss insights on the selective application of andragogical principles in an online environment.

Report of the results of the project “Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning” (IDEAL) sponsored by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (Owusu-Boampong & Holmberg, 2015) presents a profile of a contemporary distance student. The report shows that a typical distance learner is a middle-aged individual, returning to a university after some period of absence related to the family or work commitments. Many of those learners value the advantages of online mode of learning due to their busy lifestyles. In addition, online programmes are typically designed to attract working individuals and career-oriented students. Therefore, it is not surprising that many online students hold professional commitments that may interfere with their learning (Venable, 2020). Moreover, for some students, the distance mode of learning is the only feasible option to obtain higher education degree. In addition, the

IDEAL report shows that a vast majority of distance students have children, and nearly half of them hold twenty or more years of working experience (Owusu-Boampong & Holmberg, 2015). A distinctive group of distance learners mentioned in the IDEAL report are retired people. The report suggests that those people are coming back to a university with aspirations for self-realisation or to maintain an active and exciting social life. Lastly, there are students from remote areas. For those students, distance learning offers an opportunity to study that they missed earlier in their lives.

Another dominant perspective (although less explicitly articulated) is that a typical adult student has a secondary status. Northedge (2003) points out that adults are perceived as “charity” compared to “proper”, younger students (p.17), whereas Grummell (2007) concludes that adult education is seen as a “second chance” (p.183). Others raise similar concerns. There is a perception of a less urgency for learning for the adult student population due to the links between adult education and lifelong learning. Lakin (2009) states that adult learners are treated as a “one-dimensional” population (p.40).

The research focused on adult students and how they learn is continuously evolving since the 1920s when the professional field of adult education emerged (Merriam, 2001). As discussed above, the main interest in researching adult students is associated with the complexity of their lives and additional barriers for participation in HE, especially comparing to the younger student population. It was suggested that adult students’ learning and learning experiences are more complex and not straightforward to understand (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Palloff and Pratt (2003) argue that educating adults using a universal approach is not practical due to the differences in their educational backgrounds and previous experience. On the other side, when taken on board and welcomed into the learning activities, adults’ differences can facilitate the

learning process. As the authors conclude, mature students “learn best when they approach knowledge in ways they trust” (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p.31).

I agree with Ladd, Reynolds, and Selingo (n.d.) who argue that the existing oversimplification and generalisation of the adult learner population and adults’ needs should be questioned and seen as problematic (see report “The Differentiated University”). By approaching the design of this research with the diversity principle in mind, I stress a need for recognition of the heterogeneity of adult students and the variety of their learning experiences, needs and perspectives.

3.4.1 Adults and the Notion of Self-Direction

Andragogy presumes that individuals become increasingly self-directed as they mature (Knowles, 1973) and tend to re-formulate their learning needs and strategies to meet educational goals. Furthermore, during the process of maturation an individual’s self-perception also changes – a person starts to perceive him or herself as a self-directed personality. In other words, andragogy assumes that adult learners experience a need to be recognised by others as self-directed and to be treated with respect (Knowles, 1973). Thus, during the learning process, they may reject situations that are incongruent with their self-concept as independent personalities.

Another potentially influential dimension of the conception of self-direction is a student’s previous negative educational experience. From childhood, a student may inherit a belief that he or she is not intelligent. This may result in the association of an educational institution with feelings of disrespect and shame. Negative childhood experience may affect adult students’ further involvement in learning, as well as limit the role of the learner within the learning process. Therefore, according to Knowles, in order to facilitate self-direction adult students

should be provided with a supportive learning environment, be encouraged to take responsibility for their learning, and given an opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with the tutor. Recent findings on cognitive science show that the level of self-direction is related to an individual's ability to manage the processes of interactions and adjust cognitive choices accordingly (Hagen & Park, 2016). Thus, an individual becomes more self-directed with the improvement of the ability to manage those complex processes. The fact that adult students routinely maintain various roles and responsibilities indicates that they may already possess some degree of self-direction. However, a pedagogical approach to educating adults should be chosen with care. As Knowles (1996) stresses, for adult students unnecessary freedom may lead to adverse results such as disorder and stress, especially for those students who are less prepared for self-directed learning.

The first andragogical assumption about adult learners provides insights into the psychological climate that is preferable for that student group: the atmosphere of mutual respect, support and acceptance. In online education practice, these conditions can be ensured when adults are allowed to have a required degree of self-direction yet supported in their learning process in a timely and respectful manner.

3.4.2 The Role of Prior Experience

The second andragogical assumption is that adult learners bring their past experiences into learning (Knowles, 1978). Hence, in order to facilitate a more effective learning, educators should ensure that adult learners are given an opportunity to reflect on the prior experience in order to merge it with newly acquired knowledge. Moreover, teaching practices should be grounded in an awareness and acknowledgement of learners' experience. The last suggestion has support from cognitive science. According to Dragnaski et al. (2004), when brought to the

focus, past experiences and associated with them emotions improve neuroplasticity of the brain of mature individuals and enable changes in a grey matter. This suggests that continuous integration of the previous experience into learning may increase information recall and retention and stimulate expansion of adult students' mental capacities.

Since adults possess a more significant volume of experience than younger students, the quality of their experience is different, and they tend to utilise fixed patterns of thoughts and habits. An adaptation of the comfortable behaviour may limit their learning. From this standpoint, online educators may face challenges in providing learning activities that on one hand meet wide variety of experiences of the adult student group, and on the other, stretch adult students' mental capacities. How to approach these challenges is a question that needs a closer investigation.

3.4.3 Readiness to Learn

Another andragogical assumption is that although adult learners have various motivations to return to a university, they choose to study voluntarily and, thus, ready to learn. Adults' readiness to learn is often linked to their learning aspirations to advance their professional or personal development or enhance their social position (Taylor & Kroth, 2009).

Knowles (1978) argues that readiness to learn should be a guiding principle for designing educational programmes for adult students. Forrest and Peterson (2006) further develop this argument within the scope of management education. The authors suggest that adult learners tend to have little interest in learning materials if they are irrelevant to their professional goals, social roles or needs. Therefore, they continue, the aim of an adult educator is to assist adults in the identification of personal needs and interests and, consequently, to ensure an educational environment that allows satisfaction of these needs.

This assumption can be considered from a standpoint of human nature. Hagen and Park (2016) argue that adult learners' desire to learn in order to support their social roles has an evolutionary established robust neurological basis. The authors state that the need for learning is related to the individual's desire for social acceptance and connection (Hagen & Park, 2016). Thus, a fear of social rejection creates an urge for improvement. These insights offer an interesting angle to explore motivation behind adults' willingness and readiness to learn, questioning their assumed voluntary origin.

3.4.4 Immediate Application of Knowledge

Andragogy explains that as individuals mature, their learning orientation shifts from a passive acceptance of theoretical knowledge to the desire of its immediate application. This assumption suggests that adults expect to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills immediately and view learning as a process that may assist them in developing ability to deal with real-life problems. Thus, adults' motivation to learn is related to anticipation of how what they learned can be utilised in real life.

This assumption offers an important implication for the current research. Referring to the findings from cognitive research conducted by Hagen and Park (2016), it can be suggested that an immediate application of new knowledge facilitates the development of new brain cells as the brain adapts under new circumstances. Therefore, it can be suggested that adults' readiness to immediately utilise new knowledge on practice can stretch learners' cognitive abilities and establish a ground for more advanced learning experiences. That is to say, appropriately designed learning activities focused on integration of past and new knowledge and experience through the applied exercise, may lead to more advanced learning outcomes.

Knowles's (1978) ideas have a significant influence on how contemporary scholars conceptualise an adult learner population, encouraging a distinction between adults and children. Yet, it failed to account for individual differences within an adult student population (Merriam, 2001). Andragogical principles also ignore issues of power relationships or social justice that may emerge within a heterogeneous adult student population and thus a portrayal of a typical adult learner is often unproblematically transmitted to the modern-age adult students, especially those who pursue their degrees in a unique online environment. The insights from andragogy, although potentially useful for adult educators or learning designers, should not be bluntly applied. Instead, educators are encouraged to consider adults' different cultures, cognitive abilities, approaches to learning, individual circumstances, social background, and personality when encountering them in an online learning environment. To do so, educators should be ready to listen to adult students' voices (Cercone, 2008).

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the relevance and the use of concepts that compose the conceptual framework of my study. The conceptual framework aimed to emphasise the complexity of terms, principles or assumptions that have been considered during this research.

The developed framework supports my inquiry in four ways. First, it clarifies an interpretation of the conception of learning frequently used in this research. It explains that although learning is often seen from cognitive or incentive perspectives, in this study, it is a phenomenon that can be experienced in different ways.

Secondly, the conceptual framework explains the process of learning from the perspective of two philosophical ideas of Experiential Learning Theory. Learning is seen as a holistic experience that may emerge within academic, social, professional or other contexts.

Consequently, it can influence different areas of a student's life. In my research, I aim to discuss the variety of contexts within which learning is experienced in order to interpret the identified variations.

Third, within the conceptual framework, I discuss assumptions about adult learners. I do so to argue that students' characteristics and preferences depend on a great number of factors and may deviate from one individual to another. I discuss andragogical principles with an intent to problematise the typical profile of an adult learner that is uncritically replicated in the existing discussions.

Lastly, the conceptual framework introduces concepts from the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985) that will be referred to in the discussion of the results of this research.

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This study employs a purposefully selected phenomenographic approach to the research design. I am aware of the fact that “phenomenographers themselves characterise phenomenography in a wide variety of ways”, referring to it as “an approach, a depiction, a method, a methodology, a movement, an orientation, a paradigm, a perspective, a position and a programme” (Tight, 2016, p.321). Tight (2016) concludes that phenomenography is “an innovative research design, which aims at identifying and interrogating the range of different ways in which people perceive or experience specific phenomena” (p.319). In my research, I do not explore the nuances and variations in how phenomenography is positioned, but rather use the terms design, methodology and approach interchangeably. Throughout the document, I also refer to phenomenographic methods of data collection and analysis.

The first part of this chapter introduces the nature and philosophical foundations of phenomenography in relation to its ontological and epistemological stances. It describes the principal characteristics of the selected approach and its essential terminology. It also provides reasons for choosing a phenomenographic research design. In the second part of the chapter, I review analytical frameworks developed to advance phenomenographic methodology and assist in its practical application. I discuss some of the theoretical considerations of different frameworks and justify the choice of the selected framework for this study.

The third part of the chapter is dedicated to the overview of phenomenographic data collection and analysis methods.

4.2 Overview of Methodology

Phenomenography is a distinctive qualitative approach that was originally developed within the field of educational research during the 1970s by Ference Marton and his colleagues in the Department of Education at the University of Goteborg in Sweden (Marton, 1981; Marton & Säljö, 1976; Tight, 2016). It has been widely applied in qualitative research across different fields and internationally to explore various meanings related to phenomena under question, with the most interest coming from researchers in the UK, Australia, Sweden and Hong Kong (e.g., Bowden, 1996; Christiansen, 2011; Cutajar, 2017; Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992; Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002; Stenfors-Hayes, Hult & Dahlgren, 2013; Trigwell, 2006; Tsai, 2009; Yang & Tsai, 2010).

The term “phenomenography” originates from two Greek words – “phainomenon” meaning appearance, and “graphein” meaning description. This implies that phenomenography provides a description of things as they “appear to be”, rather than as they actually are (Pang, 2003, p.145). The anticipated outcome of the phenomenographic research is an identification of the “limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood, perceived and apprehended” (Marton, 1994, p.4424).

Underpinning my decision to consider phenomenography as a research design was the fact that phenomenographic methodology allows an identification of variations in how people understand and experience the phenomenon of interest. The focus on qualitative differences in individuals’ experiences and conceptions emphasised in phenomenography makes it an attractive and the most adequate approach for achieving aims of this study.

Phenomenography brings with it several assumptions and prepositions that need to be considered. Below, I discuss the essential assumptions of phenomenography and their implications for the current research. Svensson (1997) points out that phenomenographers should avoid the influence of any theoretical lenses or beliefs on the investigation process, especially when analysing participants' accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. Nevertheless, an inquiry is guided by unique phenomenographic assumptions that originate from the empirical studies on conceptions of learning (Svensson, 1997). Moreover, although not rooted in any school of thought, phenomenography has its own ontological and epistemological premises (Svensson, 1997).

Phenomenographic stances have been accurately summarized by Trigwell (2000) in a widely cited diagram which compares phenomenography with other research methodologies (see Figure 4.1).

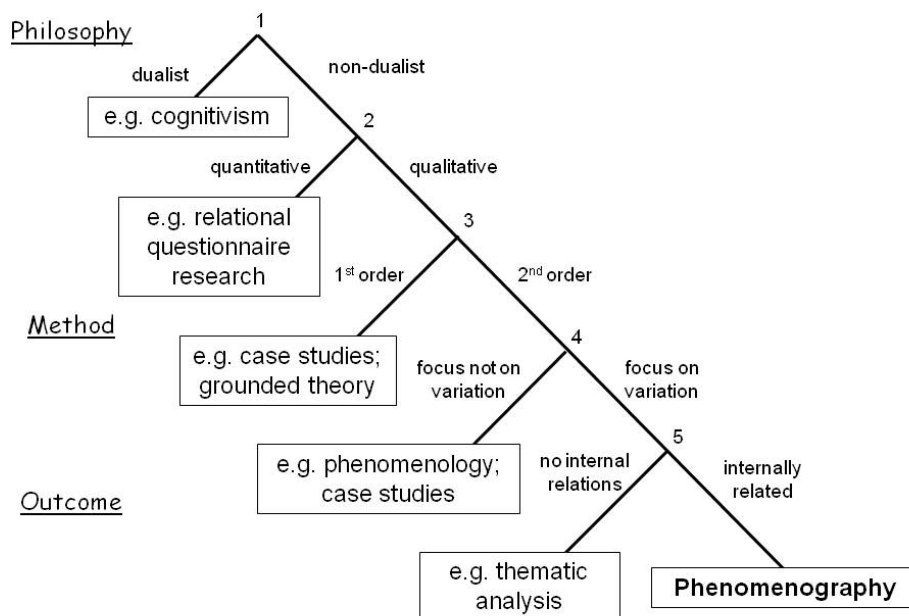


Figure 4.1 Stances of phenomenography and other research approaches.

4.2.1 Ontology

The ontological position of phenomenography is that reality can be best examined from the second-order perspective. This means that phenomenographers are interested in investigating the phenomenon as experienced and described by people rather than in the analysis of reality per se (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998).

Marton (1981) emphasised the benefits of exploring a phenomenon from a second-order perspective. He explained that there are two pathways to study various phenomena in the world: a first order and a second-order perspective. In the first-order perspective, researchers orient themselves towards the world in order to make statements about reality or a phenomenon. By contrast, when exploring a phenomenon from the second-order perspective, phenomenographers orientate themselves “towards people’s ideas about the world (or their experience of it)” and “make statements about people’s ideas about the world (or about their experience of it)” (Marton, 1981, p.178). Traditionally, researchers tend to study a phenomenon from their own, first-order perspective. Phenomenography chooses a second-order perspective (Marton & Svensson, 1979), committing to a description of reality as experienced and articulated by research participants.

Entwistle (1984) claims that studies that adopt a first-order perspective essentially insist on an external view when analysing a phenomenon of learning. He argues that these studies often fail to provide useful and unique insights. A phenomenographic approach was developed to overcome such limitation by adopting a second-order perspective (Marton, 1981).

The second-order perspective has been discussed as a useful form of pedagogy (Irvin, 2005) as it facilitates exploration of the learning experience from students’ accounts (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998). Since the objective of phenomenography is to study human experience, the

second-order perspective provides this opportunity by uncovering peoples' understandings and perceptions of a phenomenon or reality.

This second-order perspective is justified by the belief that an experience of an object and the subject of experience (an individual) are internally linked (Marton, 1981; 1986; 1994). That is, an object is always understood and defined by an individual in a unique way (Marton, 1981). Due to this non-dualistic perspective phenomenography differs significantly from the other schools of thought, such as cognitivism or constructivism (Trigwell, 2006).

A non-dualistic perspective questions the existence of objective reality. Instead, it assumes that reality is rather something that people experience, and it is determined by the internal relationships between the world and the individual (Marton & Booth, 1997). Following the non-dualistic ontological stance, phenomenographers accept that "there is only one world, but it is a world that we experience, a world in which we live, a world that is ours" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.13). As Uljens (1996) points out, the reality or a phenomenon cannot be investigated if an individual has not experienced it. When applied to learning, the assumption of phenomenography is that knowledge is both subjective and relative (Kinnunen & Simon, 2012). As Svensson (1997) points out, the nature of knowledge and learners' conceptions about it are internally related.

4.2.2 Epistemology

By adopting an interpretivist phenomenographic methodology, I recognise that subjective knowledge can provide valuable insights and contribute to the more informative understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, an interpretivist research paradigm determines the view on reality as a subjective experience. In other words, when investigating

the phenomenon, the subject (an adult student) and the object (phenomena of online learning and success) are viewed as related through the experience (Marton & Booth, 1997).

The epistemological stance of the phenomenographic research design is based on a principle of intentionality (Marton & Pang, 2008). This principle implies a non-dualistic, relational perspective which sees an experience as a result of the relationship between an individual and the world (Pang, 2003). In relation to learning, Marton and Pang (2008) argue that the creation of knowledge has a similar mechanism - it is constituted through the relationship between the learner and the phenomenon of learning resulting to the learning experience. Thus, in phenomenography, the core of knowledge about a phenomenon is represented by various meanings assigned to that phenomenon and by variations and commonalities within these meanings (Svensson, 1997).

4.3 Phenomenography and the Theory of Variation

Phenomenographic methodology has been often criticised for the lack of theoretical foundation. This criticism is associated with the origination of phenomenographic methodology from empirical research. Indeed, early phenomenographic studies were very much focused on uncovering various aspects of how people conceptualise a phenomenon, and to a lesser extent on examining why people experience reality differently (Säljö, 1994). To close this gap, a new phenomenography that introduced theoretical foundations of a methodology emerged in the 2000s. The new phenomenography has developed a more substantial theoretical ground through the introduction of the theory of variation (Marton, 2015). The theory of variation shifted a focus of inquiry from methodological (how to describe different ways of experiencing) to theoretical (the nature of variation in experiencing the

phenomenon) (Pang, 2003). Since then, phenomenographers developed a greater interest in the theoretical explanation of the existence of different ways of experiencing the world.

The theory of variation presumes that variation is an epistemological basis of all learning. It presumes that learning can only occur if the learner experiences variations when encountering a phenomenon or reality. Variations provide learners with an opportunity to experience properties that are crucial for learning, especially when the aims of the learning are to transform old mental frames or develop new capacities. Furthermore, Marton and Trigwell (2000) argue that the learning that aims at preparing a learner for the unknown future presumes variation by its nature.

Apart from the idea of variation, the foundations of variation theory contain notions of discernment simultaneity (Marton & Tsui, 2004). To learn something, the learner must experience the world simultaneously within all discerned elements (Bowden, 2000). The variation theory suggests that the most powerful learning can only happen when the learner develops an ability to experience all aspects of the phenomenon simultaneously (Bowden & Marton, 2004). This opportunity can be created by learning that enables a learner to distinguish aspects of reality that are critical to a certain phenomenon and to become aware of multiple contexts of experience. The theory suggests that the necessary condition to reach this level of awareness is the experience of the other aspects of the phenomenon. In other words, the experience of variation is a precondition for more powerful learning (Marton, Runesson & Tsui, 2004). An example of a constrained way of learning is when a learner experiences reality through the taken-for-granted assumptions and is not encouraged to become unaware of the other ways of experiencing it (Booth & Hulten, 2003). This taken-for-granted way of experiencing, as Jarvis (2004) stresses, is not an intuitive process but instead strongly connected to the previous experience.

Discernment of the reality should not be confused with its construction (Marton & Trigwell, 2000). The act of discernment, or differentiation, of the new aspects of a phenomenon can only happen if there is a background of previous experience of other aspects. Marton, Runesson, & Tsui, 2004) explained that the discernment would happen if the four dimensions of variation are presented. The conditions for a full discernment are:

- An experience of a phenomenon against a background of something else, or in contrast with that background.
- An experience of the various appearances of the phenomenon in different situations, or contexts.
- To be able to experience a specific aspect of the phenomenon and to distinguish from the other aspects, this aspect must have variations, whereas other aspects must remain constant.
- If there are several critical aspects of the phenomenon, they all must be experienced simultaneously (Marton et al., 2004).

When applied to the learning process, the theory of variation suggests that a more powerful learning experience can be achieved when a student is exposed to encountering different aspect of learning. Thus, in the light of recognition of the multiple aspects of learning, the taken-for-granted (limited) ways of experiencing can be advanced (Booth & Hulten, 2003). The aims of this study imply the adherence to the traditions of classic phenomenography. However, since this study also intends to uncover the nature of the identified variations, it contains element of new phenomenography and, thus, contributes to the development of the theory of variation.

4.4 Reasons for Employing Phenomenography

This study highlights the necessity for an in-depth investigation of the phenomena of learning and success. It also advocates the need for identification of differences and similarities within adult learners' experiences and conceptualisations. The research aspirations of this study determined the choice of the research design. Tight (2016) remarks that "phenomenography is closely associated with an interest in higher education practice, particularly the student learning experience" (p.331). This interest aligns with the aims of my study which attempts to explore various meanings of the process of learning in two online programmes and different conceptualisations of success generated from the accounts of adult students.

As a methodological approach, phenomenography assumes that there is a limited number of ways a phenomenon can be experienced or understood (Marton & Booth, 1997). It is also presumed that the ways in which a phenomenon can be experienced are structurally related and that the different ways of experiencing are logically linked to each other (Åkerlind, 2005a; 2005b). Following these assumptions, the identification of a set of categories allows me to describe and present in a structured way qualitative differences in how adult learners experience an online learning process and how they conceptualise success, with differentiation of various aspects of both phenomena (Marton & Booth, 1997).

Apart from the general alignment of phenomenographic design with the aims and objectives of this research, there are other reasons for choosing it. A second-order perspective in investigating a phenomenon is in line with my desire to explore conceptions of online learning and success from the accounts of adult students. Thus, the main interest of this study is to understand how two phenomena are experienced and conceptualised by the study participants, rather than in my analysis of the learning and success within the two online programmes.

Another reason for employing a phenomenographic research design is its interest in an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon, in uncovering its different meanings and potential relations between different meanings (Marton, 1988; Marton & Booth, 1997). In this way phenomenographic approach to research can provide useful insights into the structure of the experience of a selected student population, as well as the nature of identified variations, by uncovering the structure of peoples' awareness and its different element.

Additionally, since the same phenomena may be experienced differently by a heterogeneous adult student population, the results of phenomenographic inquiry can produce a holistic picture of a collective experience of learning and success, highlighting rather than dismissing important variations. As Åkerlind (2005c) points out, phenomenography offers a way to “look at the variation in meaning holistically, although this requires reducing each category to a minimal description of key aspects of the variation” (p.16). I believe that phenomenography is the best-suited design for my research as it allows an in-depth investigation of adult students' collective experiences of online learning and conceptualisations of success with a focus on a diversity of their accounts.

4.5 Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks

This part of the chapter discusses theoretical and analytical frameworks conceived and developed by the phenomenographers Marton (1988), Marton and Booth (1997) and Pramling (1983). It also provides a justification of the choice for selecting frameworks for the current study and explains the nuances of their application.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, phenomenography is not rooted in any philosophy or a specific school of thought (Svensson, 1997). Yet, it has its own ontological and epistemological

assumptions and allows the use of theoretical and conceptual frameworks to advance a discussion of the empirical results.

To bring the process of analysis into a light, two specific instruments have been developed by phenomenographers, namely the What/How framework and the Referential/Structural framework (see Harris, 2011; Marton, Dall’Alba, & Beaty, 1993; Pramling, 1983). The two frameworks have distinguishing backgrounds and need to be carefully considered when selecting one framework in favour of the other or deciding to employ both in combination (Zhao, 2017). In the part of the chapter that follows, I discuss two frameworks in detail and explain the benefits of employing a selected one in my study.

4.5.1 The What/How Framework

The origin of the What/How framework began from the study on children’s conceptions of learning conducted by Pramling (1983) (Harris, 2011; Zhao, 2017). When analysing the responses of participants, Pramling noticed that they all fall into two specific question groups. One group of responses was about children’s perceptions of their learning in terms of “What” aspect of the learning process, whereas the other group of responses was about the “How” aspect of learning, providing examples of how learning comes about (Pramling, 1983, p.88).

Marton et al. (1993) support the use of the What/How framework in phenomenographic analysis, suggesting additional elements to it (see Figure 4.2). As Marton and Booth (1997) explain, the “What” aspect directly refers to the content that is being learned, while the “How” aspect indicates intention and “the quality of the act of learning” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.84).

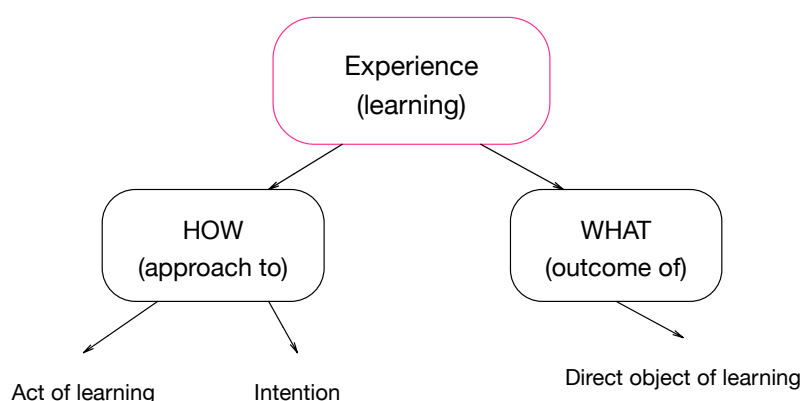


Figure 4.2 The structure of a How/What framework.

Despite the recognition of the utility of the How/What framework, there is a criticism regarding its roots in the study of children’s learning (Harris, 2011). Moreover, there is an ambiguity and a lack of clarity about the use of the framework (Zhao, 2017). It is assumed that the “What” aspect is somewhat equal to the referential aspect and the “How” aspect is identical to the structural aspect of the phenomenon (see Marton et al., 1993). Besides, the link of the What/How framework to the theory is very subtle, whereas the Referential/Structural framework also discussed in this chapter seems to be well-grounded in the work of Gurwitsch (1964) on awareness. The lack of theoretical consideration is one of the main reasons why this framework is criticised and rarely utilised by phenomenographers (Harris, 2011).

4.5.2 The Referential/Structural Framework

According to Reed (2006), phenomenographic study requires not only an identification of a limited number of qualitatively different ways of experiencing a phenomenon, but also an examination of the differences and similarities that relate and distinguish categories one from the another. Åkerlind, Bowden, & Green (2005) argue that the conceptions of experience can

be represented by two aspects, which indicate the differences in meaning and the differences in structure. First, experiencing something presumes the act of discerning it from its context, but at the same time relating it to the same or other contexts. Secondly, experiencing something involves discerning its parts and relating them to one another and to the whole.

After extensive empirical research on conceptions of learning Marton (1988) and Marton and Booth (1997) re-considered a What/How framework and proposed a Referential/Structural framework which allowed an identification of the differences in meaning and the differences in structure (Harris, 2011, Zhao, 2017). Marton and Booth (1987) pointed out that the referential aspects provide a picture of the broad meaning of the phenomenon, while the structural aspects represent an internal and external horizon of the awareness (see Figure 4.3).

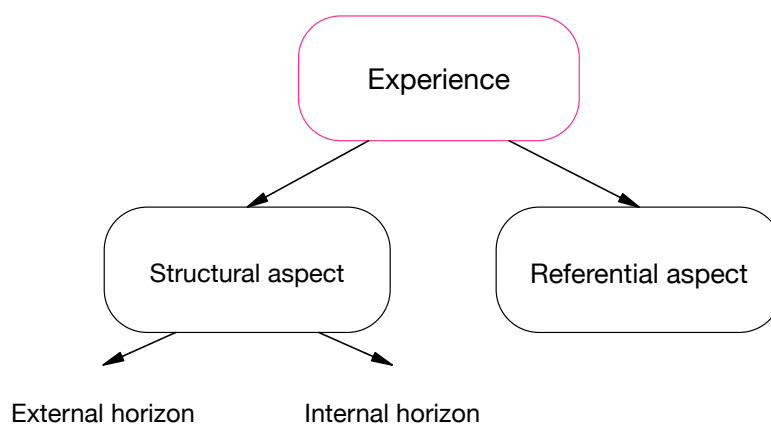


Figure 4.3 The Referential/Structural framework.

Although the Referential/Structural framework proved to be a useful analytical tool in many studies (see Gibbings, 2008; Lo & Chik, 2016; Zhao, 2017), by offering an opportunity to examine the phenomenon through the lens of concepts borrowed from the Gurwitsch's (1964) theory of field of consciousness, some concerns still need to be addressed. One of the issues in

employing the Structural/Referential framework is associated with the ambiguity of the concept of the external horizon. Thus, the potential benefits of the use of this framework can be realised if the notion of external horizon is explained (Lo & Chik, 2016). Furthermore, all the analytical procedures implied by the utilisation of the framework should be consistently followed (Harris, 2011). In addition, it is strongly recommended to ensure the transparency of the procedures of the data collection and analysis, so they can be replicated or utilised by other researchers (Harris, 2011).

The use of the analytical framework allows not only to conduct an analysis in a considered and structured way, but also to document this process in greater detail (Zhao, 2017). This last point is important in ensuring the transparency of the research. However, the differences between two considered frameworks require a researcher to provide justification for the use of the one of them. Yet not many phenomenographers provide such justification or explain its application in the analysis. Even fewer researchers guide a reader through the analytical process when employing any framework. By articulating how a framework has been utilised, a researcher can make the analytical process more rigorous and trustworthy (Zhao, 2017). This will not only increase the validity of the research but also contribute to a methodological development of phenomenography, adding to an understanding of the application and potential benefits of the selected framework.

4.5.3 Analytical Framework Employed in This Study

The primary aims of this study are to investigate qualitative variations in the ways adult students experience their learning and conceptualise success in two online postgraduate programmes. The frameworks considered above appear to be useful analytical instruments for

the analysis (Zhao, 2017; Harris, 2011); however, the choice of the framework that will guide the data analysis needs to be mindfully considered.

In regard to the What/How model, Marton et al. (1993) point out at the considerable inconsistency in the emphasis of one or the other aspect within phenomenographic studies (Harris, 2011; Marton et al., 1993; Zhao, 2017). Furthermore, there is an ongoing debate regarding the ambiguity of the “How” aspect that has been discussed earlier. Lastly, this model lacks theoretical underpinning, with only a weak link with the intentionality research (Marton & Booth, 1997). For these reasons, I have rejected the application of the What/How framework.

The Referential/Structural framework, if compared to the What/How model, is more substantial and seems to be a more appropriate choice for this study. One of the most robust features of the Referential/Structural framework is that it has links with the existing theory of the field of consciousness (Gurwitsch, 1964), and, specifically, with a conception of the structure of awareness. Thus, an analysis of the phenomena through the lens of this framework can allow a researcher to identify various elements and the structure of an individual conception, as well as a contextual background within which that concept resides (Irvin, 2006). Within the Referential/Structural framework, the referential aspects focus on the main meaning assigned to the phenomenon under question, whereas the structural aspects of the phenomenon represent “what is in the foreground and background” of individuals’ accounts (Ashwin et al., 2014, p. 968). Together, these referential and structural aspects form each category of description.

The Referential/Structural framework is also a useful instrument for analysing a process of conceptual development. The identification of the various ways people conceptualise a phenomenon can be enriched by an explanation of why there are different understandings. This can be done by a detailed analysis using this analytical framework. Moreover, with the use of

the analytical tool, it may be possible to uncover the evolution of a concept from a more simplistic to a richer and more complex. In other words, the use of the Referential/Structural framework has a potential to assist me in examining elements that compose conceptions, consider different contexts within which elements of the phenomenon are discerned and trace an evolution of the conception. It is important to bear in mind, though, that in order to obtain these additional layers of meaning, a design of the method of data collection should be done in a way so it can uncover multiple facets of conception at a deeper level.

Another reason for selecting a Referential/Structural framework as an instrument for the data analysis is that it is grounded in and has a potential for contribution to the theory of variation (Harris, 2011; Marton, Runesson, & Tsui, 2004). The theory of variation propounds that for learning to take place, a learner needs to become aware of those facets of the phenomenon that he or she was unaware of before. The structured representation of conceptions regarding a specific phenomenon may assist both a learner and an educator in understanding the missing parts of a complete picture of the phenomenon.

Lastly, there are reasons to suggest that the use of the structure of awareness conception within the Referential/Structural framework may increase the validity of research (Harris, 2011). First, the application of the Referential/Structural framework indicates that the development of categories has been done in a deliberate way. Additionally, the layered structure of the ways of experiencing a phenomenon, as Cope (2004) argues, “allows easier and better-informed scrutiny of the results by readers” (Cope, 2004, p.15). However, this argument can be questioned. Although the use of the Referential/Structural framework can potentially heighten the rigour of the research by providing a more detailed and in-depth analysis, this by itself does not increase the validity and reliability of the study (Cope, 2004). Therefore, it is more reasonable to regard this framework as a tool that can be used to untwist intertwined elements

and aspects of conceptions about a specific phenomenon and assist in understanding the nature of the variations in meaning. When applying the chosen framework, it is important to remember that a phenomenon of learning is very multifaceted and strongly depends on the context. Therefore, a single framework cannot fully explain the variety of learners' conceptions about a complex and dynamic phenomenon. Nevertheless, the Referential/Structural framework scaffolds the process of analysis and assist in describing the structure and hidden elements of the various ways of experiencing of online learning and conceptualising success.

4.5.4 The Structure of Awareness Framework

The structure of awareness framework was first introduced in the work of Aron Gurwitsch on the structure consciousness (Gurwitsch, 1964). Gurwitsch proposed that awareness has layers, named a theme, a thematic field and a margin. According to his theory, when people encounter a phenomenon, they can only differentiate certain features of it as they pay more attention to some elements whilst dismiss the others (Marton et al., 2004). Phenomenographers translated the concepts of theme, a thematic field and a margin into the notions of internal and external horizons, proposing that the internal horizon represents a theme, whereas the external horizon constitutes a thematic field and a margin (Figure 4.4).

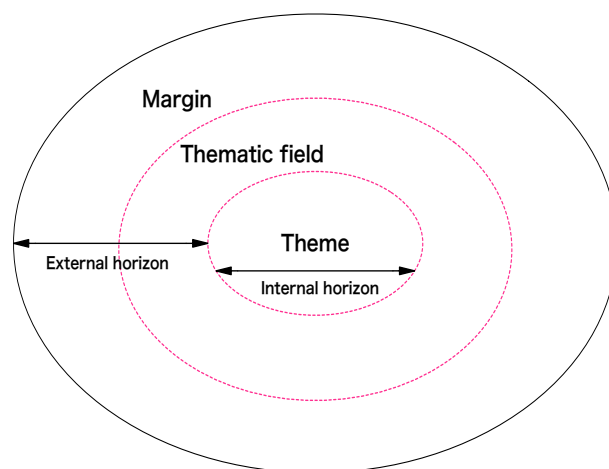


Figure 4.4 The structure of awareness.

The proposed layered structure of peoples' awareness is reflected in the assumption of phenomenography that there is a relationship between ways of experiencing reality and an individual's awareness. Within the structure of awareness framework, a way of experiencing a phenomenon mirrors a particular feature of an individual's awareness (Cope, 2004; Martin & Ramsden, 1992). This idea is captured in Figure 4.5.

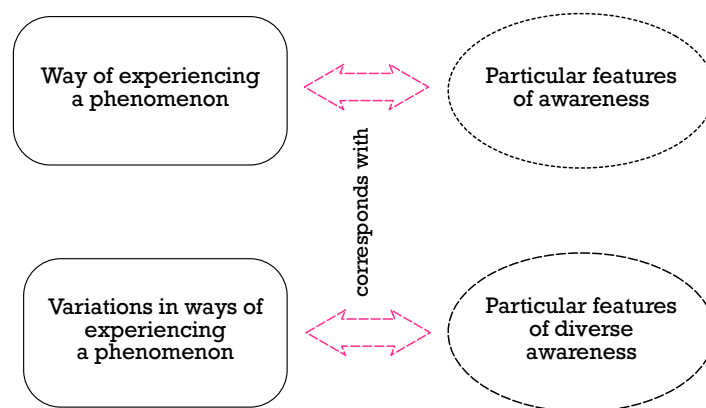


Figure 4.5 Correspondence of ways of experiencing a phenomenon with the individual's awareness.

Although people may think that they are aware of the world around them, some features of the reality at a single point of time may rest in the background of people's awareness. Different people may notice different features and aspects of the same phenomenon. Thus, in order to develop a complete picture of the phenomenon, a phenomenographer aims to describe various ways of experiencing it from a collective perspective. A collective awareness emerges when different people become aware of the same phenomenon through familiarisation with alternative ways of experiencing it (Bowden & Marton, 1997). Arguably, a collective awareness may offer unique advantages and enhance the learning process. As Bowden and

Marton (1997) explain, when an individual becomes aware of alternative ways of experiencing a phenomenon, his or her own experience may be enriched. Moreover, an awareness of alternative ways of experiencing a phenomenon adds new elements to the knowledge about a phenomenon or advance a picture of reality. The richer and a more interconnected collective awareness facilitates an individual experience to become more complete and powerful (Bowden & Marton, 2004). Bowden and Marton (2004) suggest that educators should aim to increase collective awareness by gathering and sharing individuals' differing conceptions and ways of experiencing phenomena of shared interest.

The structure of awareness framework assisted me in conducting a more rigorous examination of various aspects of two phenomena as described and discussed by adult students. To search for different layers of adult students' awareness of the phenomenon of online learning and a concept of success, I utilised this framework (Marton & Booth, 1997) during the analysis of empirical data. In doing so, I assumed that each category of experiencing online learning (or conceptualising success) corresponds with a specific feature of an adult student's awareness about that phenomenon (or a concept). As a result, I identified and described adult students' awareness of two phenomena with the hope to advance a collective awareness through the presentation and discussion of the study results. Provided phenomenographic description of the identified categories unpacks the meaning a student assign to the phenomenon when discerning a particular aspect of it. Utilysing the structure of awareness framework, this research identifies different ways of experiencing online learning (conceptulising successe), this study aims to provide a more complete description of the phenomenon and contribute to the emergence of a collective awareness.

4.5.5 The Reflective Practice Framework

In a phenomenographic study, the researcher's voice can influence the process of data interpretation through the assumptions and biases rooted in their background. Since the researcher's subjectivity plays an important role in the research process, there is a need to address potential concerns. I argue that in a phenomenographic study a researcher's subjectivity plays a critical role due to the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the methodology. A unique element of the phenomenographic research design is that it implies multiple levels of interpretation: first, how study participants make meaning of their experiences; secondly, how the researcher accounts for the experiences of study participants; lastly, how a researcher positions him or herself within the research. The last point is related to the influence of the researcher's voice on how the results of the study are articulated and presented. Throughout the work of this research project, I became aware of the areas that had been influenced by my subjective perspective and assumptions and aimed to position my voice as neutrally as possible.

The phenomenographic data analysis process involves iterations. The process of iteration, however, is not mere mechanical action. It provides no precise formula of the analytical actions and requires reflection (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Moreover, since every research is a unique project, the individual researcher determines the way of how to conduct it best. To indicate the researcher's biases, how they may impact the research process, as well as how they will be addressed, there is a need for additional scaffolding. To address these concerns, I designed a framework for reflection.

Despite the benefits of reflection highlighted in past research, there is no emphasis on the power of reflexivity and deliberate positionality in phenomenographic studies. Moreover, there is no guidance for novice phenomenographers on how to reflect during the research process. In this

research, the need for a framework for reflection arose from the lack of clarity regarding phenomenographic data analysis and a lack of understanding of the algorithm of that process. To familiarise myself with the process of phenomenographic data analysis, I initially turned to the specialised literature on phenomenographic methodology. Within that literature, I considered different models and approaches to analyse the data. Nevertheless, after extensive reading, I still had little idea which form of analysis is the “right” one. Without a framework, I did not know how to express my subjective position, how to ensure the accurate application of the utilised frameworks and how to maintain reflection on those actions.

Some of the fears that I faced during the data collection and analysis were related to the ambiguity of the open approach to gathering the data. I felt a lack of confidence to interview study participants in a conversational style, with the use of follow-up questions. I had to investigate in-depth what appeared to be meaningful for a student, rather than what I thought should be explored. This resulted in the collection of unstructured data that was challenging to analyse. I was worried I would miss an opportunity to collect richer and more relevant data.

The worry subsided with more experience of conducting interviews and analysis participants’ reflections and, especially, with the introduction of a reflective practice framework into my study (Figure 4.6). John Dewey (1910) emphasised that reflection on the process can improve thinking and subjective judgment. The developed reflective practice framework has its roots in the cyclic process of thinking described by John Dewey in his work “How we think” (1910). Dewey (1910) provides an explanation of the idea of reflective thought as,

Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further considerations to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought. (p. 6)

I adopted and further developed this framework as an instrument for guided reflection that supported and brought into consciousness the processes of iteration and interpretation (see Appendix 5 for additional tools for reflection employed in this study and Appendix 8 for examples of reflection).

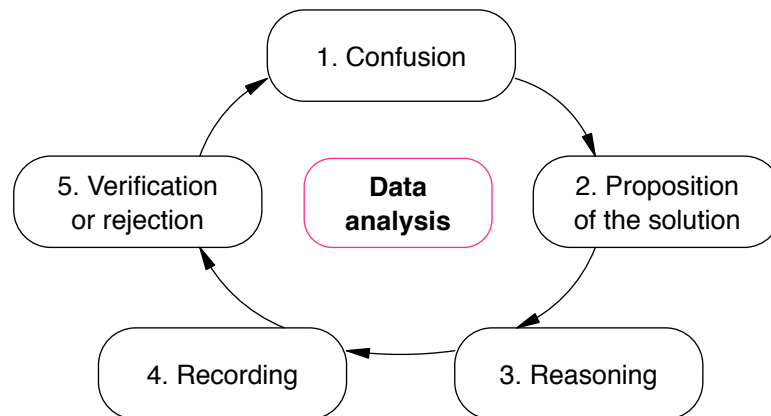


Figure 4.6 Framework for reflection.

The five elements of the reflective cycle are confusion, proposing a solution or explanation, reasoning, recording and, finally either verification or rejection of the proposal. As the figure shows, the reflective thought starts with confusion. In phenomenographic data analysis, the confusion emerges when a researcher faces unstructured data. The data at hand can only suggest an interpretation or a possible way of organising participants' utterances. It cannot provide a definite interpretation. However, the insights and suggestions that emerge in a researcher's mind are always rooted in the past experience and gathered knowledge (Dewey, 1910). By accepting the initially emerged interpretations and explanations of the data a researcher can bypass the conscious thinking process. On the other hand, rejecting the initial solution suspends uncritical thinking and initiates the process of reflection. The next step,

reasoning, presumes a more intimate and extensive consideration of the proposed idea or interpretation, involving an examination of the empirical data. During this process, the interpretations that initially seemed plausible often didn't fit the data. During the phenomenographic data analysis, the process of reasoning combined with a recording (step 4) may result in the generation of the multiple categories of description and several outcome spaces (see Appendices 6 and 7).

Following the designed reflective practice cycle, I was documenting my thoughts before, during and after each individual interview, when conducting initial data analysis, when considering feedback from senior academics after public presentations and in many other occasions. Continuous reflection enhanced my understanding of phenomenographic methodology and facilitated my development as a researcher. I came back to those notes at different stages of the data analysis and used them to assist me in reflection on the research process in general and on my positionality. The benefits of documenting my thoughts during the data collection and analysis became apparent at a later stage of research. Reflections not only allowed me to develop an understanding of how to position my voice within the research, it also assisted me in addressing questions of rigour and transparency.

Surprisingly few examples of the development and practical application of different reflexivity frameworks, techniques and tools have been reported over that last two decades (e.g., Pillow, 2003; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020; Call-Cummings & Ross, 2019). With little interest in bringing reflection to focus within phenomenographic studies, the value of reflexivity for a highly interpretive phenomenographic methodology has remained unrecognized. The developed framework provided me with a considered algorithm for maintaining reflection on the phenomenon under investigation as well the research process itself.

4.6 Data Collection

4.6.1 Sampling

The optimal number of participants in phenomenographic research is relatively small (Marton, 1988; Trigwell, 2000). Therefore, it is recommended to select participants using a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling gives a researcher an opportunity to invite a population that can provide rich and relevant data. Furthermore, for a phenomenographic study, it is critical to ensure the diversity of the sample (Green, 2005). Thus, the participants of this study were recruited through purposeful sampling with inclusion criteria in regard to their demographic differences (Appendix 4).

A list of the potential study participants was discussed with a UK university's working group of the Review Panel¹ and obtained through its survey office. The survey office generated a sample in accordance with requested criteria for diversity. An indicated number of potential participants was 200 learners from the UK university and 100 learners from its partner institution in Russia. The Review Panel confirmed that there were 233 students available in total, hence the sample is viable.

When choosing criteria for selecting study participants, my aim was to reflect a real-life diversity of adult students in my sample population. Following inclusion criteria have been

¹ An anonymised name of the Ethics Panel of a UK university.

applied: participants are 25 years old or older, they are enrolled in or has just finished their online postgraduate programme, have various educational experiences, including experience of learning online. Additionally, potential participants should represent different nationalities and cultures. And finally, gender was also an issue that needed to be considered. Ideally, I aimed to have an equal number of male and female participants.

Apart from having participants with a variety of experiences, the students should also be willing to share their experience with the researcher (Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002). Therefore, it was important to make sure that the participants were motivated to reflect on their experience. Therefore, into the invitation email I included a statement that participation in my study is voluntary. After a permission to contact students was granted, an invitation email (Appendix 1) together with a participant information sheet was sent to all potential participants (Appendix 2). As a result, fifteen adult learners expressed interest in taking part in this research. This number of participants seemed reasonable for investigating the variety of learning experiences for a few reasons. According to Trigwell (2000), fifteen to twenty participants is an optimal number for a phenomenographic study. Similarly, Marton (1988) suggests that interviewing fifteen to twenty participants provides for an optimum outcome and generates manageable amounts of data. After interviewing ten participants, I felt that the satisfactory level of data saturation had been reached. However, five more participants were interviewed to ensure that no other categories emerged from the data. A decision to terminate the participants' recruitment was finally made to adhere the time frame for this research project.

4.6.2 Phenomenographic Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are a commonly used method of data collection in phenomenographic studies (Marton, 1986). However, the methodology presumes a specific approach to that process. A

phenomenographic interview is a participant-led conversation, where people can talk about those dimensions of the phenomenon that are most meaningful for them. The conversational format of the interview allows people to reflect and to make meaning from their experience naturally (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Although a researcher typically designs a sample of interview questions beforehand, these questions should be used to start a conversation. However, each conversation can eventually take a unique route.

The questions of an interview should be as open as possible so they can help to elicit peoples' conceptual understandings through reflections and without prompting (Bowden & Walsh, 2000). The areas of an interest that participants choose to discuss in their reflections consequently result in the development of the categories of description that represent different ways of experiencing a phenomenon. Therefore, as Marton (1986) stresses, it is important not to restrict participants' reflections on the phenomenon.

In my study, in our conversations, the participants were encouraged to express their understanding of the phenomenon in their own words and from their own perspectives (Bowden, 2000). I did as much as I could not to lead individual interview towards predetermined or anticipated results. In addition, to ensure the quality and validity of the collected data, I followed data evaluation procedures presented in Figure 4.7. Each procedure will be discussed later in this chapter.

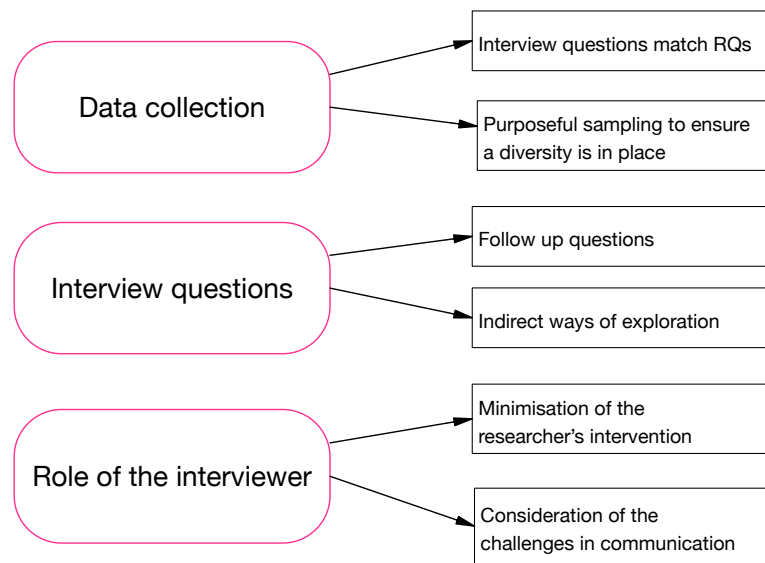


Figure 4.7 Data evaluation procedures.

One of the concerns regarding the phenomenographic interview method is associated with interview themes or questions. The main concern of the validity of data that needed to be addressed is the relevance of the interview questions to the purposes of the research. This consideration should be done in advance in order to make sure that the collected data can assist in answering research questions and achieving the aims of the study. A way to eliminate this limitation is to make sure that the interview questions are aligned with the purposes of the research and designed to investigate the phenomenon under question (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). Although the questions of a phenomenographic interview should be open, and an interviewee should lead the conversation, the focus of the interview must be around the phenomenon of interest determined by a researcher. In other words, whilst the interviewee has an authority to express his or her experiences, the researcher holds control over the focus of the research and the relevancy of discussed matters.

In this study, I had two phenomena of interest, namely online learning and success. For each research question, I developed a set of questions to assist me in the interview process. I also had to make sure that during the conversation, I had enough triggers and prompts to encourage participants' reflections. The sample of the designed interview questions and its relevance to the research questions is shown in Table 4.2. Although a sample of predetermined questions has been designed, not all the sub-questions were used during my conversations with study participants. The sub-questions from the sample were only asked if there was a need to assist participants in the process of reflection.

Table 4.1 Correspondence of the research questions with the interview questions.

Research question	Corresponding interview question
	Q1 Could you, please, briefly introduce yourself.
RQ1 What are the qualitative differences in adult students' experiences of their learning process at a UK university and its partner institution in Russia? (phenomenon one)?	<p>Q2 I would like to ask you how has it been to be a student studying online?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you describe moments when and how you felt a part of the online learning community? • Would you describe the transition onto the programme as being expected or unexpected, and in what ways? • Could you tell me the most significant changes that happened in your personal or professional life since starting this programme? <p>Q3 Please talk about your online learning experience:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Could you please talk about your experience when you first joined the module? How did you feel and what did you do? b) Could you remember the most valuable as well as the most challenging aspect of your learning experience in this online module? c) Could you name incidents from which you felt you have learned something valuable (information, skills) during your online module? d) Could you describe a situation when you felt most motivated in your module?
RQ 2 What are the qualitatively different ways in which adult students conceptualise success? (phenomenon two)?	<p>Q4 Could you please talk about your progress in your online programme? Could you give me an example of what is it in your learning that makes you feel successful/unsuccessful?</p> <p>Q5 Now, I want to ask how do you feel about your prospects in this online programme and in life?</p>

Research question	Corresponding interview question
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) How do you see yourself at the end of this programme? In a ten-year period? b) Could you remember a situation when you felt that your learning has been particularly beneficial for you?
RQ 3 How do the different ways of experiencing learning by adult students relate to their different ways of conceptualising success?	Q6 How do you think your online learning experience influences your academic progress? How do you feel the online learning experience influences your prospects in this online programme?

4.6.3 Issues of the Interview Method

Before initiating the data collection process, it is important to consider issues of a phenomenographic interview. One concern raised by Säljö (1997) is that whether the data collected through the phenomenographic interview is valid for the purposes of research. He pointed out that “it is doubtful if and in what sense the interview data generated in much of the empirical work within this tradition can be assumed to refer to “ways of experiencing”, the core object of research in phenomenography” (p.173). Säljö (1997) points out that phenomenographic data represents an individual’s discourse about the experience rather than the experience itself. Therefore, it is the discourse that is being analysed by phenomenographers. However, in the earlier response to Säljö’s criticism, Marton (1994) explained that discourse goes along with experience and even encompasses it, signifying what is meaningful for an individual. Therefore, the relationship between language and experience cannot be denied. Moreover, Svensson (1997) emphasises that an analysis of articulated conceptions about a phenomenon through language is one of the most accessible ways to explore human experience. Marton et al. (2004) and Svensson (1997) agree that language can be an unavoidable element in the process of conceptual development, shaping the process of construction of the experience.

There is another issue that a phenomenographic researcher should recognise - individual differences in the ability to articulate experience. For instance, some individuals may struggle to verbally express their position, whereas others may hide their real experience due to the risks for their reputation (Säljö, 1997). This issue can lead a researcher to the trap of mistrust towards the data gathered from the study participants' accounts. Yet, in phenomenographic study, the participants' utterances are of a great importance and should be viewed as a source of valuable and trustworthy information.

In this research, in order to ensure that students' conceptions are presented as faithfully as possible, I have employed several strategies. First, a participant information sheet has been sent to study participants in advance to inform them about the aims and objectives of the current research and what is expected from them. A sample of interview questions has been used during the interviews as a guidance to maintain a focus of the conversation. I made sure that during the conversation students had freedom to reflect on their experience without leading them to any specific discourse (Irvin, 2006). To do so, I was approaching a phenomenon indirectly by utilising follow-up questions as a way of encouraging participants' reflections and using sub-questions selectively. Lastly, the participants have been explained that any uncomfortable question can be dismissed without a termination of the interview.

4.6.4 An Indirect Way of Exploring Conceptions

Traditionally, in order to uncover peoples' conceptions, phenomenographers ask questions starting with "What do you mean by...?" and then introduce relevant follow-up questions to clarify the meaning or to ensure more details about the phenomenon of interest. However, Bowden (2005) and Green (2005) suggest a method of gaining insights into the reasons why a phenomenon is experienced in a particular way by encouraging participants' deeper reflection.

One of the reasons for employing this method, as Green explained, is that when people start to reflect and describe their experiences, they immerse into the conversation, providing more valuable details. The approach used by Green and advocated by Bowden can assist in gathering more rich and relevant data compared to the traditional way of investigating conceptions. Furthermore, it facilitates an opportunity to describe the experience in a natural rather than a controlled manner. Lastly, an indirect way of exploration through the reflection on experience can provide more insights into how the participants actually experience and conceptualise the phenomenon of interest and why they do it that way.

Follow-up questions play a significant role in initiating participants' reflections as they encourage an interviewee to go into the deep consideration of the conception or experience (Åkerlind, 2005a). They also allow clarification of the meaning articulated by a participant. In other words, follow up questions is a unique tool for eliciting a meaning of a phenomenon under question.

The general way of posing the follow-up question is to ask a participant to talk more about what has already been articulated. In addition, a researcher may ask a participant to provide concrete examples of the situation relevant to the described experience. For example, questions like "Could you tell me more about...?", "What do you mean by...?", "Could you give me an example when you...?" can be used as sub-questions and follow-up questions. Another way of posing follow-up questions is to ask a participant to clarify how the articulated conception fits within what has been said earlier, starting with "You mentioned X. How does this relate to Y your mentioned earlier?".

The indirect way of exploration has been adopted in the current research. Following Green's (2005) example, I included introductory question into the discussion. The question "Could you

please briefly introduce yourself?” was a warming up question, and if a student was willing to share personal information, additional questions about students’ backgrounds, work and family situations and previous experience were asked. Apart from the warming up function, such questions also provided useful information concerning students’ backgrounds and, indirectly, their motivation to undertake an online study.

Being aware of the importance of follow-up questions, during the interview I was paying a close attention to participants’ responses in order to pose a question in an appropriate moment. One of the challenges of this process was a need to be sensitive to and recall what has been said before and to naturally embed a follow-up question into the conversation. Following Åkerlind’s (2005a) advice, I was selecting an exact word or phrase that seems to be meaningful for the interviewee and was asking the person to talk more about it. I was concluding that the meaning of the phenomenon is fully explored when an interviewee was repeating what has already been stated after a number follow up questions and moving to another question in order to maintain an easy and comfortable conversation. At the end, when listening to the interviews, I was satisfied that all participants had a chance to fully reflect on and talk about their experiences of online learning process and their views on success.

Introductory and warm-up questions assisted me in creating a relaxing atmosphere and proved to encourage participants to be more open. Using these techniques allowed me to fully explore students’ experiences and to ensure that the meanings of the phenomena under investigation are grounded in the valid empirical data.

4.6.5 Addressing the Risk of the Researcher’s Intervention

A way of minimising a researcher’s influence on the process of data collection is known as bracketing. Bracketing, according to Tufford and Newman (2012) is “a method used by some

researchers to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project” (p. 81).

In phenomenographic research, bracketing is a critical element for ensuring a phenomenon is explored from the second-order perspective. Thus, a researcher should be careful not to lead an interviewee to any direction of reflection or thought. Instead, a researcher should avoid commenting on the expressed utterances or suggest an interpretation of the articulated experience.

The practices of decreasing a researcher’s intervention employed in this study are summarised below (adapted from Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Åkerlind, 2005a; Bowden, 2005; Tufford & Newman, 2012):

- When asking follow-up questions, a researcher should be careful not to lead the interviewee to a particular direction of thinking.
- When clarifying the meaning, a researcher should avoid an introduction of the new concepts, as well as correcting the utterances using different terms or expressions.
- To encourage a more profound reflection, a researcher should allow some time to think before an interviewee feels ready to talk.
- Although it is important for a researcher to be present and empathetic during the conversation, he or she should avoid showing neither disagreement nor agreement with an interviewee’s position.
- A researcher should use follow-up questions to clarify the meaning expressed by the interviewee, rather than assuming that the meaning is obvious.

Taking on board these suggestions helped me to minimise my intervention into the data collection process. When interviewing participants, I assumed that the phenomenon of our

focus could be experienced in any way, despite my personal position or opinion. To indicate an interest in what the participant is sharing with me, I was replying with the sounds “oh”, “I see” and “thank you”. I was also expressing an interest to know more about those conceptions that seemed to be striking or unique. Overall, the discussed methods for bracketing demonstrated to be useful techniques for ensuring the validity of data.

4.6.6 Considering the Challenges of Communication

Among concerns associated with the validity of phenomenographic data are limitations of verbal communication. Sandberg (2005) emphasises that people tend to articulate their experience in a distorted way. The distortion may appear due to moral, social or cultural influences. Such influences may prevent an interviewee from answering an uncomfortable question sincerely (Säljö, 1997). Although a researcher should be aware of that risk, as discussed in a previous part of this chapter, it is important to have trust in participants' accounts. A technique to improve the validity of verbally articulated data - the use of follow-up questions - has already been mentioned earlier (Sandberg, 2005). Apart from the discussed benefits of follow-up questions such as facilitation of an interviewee reflection, clarification of the meaning of the phenomenon and return to the mentioned comment later in the discussion, the researcher can eliminate the influence of various factors that may distort the conversation.

Another issue of the validity of spoken data has been emphasised by Sjöström and Dahlgren (2002). The expressed concern regarding the researcher's understanding of participants' utterances. When building a conversation on what has already been said, a researcher must quickly, and as correctly as possible, interpret the meaning articulated by the participant (Kvale, 1996). This task requires a complete focus of the researcher on a conversation. This practice,

although being challenging, needs to be under a researcher's control since the misinterpretation of participants' utterances can compromise the quality of the data.

The same point, but from the interviewee's perspective, was stressed by Kroksmark (2006). The limitation he is referring to is an on-going process of reflection during the interview process that does not allow the space or time for thinking or analysis. A researcher should exercise a continuous and comprehensive monitoring of the interview process in order to identify and eliminate discussed issues (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). As Kvale (1996) state, a good interviewer is an individual who can maintain interpersonal communication successfully.

Following the suggested strategies, I was continually monitoring my interviewing skills and working on their improvement during the whole process of data collection. I was paying attention not only to the focus of the interview and to the way of asking relevant follow-up questions, but also to the interaction with my study participants. It could be argued whether I fulfilled the criteria of a competent researcher or not. Reflecting on the data collection process, I acknowledge that this process was not always ideal. What can be stated with confidence is that I tried to address identified issues and limitations as much as it was possible in order to improve the validity of data. Thus, I believe that evaluation procedures allowed me to collect worthy and relevant data.

4.7 Data Analysis

This section of the chapter explains different phases of the data analysis. In phenomenographic research, the main purpose of the analysis is to organise and to assign meaning to the set of collected data (van Rossum & Hammer, 2010). Furthermore, phenomenographic research has a specific aim, which is to describe qualitatively different ways of how people experience a

phenomenon and to present these ways in a form of the hierarchically structured categories (Sandberg, 1997).

The phenomenographic data analysis starts during the data collection and later moves to more specific procedures. To analyse the collected data, I employed a seven-step model suggested by Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991) and further elaborated by Sjöström and Dahlgren (2002). The model has been adapted by adding an additional procedure to improve the transparency of the data analysis.

4.7.1 Preparations for Analysis

Preparation for analysis started from checking the quality of recordings. After each interview, I listened to the recordings to check if there were any defects or whether the speech was clear. As I still remembered the conversation, I was able to make notes on the occasions where the quality of the tape was poor. After the interview was checked, I transcribed it verbatim. If the interview was in Russian language, after transcription, I translated it myself. Everything that was audible on the recording, including repetitions and voice expressions, were transcribed. If the utterances were unclear, I listened to it again with extra attention and tried to remember the conversation. The process of transcription was done within eight weeks without delay.

I did not send the transcribed interviews to the participants for their revision or comments, since in phenomenographic research, the face validity check is not viewed as a necessary procedure. This is due to the belief that in different contexts of reflection, an individual may feel the call for sharing new kinds of experiences. Therefore, for the current research, the experience of interest was the one that was expressed during the interview situation.

Once the interviews were transcribed and translated, the data pool was created. The data pool comprised all relevant data related to the focus of the current study, with decontextualised utterances put together. This allowed me to move my attention to the analysis of adult students' experiences from a collective perspective, looking for various ways these experiences and perceptions were conceptualised.

The students from two programmes selected as research sites represented an international cohort of adult learners, including learners from Russia, former soviet countries and those from the UK and European Union. When recruiting study participants, my aim was to ensure the national and cultural diversity of adult students, rather than comparing learners from two research sites. Furthermore, by aiming to examine experiences of adult students from two programmes from a single cohort perspective, I wanted to offer a "way of looking at collective human experience of phenomenon holistically" (Akerlind, 2012, p.116). A collective perspective on a phenomenon, referred to by Bowden and Marton (1997) as collective awareness, emerges when different people are aware of each other's ways of experiencing, seeing, and thinking about that phenomenon (Bowden & Marton, 1997). Thus, an outcome space represents a holistic picture of a collective perspective on a phenomenon under question. By linking different ways of experiencing, rather than comparing students' experiences based on their institutional affiliation and nationality, I aimed to offer a fuller understanding of the phenomena of online learning and online students' success.

The approach to data analysis, steps of analysis, procedures and my reflections on the process will be discussed in the subsections that follow.

4.7.2 Steps of Data Analysis

The procedures of phenomenographic data analysis are not universal and vary among researchers (Marton, 1986). Thus, it is not easy to find an algorithm for practice. Marton (1986) describes phenomenographic data analysis as a discovery, whereas Bowden and Walsh (2000) suggest that the categories of description are not discovered but rather constructed by a researcher. Marton (1986) proposes four steps of analysis of the interview transcripts. In practice, there is a constant iteration between:

- a selection of relevant points related to the phenomenon within the utterances that form data pool,
- an interpretation of the phenomenon in terms of the selected utterances,
- a search for the variety of meanings embedded in the selected statements (the pool of meanings) from a collective perspective, and
- an arrangement and rearrangement of the selected utterances to form categories of description.

Marton (1986) emphasises that categories of description should be empirically grounded. He also stresses that the process of phenomenographic data analysis is dialectical in nature. Merging transcripts into a single data pool presumes to view data as a single set and analysing utterances from a collective perspective. During the analysis, the meaning emerges from data when the utterances are arranged, brought together, and compared. The variety of meanings derived from the data pool determine which utterances will be included in the categories of description. Marton (1986) confesses that this process is extremely time and energy-consuming, but the result of the analysis is the development of a stable set of conceptions.

Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991) proposed a more detailed model of analysis. His model contains seven steps, including familiarisation, condensation, comparison, grouping, articulation,

labelling, and contrasting. For the novice phenomenographer, this process of arranging and rearranging data might be challenging to understand, but if understood correctly, will eventually lead to the establishment of the “stable system of meanings” (van Rossum & Hammer, 2010, p.41).

The model suggested by Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991) provides more explicit guidance than that suggested by Marton and his colleagues (Marton, 1986; Marton et al., 1993). However, it does not offer a scaffolding to maintain the transparency of the analytical process. Considering associated limitations and risks, I utilise a layered procedure of data analysis, making this process more coherent and transparent. I adopt Dahlgren and Fallsberg’s (1991) model by adding an additional step (Figure 4.8) and merging it with the reflective practice.

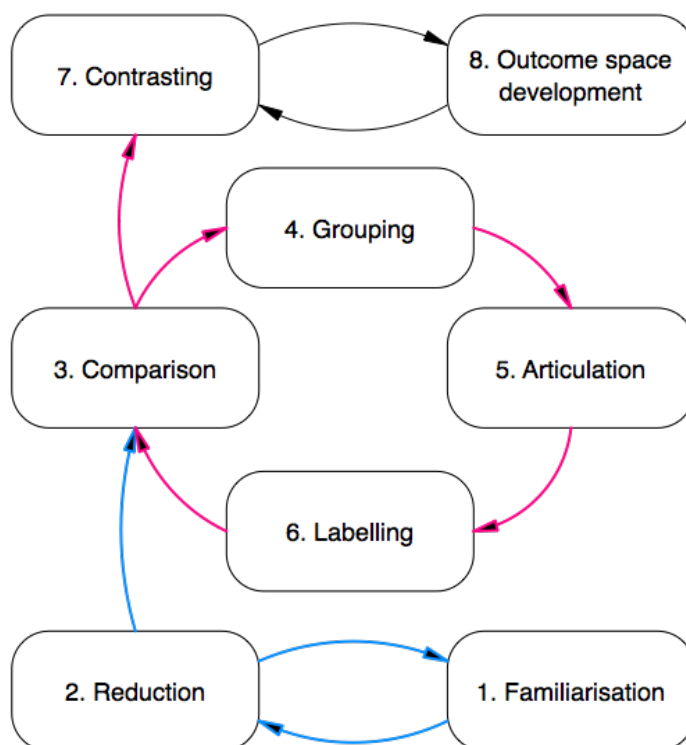


Figure 4.8. Model of data analysis.

As the model shows, steps 1-2, 3-6 and 7-8 are repeated in an iterative procedure. The iteration between steps 1 and 2 ensures the inclusion of all the relevant data into the analysis. Iteration between steps 3 and 6 allows the discernment of the similarities within and the differences between the categories to be done in a reflective way, whereas iteration between the 7th and 8th steps enables the refinement of the interrelations between the categories and gradual development of the hierarchical structure.

I incorporate the reflexive practice framework (Figure 4.6) to the data analysis to ensure that both analysis and a reflection of the research are done in a considerate way. By doing so, I promote the value of reflexivity and explicit positionality of the researcher's voice - procedures commonly neglected in phenomenographic studies. The reflective practice framework helped me to make subjective perspectives embedded into the data analysis transparent, reasoned and open to discussion. It also triggered and scaffolded a consideration of alternative ideas and views. The practice of reflection provoked deep learning and understanding of my own research, which would not have been possible otherwise. In the following part of the chapter, I elaborate on each step of this process in detail, presenting their aims, procedures and my reflection.

Familiarisation

Aim:

To consider all data in order to gain a sense of i) what is the range of meanings adult students assign to their experience of learning in two online postgraduate programmes (phenomenon one), and ii) what are the different perceptions of success among my study participants based on what they said about success in their reflections (phenomenon two).

Procedures and reflection:

Having in mind the research questions of this study, I read and re-read the transcripts to explore adult learners' different ways of experiencing their learning and their conceptualisations of success. In conducting interpretive phenomenographic research, it is critical to approach the data with an open attitude at early stages of analysis (Åkerlind, 2005a), e.g. to be free from assumptions and influences of specific ideas or theories. (see Marton, 1997; Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). Following this suggestion, my aim was to immerse myself into the data with an open mind and get a notion of what is generally mentioned about the main aspects of the phenomena. By continuously reading and re-reading the transcripts, I was making initial notes on differences and similarities in utterances and achieving a more and more sophisticated understanding of the students' ways of experiencing both phenomena. To make sure that I was taking enough time to reflect on my attitude to data analysis, I utilised a framework for reflection (Figure 4.6) at all stages of data analysis and wrote the results of my thinking in an academic blog.

The process of familiarisation with data, however, is not limited by reading and re-reading the transcripts and listening to the audio-recorded interviews. I also took an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the experience of adult online learners beyond my personal biases and assumptions. During the reflection process, I continuously asked myself such questions as "How might my subjectivity influence the data interpretation?" and "What are my personal assumptions that may influence the interpretation of the data?" Being an adult student myself, I held my own assumptions that had to be uncovered in advance or during the research process. When reflecting on the influence of my personal experience, I became aware that I was unconsciously focused on uncovering challenges and barriers that my study participants may have had, rather than being open on the wide range of views. My personal experience as an

adult student fixated my focus on looking for evidence of a lack of understanding of adult learners' individual circumstances and needs.

Once I identified that tendency, I was able to observe the way I am working with the raw data in order to make sure my assumptions do not influence the direction of the interpretation process. Since phenomenographic research should avoid the influence of earlier suggested insights or pre-existing theories related to the phenomenon of interest, the integration of reflective practice at the initial phase of analysis, and, specifically, the exercise of looking for alternative solutions, allowed me to open up doors for the discovery.

Although it is not possible to prevent subjectivity completely, the framework for reflection allowed me to eliminate major risks and address identified concerns. I can argue that the interpretation of data and consideration of insights has been made in a deliberate way to avoid unreflective thinking.

Reduction

Aim:

To identify the most distinctive utterances in relation to i) each research question and ii) the focus of the research in order to formulate a data pool.

Procedures and reflection:

Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991) and Sjöström and Dahlgren (2002) describe this step as identification of the relevant units of analysis. The approach to the formulation of the data pool varies among researchers. Some phenomenographers advocate a selection of the small pieces of transcripts, whereas others prefer to keep nearly all transcripts together for further analysis.

After an extended period of reading and making sense at the first step of the analysis, I felt that I became confidently familiar with the transcripts and started to select utterances that were relevant to the research questions and to the study's focus. After discovering all the relevant utterances, I gathered the selected parts in one file to create a data pool, or a "pool of meaning" (Marton, 1986, p.43). One of the significant issues associated with the process of the formulation of the data pool is a researcher's subjective judgment of the relevancy of the data. To decrease a researcher's subjectivity, Sjöström and Dahlgren (2002) suggest paying attention to the following aspects:

- frequency of the concepts or phrases,
- a position of the utterance that seems meaningful within the data pool,
- a relevance of the selected utterance to the focus of the research and research aims, and
- an explicit emphasis of the interviewee on a single concept or statement, especially when comparing it with other statements. A focus on an individual concept shows that, for an interviewee, that aspect has more significance than the others.

In my analysis, I followed the second, the third and the fourth suggestion proposed by Sjöström and Dahlgren (2002). I rejected the first suggestion since it contradicts the principle of diversity embedded in my research. The purpose of this study was not to identify common themes that emerge from the data, but quite the opposite, to uncover the unique ways of experiencing and conceptualising two phenomena.

First, I looked at the position of the participants' responses that seemed directly relevant to the research questions of this study. For instance, for research question one, I was attentively considering answers to the question "Could you please talk about your experience of learning at this moment?". In relation to research question two, I was looking at the position of the utterances that were expressed when I asked students "What is it in your learning that makes

you feel successful/unsuccessful as a student?” (with a sub-question or follow-up questions to provide a concrete example).

Following the third Sjöström and Dahlgren’s (2002) suggestion, I paid greater attention to the comparison of concepts or aspects of learning that were made by the interviewees, as well as to their claims that some aspects were more meaningful than the others. For me, it was less of a challenge to discover the meaningful conceptions as many of my study participants emphasised what is important during their reflections. For example, some students shared that their learning journey was not comfortable, providing vivid examples, whereas others were talking about the need to restructure daily routine. Yet others associated learning with a sacrifice that goes along with a decision to invest time, money or effort in learning.

Having in mind the aims of my study, I gradually reduced the volume of data by selecting utterances that were relevant to my research. Having some insight from the extensive reading of the transcripts, I then marked the most striking and distinctive elements of students’ answers. When deciding which data should comprise the data pool, I also came back to the notes made during the interviews and when familiarising with data to make sure that all utterances that represented potentially meaningful variations were included in further consideration. Reflecting on the issues identified earlier, I tried to avoid possible shifts in my attention to either challenging or positive experiences. Instead, I sought for utterances that had the potential of being striking or different from a learner perspective.

At this stage, I was still working with individual transcripts. Working with an individual transcript implied analysis on each transcribed interview at a time, highlighting distinctive utterances of each participant, and making reflective notes on the relation of a selected utterance to how the phenomenon under question is experienced and conceptualised.

Comparison

Aim:

To compare the piles of data within the data pool in order to identify differences and similarities.

Procedures and reflection:

This step of analysis implies a comparison of utterances with a focus on what is diverging or similar within the expressed meaning. This process has been done in a reflective manner, following a reflective practice framework, and with the utilisation of different instruments for reflections (see Appendix 5). I aimed at identifying the boundaries between different categories, yet without limiting their number.

Differences and similarities among the utterances, according to my interpretation, were documented. Since I had a manageable amount of data, I worked with printed transcripts manually, highlighting the chunks of data and making notes on the possible meaning (see Appendix 9).

To assist me in this identifying the differences and similarities in meanings, I often used such questions for reflection as How do students appear to relate to their online learning process? How do they go about their learning experience? and What does success mean for a student? Once I thought I found the answer in data, I was posing the same question again. Asking these questions allowed me to keep my focus on the research aims and phenomena under investigation, as well as to look for evidence in data on alternative ways of experiencing learning and conceptualising success.

Grouping

Aim:

To group and organise the utterances that appear to represent similar ways of conceptualising a phenomenon into the piles of data.

Procedures and reflection:

Grouping is a process of developing initial categories of description, each of which represents a qualitatively different way of experiencing a phenomenon. This process may be initiated at the earlier stages of analysis when a researcher is working with a data pool and making notes of the possible range of meanings of the phenomenon in mind.

When grouping utterances and developing categories of description, I was interpreting transcripts within the context of the whole data pool, rather than each interview in isolation from it (Åkerlind, 2005a). This allowed me to develop a range of meaning of the phenomenon in mind from a collective perspective. On practice, I organised selected and marked quotations into categories (see Appendices 5 and 6).

For the phenomenon one, I initially had six categories that represented how online learning as a process is experienced, e.g. online learning is an investment in a long-term goal; online learning is a process that gives structure; online learning is a process that triggers lifelong learning; online learning is a “game-changer”; online learning is a process that influences the way of seeing and thinking and online learning is a challenge that makes you feel good. For the phenomenon two, I identified five categories, e.g. success is measured by formal criteria; success is a relational achievement; success is an improvement in work; success is an opportunity to open doors, and, lastly, success is personal development.

As the data analysis and reflective practice frameworks suggest, initially proposed categories will be further explored and either confirmed or rejected.

Articulation

Aim:

To capture the essential meaning of a proposed category.

Procedures and reflection:

At this stage, the initially proposed conceptions are revised and re-grouped as the analysis moved back and forth. Following the reflective practice framework and adhering to the principle of diversity, I repeated the process of grouping the utterances into categories several times, always looking for alternative categories and reasoning the importance of their distinction.

On practice, the data pool as a whole was carefully read, with a focus on a single idea of the proposed category in mind at each time. I was making notes on the page number to document the location of relevant utterances in the data. During the verification process, I evaluated the highlighted quotations in order to either reject or confirm the proposed category of description. Following this circular process of reflection, I developed several drafts of the categories of description for phenomenon one (experience of online learning) before arriving at a final set of categories.

Articulation not only allowed me to develop progressively wide and rich categories but also entailed their preliminary comparison. The statements associated with the proposed category were scrutinised in order to develop a central meaning of the category, as well as compared to those from the other categories. To avoid an overlap between the proposed categories, I

differentiated subcategories for the final set of categories of phenomenon one (experience of online learning). If I thought that some categories represented similar conceptions, they were integrated with each other. As I was trying to keep my mind as open as possible during the analytical process, the initial number of categories was larger than the final set. However, when I encountered a new fragment that did not fit into any of the existing categories, before creating a new one, I reflected on my interpretation of it. In other words, I sought to re-interpret and re-consider the meaning of the emerged conception. Only when I was confident that my understanding was the most satisfying, I was deciding to create a new category.

Labelling

Aim:

To choose criteria to attribute to each category in order to highlight the essence of each category by giving it a name.

Procedures and reflection:

Once I had summarised the meaning held in each group of utterances, I selected the most suitable quote or phrase to name the category. If I could not find an appropriate quote or phrase, I used the most fitting description with my own words or a metaphor.

It is important to emphasise that the names for developed categories should emerge from their meaning and not influenced by the results of past phenomenographic studies.

Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991) and Stenfors-Hayes, Hult, & Dahlgren (2013) emphasised that steps three to six represent an iterative process during which similarities and differences between the categories are identified, articulated and distinctly expressed. Following the iterative process of reflective thinking, I was able to maintain continuous comparison and to

contrast of the proposed categories. This resulted in the renaming of draft categories that were smaller in number, but with important sub-categories.

Contrasting

Aim:

To compare the categories through a contrastive procedure in order to identify variations across them.

Procedures and reflection:

During this process, I considered mutual relationships across the developed categories. When discovering dimensions of variation, I followed Ashworth and Lucas's (2000) suggestion to be empathetic to the participants' opinions and, therefore, thought about the representation of their voices.

The process of developing categories of descriptions and exploring the potential variations within these categories has been done simultaneously. As Marton and Pong (2005) explain, two aspects of a phenomenon are intertwined and appear at the same time, because the "structure presupposes meaning and at the same time meaning presupposes structure" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.87).

At the previous stage, the identification of categories of description revealed the referential aspects of adult learners' awareness. During the process of contrasting, I was discovering elements of conceptions that differed across all the categories I developed. In phenomenographic terms, I was aiming to identify the dimensions of variation that were very noticeable across all the categories. To provide an example, when contrasting categories of description of the phenomenon one, I discovered that the themes *motivation, the role of social*

interactions and *learning outcomes* occurred in each category. I, however, do not argue that I identified the exhaustive list of variations within the meaning assigned to the online learning phenomenon.

Development of the Outcome Space

Aim:

To develop a phenomenographic outcome space that represents distinctive elements of each category, the variations across different categories, and relations between them.

Procedures and reflection:

In phenomenography, an outcome space represents the hierarchy (typically, although not necessarily) of conceptual categories and the structural relations among them. Thus, a model of arranged categories is a primary outcome of any phenomenographic research (Marton, 1981; 1988). The proposed inclusive hierarchy of conceptual categories of an outcome space implies that each successive category of description includes the previous one and that the final category includes all the others.

The focus in phenomenography is to identify variations between identified categories, rather than categories themselves (Ashwin et al., 2016). Marton and colleagues (1993) argue that it is likely that the higher-level categories will contain something that the lower-level ones do not. Thus, they continue, categories of descriptions often require to be hierarchically constructed with high-level categories becoming more comprehensive and inclusive.

The development of the outcome space in this study has been done using the following strategies:

- I first looked at the relationships between and across categories broadly (differences in meanings and differences in dimensions of variations) having the emerged themes of variations in mind (for the phenomenon one, three themes that emerged were motivation, the role of social interactions and learning outcomes).
- To document the process of the outcome space development, I employed the Referential/Structural framework and distinguished a referential aspect (including an internal horizon) and structural aspects (including dimensions of variation), and an external horizon for each category of description.

I began with locating categories of description and identified dimensions of variation in a hierarchical form, having in mind an assumption that categories of the higher level contain the features of the categories of the lower level. Following the reflective practice framework, I was staring at this process from the beginning once I developed the first outcomes space. I reflected on how I could arrange categories differently, whilst demonstrating that the hierarchy of the meanings is grounded in data. I was working with the hierarchical structure, arranging and rearranging categories, until I felt that the categories and the dimensions of variations are settled.

As indicated above, the development of the outcome space was accompanied by the identification of referential and structural aspects of the phenomenon, as well as a differentiation of the context of experience, or external horizon.

Following the structure of awareness framework, the identification of the internal horizon included a recognition of the elements that are in the foci of an individual's awareness (Cope, 2004). In other words, elements that have been immediately recognised as meaningful represented referential aspects of the phenomenon, or its internal horizon (Irvin, 2006), whereas

those elements that varied across each category represent dimensions of variation. The aspect of the phenomenon that resided in the background of the student's awareness and shaped the context of experience represented an external horizon. Thus, in this step, I made a distinction between referential aspects with an internal horizon as a focus of the learner's awareness, structural aspects with dimensions of variations that run across each category, and an external horizon.

It was a challenging task to determine the boundaries between the two horizons, internal and external, due to the complexity of the phenomena under investigation. To assist me in this process, I considered Cope's (2004) suggestion to pose the following questions during the analysis: "What dimension(s) of variation must be discerned if the quote is to make sense?" to discern the internal horizon; and "How must the phenomenon be delimited from its context if this quote is to make sense?" to distinguish the external horizon (Cope, 2004, p.14). According to Cope (2004), to determine the boundary between the external and internal horizons, the researcher should analyse in which context the identified internal horizon sits, or what the context is in which that way of experiencing online learning is discussed. Although in this study I adopted Cope's suggestion into practice, some of the categories had clearer external horizons than the others.

By explaining the issues and challenges of the process of the outcome space development, I acknowledge that the developed outcome space is as a result of the relationship between me and the data. Thus, the results presented in this study are not the only possible outcomes since the data can be interpreted differently by other researchers.

4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the phenomenographic research design employed in this research. I explained ontological and epistemological assumptions of phenomenography and considered its main concepts that have been used in this study, namely a category of description and an outcome space. I also elaborated on different aspects of the phenomenon that have been explored in this research.

I considered frameworks that have been utilised in this research to assist me in the process of data analysis, as well as briefly articulated alternative options that have been rejected. I justified the choice of the Referential/Structural framework as a guiding tool for the data analysis for this research by explaining its stronger theoretical foundation and concise nature.

In the second part of the chapter, I documented the processes of data collection and analysis of this research, accompanied by my reflections. When discussing data collection, I articulated the potential issues and risks and explained how these had been addressed to ensure the validity of data. An explanation of the data analysis process aimed to untwist the complexity of the process and ensure its transparency. Using eight-step procedures of data analysis and the developed reflective framework in combination allowed me to maintain a considered reflection of the process of data interpretation and presentation of the results. The reflective practice framework proved to be useful as it provoked deeper awareness and a more deliberate understanding of my own research, which would not have been possible through the available methodological approaches.

5 Research Question One

This study approaches the first research question *What are the qualitative differences in adult students' experiences of their learning in postgraduate online programmes at a UK university and its partner institution in Russia?* by: i) enumerating the different ways in which adult learners experience their online learning; and ii) characterising the uncovered variations.

I present three distinctive ways, or categories of description, of how adult students who participated in my study experience their online learning, supporting each of them with an illustrative quote. In a similar way, the identified aspects of the phenomenon and relevant contexts illuminated using direct quotes from the study participants. The quotes have been selected from grouped utterances (see section 4.7.2 Steps of Data Analysis, step 4. Grouping) to ensure that the developed categories of description are empirically grounded.

I start with the discussion of the structural differences between the categories. Having explained the structural variations between the categories, I analyse differences across and within each category. As a part of the reflective methodology, I also provide a reader with additional information on the processes of development and evolution of categories of description, presenting earlier versions of the categories in Appendix 6.

In response to the first research question, I identified three qualitatively distinct categories of description which illustrate the meaning that adult students assign to the experience of online learning. Based on the empirical data gathered from adult students' accounts, the final set of categories of description is as follows:

1. Online learning is an investment.
2. Online learning is a process that brings structure.
 - 2A. Online learning brings structure to daily routine.
 - 2B. Online learning brings structure to experience and knowledge.
 - 2C. Online learning brings structure to work.
3. Online learning is a process that enables and empowers.
 - 3A. Online learning changes the way of professional thinking (enables).
 - 3B. Online learning broadens horizons (empowers).

To visually represent the identified variety of adult learners' experiences, I used the Referential/Structural and structure of awareness frameworks (Marton & Booth, 1997) (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Categories of description of the adults' online learning (OL) experiences.

Categories of description			
<i>Context</i>	OL equips	OL disciplines	OL emancipates
Academic/ Professional	Category 1. OL is an investment		
Professional and personal		Category 2. OL is a process that brings structure	
Professional, personal, and beyond			Category 3. OL is a process that enables and empowers

The name for each category has been assigned by the key feature that arose from the focal perspective of the participants' awareness of the phenomenon and recognised at the time of conducting interviews. To bring students' voices forward, the names of the first and second categories have been given using participants' most relevant associations with their online

learning experience. For category three, I used a metaphor “enables and empowers” to emphasise the influential aspects of online learning experience that emerged from data with regard to contribution to the learners’ growth and development.

Three themes, or dimensions of variation, that run across each category are the nature of the adult student motivation, the role interactions with others for students’ online learning and emphasised learning outcomes (Table 5.2).

Table 5.2. Referential and structural aspects of categories of description.

Category of description	Referential aspects	Structural aspects			
		Focus: Motivation	Focus: Interactions with others	Focus: Learning outcomes	Context of experience
<i>OL is an investment</i>	Learning online is an investment opportunity with an expectation of return	External, driven by the return of investment	Orientation and benchmarking	Fit the demand of the labour market	University contexts/ economic
<i>OL is a process that brings structure</i>	Learning online structures knowledge and experience, everyday life, and professional practice	External, with a potential to be transformed into internal	Sharing and shaping different opinions	Changed trajectories of professional and personal life	Broader context of professional and personal life
<i>OL is a process that enables and empowers</i>	Learning online enables professional and personal growth and empowers an individual	Internal, driven by the need for growth	Reflective way of communication, acceptance of alternative perspectives	Shift of ontological and epistemological perspectives	Life world

Variations in the core meaning assigned to each category (referential aspects) and within dimensions of variation (foregrounded structural aspects) demonstrate a progressive expansion of adult students' awareness as a group from the category of the lower level (category 1) to the highest-level category (category 3). Lastly, I provide a context (backgrounded structural aspects, or an external horizon), within which each category was discussed during the adult students' reflections. A discussion of the dimensions of variation and the external horizon offers insights about the nature of variations in the core meaning of the phenomenon of online learning. The outcome space is visualised in the form of a hierarchically inclusive model shows a progression from one category to another as students' awareness is expanding (Figure 5.1).

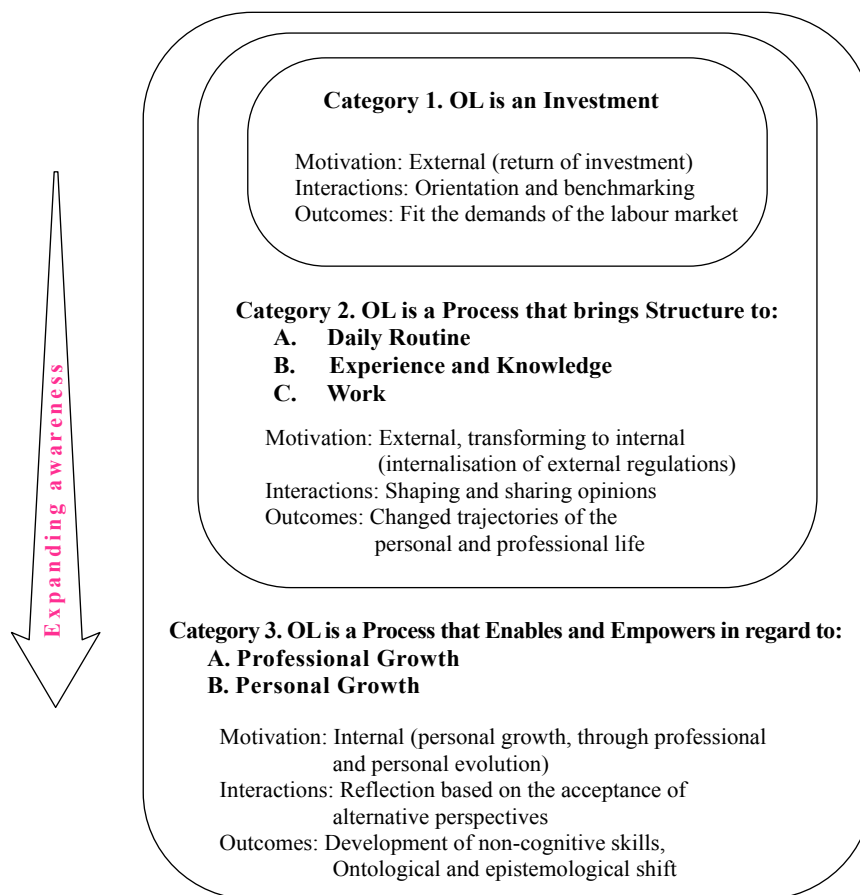


Figure 5.1 Outcome space for the phenomenon of online learning as experienced by adult students.

An expansion of the students' awareness reflects a shift of the meaning that has been assigned to the phenomenon. This implies that as a student gains a broader awareness of the phenomenon, he or she may be able to transit to the next category by experiencing online learning in a more complex and powerful way (Bowden & Marton, 1998). The change of focus and a context within students' reflections across each category that will be discussed further in this chapter provide a map of the qualitatively different ways of experiencing online learning.

5.1 Category 1. Online Learning is an Investment

5.1.1 Referential Aspect

In this category, online learning is experienced as an opportunity for investment. It is discussed as an investment of time, money or effort to gain benefits in the future. The need for investment is dictated by the demands of the labour market or determined by a student who wishes to advance in the professional field. When talking about online learning from the investment perspective, the emphasis is placed on the development of competencies that are considered as missing or lacking, on the acquisition of new skills and tools for professional use, on gaining a degree that can provide more options on a labour market:

...I knew exactly why I went to that course. I was aware of what kind of competences I was lacking. I didn't need to additionally motivate myself; I knew that I had to learn about the functions of management, management of change, management of processes, and therefore, I was just patiently doing it. (Participant 9)

... It's for both of us [a student and his wife] ... as adults, now that we have a life, we understand that doing these studies, it's not just, ahh, let's learn this. It is a means now. You are doing this because you expect to get a certain return on investment, let's say,

a certain something out of it. It is elevating your mental capacity in order for me to elevate my career and get to the next step. (Participant 5)

I understand what I am doing it for. It was my decision to go for a [the study programme], and I knew I had to sacrifice something... So, I'm looking at that. I'm making some sacrifices now for the long-term goal. (Participant 2)

Like any other investment, investment in learning has its costs and often associated with the sacrifices that are readily made to receive a return on investment. For example, to pursue a degree, a student must reduce uncritical elements of personal life and leisure time, more carefully allocate family commitments and reject emerging opportunities:

A couple of opportunities came up that were five days a week working, and I thought I'm going to get my [degree] done before I step up to five days a week because I don't think I would manage it as well if I didn't have that one day in the week where I can just get my head down. (Participant 8)

Of course, prioritising everything, limiting sleep time, as always, as the majority of people do. (Participant 12)

I think the important thing is that I had to allocate priorities. So, when the workload was so critical, and there was no time, I had to literally drop some things off, the things that were carried before automatically. (Participant 9)

With the need for sacrifice and associated challenges in place, integration of online learning into a students' lifestyle is not necessarily an easy process. An idea of flexible online education is attractive for a busy adult learner; however, learning at a distance requires a high level of

discipline and self-regulation. For a student from this category, familiarisation with the learning environment, adaptation to its culture and requirements of the course can be associated with stress and frustration:

... it's a chaos. I mean, you can spend days just looking at papers. So, sometimes it was a bit difficult to find some of the information that was mentioned in the assignments... it should be easier to find. (Participant 1)

Based on the large survey conducted with online students, Rienties and Toetenel (2016) found that learning does not always lead to satisfaction and may be an uncomfortable experience. The authors explained that this is due to the fact that learning cannot happen without mistakes, suggesting that a discomfort and frustration are normal elements of the learning process. In a situation of a conflict between regulations posed on a student by the learning process and a student's expectations, an individual may express frustration and rejection, as it happened with one of my study participants:

I have been studying in [programme] and that was a nightmare for me. I was just waiting for when it will finish. And when it's finished, I felt such a relief, such a joy. And I have decided for myself that I will never ever go study anywhere else. So, those are my feelings. (Participant 7)

Examples of conflict in learning have been documented in biographical and narrative research. Magro (2008) listened to the experiences of adult learner immigrants in their English as an Additional Language programmes and uncovered their traumatic experiences related to the broad dimensions of their lives. Similarly, Merrill (2015) found that learning trajectories of working-class students in her study were not straightforward and not without academic and

social integration struggles. To better understand the causes of frustration of my study participants, I turn to self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT explains that external motivation - a type of motivation that is most likely to be experienced by a student from this category - reduces the feeling of individual attainment and thus prevents a student from a more beneficial learning experience. Moreover, when the values associated with external regulation are not internalised, the process of learning is experienced negatively, as threatening an individual's tendency towards development. Even if a student has an internal motivation to begin the study, past research showed that external stimuli, such as deadlines or objectives that conflict with a student's personal values, can diminish internal motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

5.1.2 Structural Aspects

Internal Horizon

A student who experiences learning as an investment opportunity is focused on both formal outcomes of the learning and on gaining competencies and skills for a professional practice that can advance chances on a labour market. A continuous progression towards a degree certificate by meeting course requirements indicate the nature of student motivation. Although this aspiration may be shared among many students, the distinctive feature of conceptualising learning as an investment is that it does not allow the broad perspective on the learning process, leaving a student aware of the other benefits of OHE. This lack of awareness can be explained by students' busy lifestyles, heavy workloads, and other responsibilities. However, what is also noticeable from students' reflections is that they lack internal motivation for learning and a focused context within which they conceptualise online learning.

5.1.3 Dimensions of Variation

As indicated above, within each category of description, variations in experience occurred in the following areas: i) the nature of students' motivation; ii) the role of social interactions; and iii) discussed learning outcomes.

Motivation

A fundamental driver for a learner from category 1 comes from outside; it is external. A student is motivated by the expected return on investment, which, in its turn, is dictated by the demands of the labour market or the requirements for professional development. Completion of the online programme is seen as an external confirmation of professionalism, thus learners may seek a degree certificate in order to validate gained skills or to progress on a career ladder:

... I was given an opportunity at work, and I took that step, and I have realised I need to know a bit more... I would say that MBA are kind of three letters that you can put in your CV, and people are not going to really question your skills too much... So, this is the reason why I decided to go for an MBA to validate my management and business side knowledge. (Participant 6)

For many students from this category, a requirement to gain a degree had been explicitly dictated by their employers. Thus, the investment of resources was not voluntary. The lack of internal motivation for learning resulted in the struggle of accepting learning challenges. As the quote below illustrates, the failure to accept regulations of the educational process resulted to the inability to adapt to the unfamiliar and uncomfortable learning process, prevented the development of conditions for the nourishment of intrinsic motivation. Instead, a fear of shame, personal misery and loss of value pushed the student to finish the programme:

So, why I finished the study and went to the end? Because [if I had not finished] I would have had to compensate my company which invested money in me. Plus, the fact of how I will be seen in front of my colleagues [if dropped out]. I would simply be ashamed. And that unwillingness to experience that feeling of shame, personal misery, loss of personal value - all this did not allow me to drop out. (Participant 7)

According to the SDT, lack of internal motivation can be seen in the absolute unwillingness to do educational activities (amotivation) or be present in the form of passive compliance. On the other hand, the most advanced and autonomous level of self-determination involves an active commitment that comes from personal interest and tendency towards growth and development. The nature of these different types of motivation varies and depends on whether a learner can internalise (accept an external regulation) and integrate external regulations (transform educational requirements into personal values). A student who expressed amotivation and passive compliance in the previous quote recognises the importance of internal interest or internal motivation in learning, but failed to experience it:

...without my personal interest, it is ridiculous to talk about anything at all. Because the interest is some kind of emotional state when I am [blossoming], I want to come closer to my aim. Plus, I need to feel the joy from moving forward to that aim, [otherwise] I will be emotionally getting out of breath very fast. (Participant 7)

The Need for Interactions

A student from this category strives to meet online programme requirements in order to gain a degree, achieve career goals and advance on a labour market. In that context of experience, academic socialisation is reduced to a clarification of information and programme requirements

and is done to contribute to a student progression towards a set goal. As the quote below shows, the value of online interactions is reduced to instrumental use:

The online is okay, but it's not enough... it's like you extract information, you're looking for information: Where do I find this template? And does anybody have a link where to find this book... There is no sense of community. (Participant 1)

In this category, social interactions are also directed towards benchmarking and validation of learning challenges. Quotes below show that benchmarking was an important process for enhancing confidence and justify struggles:

...you realise that you're not alone in this trip... It is difficult. All of this you feel, like they're the people doing the same thing. So, it's not, couldn't be that bad. (Participant 1)

Yeah, I think that [interactions with other students]... help because you have that feeling how other students are doing... when you hear that other students are experiencing the same problem, then it does, it just makes you more confident, you feel you're not the only one struggling. (Participant 3)

Learning Outcomes

The benefits of online learning from the perspective of a student from this category are similar to the financial benefits and opportunities described by Weisbrod in his work “Education and investment in human capital” (1962). First, Weisbrod (1962) introduced the notion of “financial return”, which is an expectation for an increase in earnings. The other two benefits are associated with the emerging opportunities for a student who went through the learning,

namely, an “opportunity” and “hedging” options. The opportunistic benefit of education is articulated in the student’s quote below:

Completing the study will open more doors. And I would be able to show up with confidence saying I have my MBA. Whereas today I show up and I say I have thirty years’ experience and here is what I have accomplished... as time goes on, I am still concerned I am running into barriers because people want to see your bachelor’s or your masters. So, I see in a few years having that and being able to knock those doors down and say: “Now talk to me!” (Participant 2)

I want to progress. I have got a career ambition, so I want to progress ideally within my industry, within IT. The top job you can get within IT, apart from running your own company, of course, is to be a CIO, chief information officer. So that’s kind of a long-term aim. (Participant 6)

A student from this category anticipates gaining advantages on a professional arena and wishes to earn a degree in order to overcome barriers that exist in the labour market. Such aspirations can be summarised in the concept of hedging (Weisbrod, 1962). He explained that hedging is “the increased ability to adjust to changing job opportunities” adding that “education may be viewed as a type of private (and social) hedge against the technological displacement of skills”. (p.113). This perspective can explain the association of online education held by my study participants with the opportunity to increase the number of options in the labour market and contribute to a better fit for professional requirements:

If gaining those qualifications from the [UK university] enables me to apply for let’s say a higher paying job or jobs at better companies, then it enhances my success there.

And opening the door to some of those bigger companies is difficult and they often have policies where they only hire people with formal education... So, it would be a success if it opened... increase the amount of options that I have in the future. (Participant 2)

I hope that the knowledge I gained will help me to proceed on a career ladder, not necessarily in this market or in this company. To gain even more knowledge and to maximally use them to raise the profit to the company where I will be working and, of course, my personal gain. Because it is true that we all have a price on the labour market, and I want my price to go higher. (Participant 11)

5.1.4 External Horizon

The elements that appeared in the student's focal awareness were an investment of time or money into learning, a need to sacrifice for future professional advantage and an anticipation of the return on investment. The context within which learning is experienced mirrors the higher education neoliberal agenda within which students' educational focus is primarily financial, and students themselves are discussed as "consumers-investors" (Marginson, 1997, p.64). This context positions individualistic benefits of learning, including financial profits and a better job to ensure the future is "very different from before" (Stone & O'Shea, 2012. p.62), in the centre of the learning process.

The focus on investment maintained by adult students from this category is not surprising. The neoliberal agenda is a top-line in many governmental policy documents, promoting such elements as an acquisition of skills and employability and emphasise the need to prepare people for the labour market (Gyamera & Burke, 2018). As a result, the purposes of education are limited to creating a skilled, employable, and flexible workforce (Burke, Crozier, & Misiaszek, 2017).

A predominant economic and labour-market oriented discourse that positions individuals as consumers of the educational product shapes students' aspirations, limits their conceptualisations of online higher education and, consequently, influences their learning experience. As Bourdieu warns, a pure focus on economic competition is dangerous as it creates favourable conditions for those with the best resources and best investment opportunities (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). Most importantly, such discourse is often silent about sacrifices that have been mentioned by my study participants.

5.2 Category 2. Online Learning is a Process that brings Structure

5.2.1 Referential Aspect

The idea that resides at the core of this category is that online learning, apart from the influence on the study-related self-discipline and self-organisation, also impacts other dimensions a student's life. Consistent with the core meaning of this category, the focus of a student's awareness is on the processes of restructuration of different areas of a student's life, in particular daily routine, professional practice and knowledge and experience.

A student from this category emphasises discipline that is required to learn at a distance and discusses such concepts as skills as time management, scheduling and prioritisation. However, an important difference between the required effort discussed in relation to the experience of online learning as an investment and the notion of discipline considered in this category is that the development of discipline is seen not as a sacrifice, but as a way to develop a more effective approach to managing multiple responsibilities.

Three sub-categories are distinguished in this category of description:

- 2A Online learning brings a structure to the daily routine.

- 2B Online learning brings a structure to learning, experience and knowledge.
- 2C Online learning brings a structure to work.

Below, I discuss each sub-category in detail.

2A. Online Learning brings a Structure to the Daily Routine

In this category, the impact of online learning on a student's life is associated with the development of organisational skills that are necessary for a reciprocal process of successful integration of online learning into a student's lifestyle and a student's successful adaptation to the learning process. The reciprocal character of this process indicates that a student's schedule is not merely adjusted to fit online learning but implies that learning is an ongoing process that expands its influence on many areas of a student's life.

In this subcategory, online learning is associated with the processes of structuring and re-organising a student's personal schedule and daily life. The concepts commonly used by learners are "self-organisation", "discipline", "time", "time-management", "prioritising" and "rhythm":

...the study has given me some kind of push, some kind of impulse, a vector to increase my effectiveness, to increase my productivity... I think because the person has more tasks, there was a need for self-organisation. (Participant 13)

It organises your time very well. It was a good experience of organising your life; everything is in accordance with the SMART system - [everything] is precise, coherent and framed by time. (Participant 11)

Another student reflected on the process of finding a rhythm and the subsequent realisation of the convenience of the online mode of learning:

...then I found my own rhythm, and I realised that it actually suits, because I can go to work, I can do my stuff and I can sit down in the evening and read a couple of pages of a book and do a couple of online activities. And actually progress, actually learn something. So, MBA online actually suits my lifestyle much better... (Participant 6)

When I asked the student to elaborate more on his way of finding a rhythm, he referred to the developed skills of planning and pacing as key elements of this process:

So, I tried to keep my calendar up to date... So, I would pace myself to make sure I get to that moment and I have got enough time to do my TMA [tutor marked assignment]. (Participant 6)

What my study participants refer to is similar to the process of student adaptation described by Motteram and Forrester (2005). In interviewing two groups of students, online, international, and campus-based, from a comparison of their reflections they found that when adapting to learning, predominantly distance learners alluded to “balancing priorities” experience (p.286). The authors suggested that this was due to their full-time employment and additional responsibilities. To summarise, students from this category do not merely integrate learning into their daily lives. Instead, they go through a continuous, reciprocal process of restructuring and re-organisation of the different life dimensions that result in successful integration into the learning environment. At the same time, by finding their own “rhythm” and “pace”, students can tailor their online learning processes in a way that better suits an individual. Empirical evidence gathered in this study shows that online learning requires self-discipline and

continuous development of organisational and time management skills. Thus, it can be suggested that approaches to learning and such elements of learning as rhythm and pace are revised regularly throughout the learning process.

2B. Online Learning structures Experience and Knowledge

This subcategory is unique due to its focus on how learning experience can systematise, and structure merged together newly acquired theoretical knowledge and previously held knowledge and experience. The learners describe these processes in the following ways:

...professionally, it was great, I felt like I have been doing this, I just haven't been calling it this. And then I picked up some new skills, and I used some of the material at work. And the biggest gap I wanted to close... was my understanding of the financial side of the business. So, I made some real progress at closing that gap in understanding the financial reports, and I want to close that some more in my next module. (Participant 2).

I even use them [theories] with experimental purposes in some things. Read, take some things from the study book. Undoubtedly. And thanks to some models, my knowledge and experience have systematised. (Participant 13)

Experiencing online learning in this way comes with the recognition that professional knowledge and experience need to be re-considered and modified in order to advance professional practice:

...when we finished the course human resource management, a particular picture has been formed in my mind... I have gained an understanding; my knowledge has

systematised in terms of the management activities... it is like each block of knowledge is a particular stage, which, in terms of education, when you pass it, a particular brick is put in the right place. And all this knowledge is applicable to practice. (Participant 13)

I have changed my approach to human resources management... I thought we need to run faster, and I didn't realise many things from the corporate culture perspective. After the completion of this course, I slowed down in terms of the pressure, because I understood that fast change could not be done. Then, from motivational things that we were given, I understood what is right to use, what is not... (Participant 12)

A student from this category is aware of ways theoretical knowledge can modify previously held knowledge and experience. Reflections of my study participants showed that such awareness has the potential to enhance professional practice and communication as it develops the ability to see theoretical principles and knowledge behind the professional practice.

2C. Online Learning brings Structure to Work

In this category, online learning is experienced as a process that both implicitly shapes work behaviour and interpersonal communication. In this way, online learning provides a framework for a more active and knowledgeable enhancement of professional practice.

A student from this category expresses the need and seeking for ways to re-consider and re-organise professional practice and communication using principles, frames, and skills acquired through the learning process. In other words, an individual is experiencing not only the structuring influence of learning on the knowledge and experience but is also feel the urge to

optimise ineffective practice. In the following quotations, students explain their conscious attempts to embed knowledge into professional practice or work:

...I would specifically be doing some work at home, and I would flip through my [study] notes or textbook. And then I would incorporate something into a presentation I was making. (Participant 6)

... everything that we were learning in the [study] course I am applying on practice, in relationships with subordinates and in relation to the global issues for the future. (Participant 15)

Understanding the practical application of the gained knowledge facilitated the development of greater confidence in the student's professionalism, making professional behaviour more considered and strategic:

But one way or another, I have changed my work. In relationships with people also. So, in some things, I have built a [communication] chain so I don't explain to a fitter from the beginning - it will take me one day - why did I do so. I am [only] trying to be a mentor for my closest subordinates. (Participant 13)

I think the best thing I've learned... were the different frameworks that you can use as a manager. So, frameworks on people management and motivation, frameworks around the marketing, frameworks around the finance as well. So, all those different ways that you can use someone else's work in order to help yourself in the day-to-day job. (Participant 2)

Apart from influencing professional actions and work, the structuring effect of online learning is visible in professional communications in general and, as the quote below illustrates, communication with subordinates, colleagues and clients:

... in general, the work became [more] effective, and with clients, the communication is more organised. There are more topics for discussion, justified, considered [discussions]. (Participant 11)

Reflections of my study participants showed that enhanced professional performance came with an understanding of how to apply a newly acquired knowledge in real life or a professional situation. Furthermore, the students' reflections also indicate that gradually, throughout the learning process, they developed a greater degree of agency, professionalism and a capacity to take on board additional responsibilities, indicating that the process of structuring is not mechanical but rather internalised:

I just recently... [became a manager] of the group... and I think earlier I wouldn't be able to manage it due to the jealousy, ambitions... Now I don't have this. I managed to talk, find a common language, explain what my values are, what are my approaches, explain that I am not an enemy, and it is important for me that those people who are under me are really cool, that they will grow and develop. This [learning experience] helped me in my [work] situation. (Participant 15)

This idea of professional development through a better understanding of how learning can benefit practice is in line with Bromme and Tillema (1995). In their work on the structure of professional knowledge, they suggest that for a person to become a professional in a particular field, the understanding of the links between theory and personal practice through the lens of

theoretical knowledge is important. The student's awareness of the importance of merging theory and practice is expressed in the following way:

...I think having work experience is what makes it even more worthy. You really dive into these theories. When you don't know what the practice is, that practical experience, then the theory is just a theory. And doesn't connect to anything. But now I see I am connecting dots more easily. Not with every theory, but every other theory. (Participant 5)

5.2.2 Structural Aspects

Internal Horizon

The learner conceptualises online learning as a process that provides structure not only for learning, but also for other dimensions of life. The study participants' reflections suggest that the reciprocal process of integration of the learning and adaptation to the learning starts with the gradual development of the skills necessary for organising and managing multiple responsibilities within and around the learning environment. Throughout this ongoing process, learning impacts a student's life, influences and questions past knowledge and experience and affects professional practice. Restructuration of the different areas of a learner's life can go in parallel or be represented as a cyclic process. For instance, subcategory 2C can be seen as a progression from category 2B, indicating that those learners who are able to connect newly acquired theoretical knowledge with previously held knowledge and experience, especially within professional practice, are more confident in taking responsibility to make a change in their occupational practice.

Online learning offers structure in an implicit way, through its requirements and a specific mode of delivery and by offering new theoretical frames to evaluate, reconsider or enhance the learner's knowledge, experience and professional practice. This way of experiencing online learning indicates that external educational regulations are internalised by a student, making efforts required for the processes of re-organisation and restructuring welcomed rather than perceived as a sacrifice, as in Category 1. In her essay on conceptual change, Vosniadou (2007) explains that during the learning process, students "need to be able to restructure their prior knowledge which is based on everyday experience and lay culture" (p. 48). She refers to the necessary process of restructuring, pointing out that conceptual development can happen through in an environment that supports students' motivation and engagement. Combining Vosniadou's (2007) insights and reflections of my study participants, it can be suggested that experiencing online learning as a process that brings structure is a prerequisite for developing a more complex conceptualisation of the online learning process. Moreover, Vosniadou (2007) argues that ontological and epistemological shifts often accompanied transformative learning experience that may subsequently influence all areas of life, as happens to students from this category.

A need for allowing a "user-adaptive e-learning design, which advocates learning tasks with built-in flexibility or variety that respond to and support the broad range of learning styles and needs" (Shute & Towle, 2003, in Ke, 2010, p.818) has been advocated by Ke (2010). An adaptive and responsive online learning environment can be more easily integrated into the adult learners' schedules and thus provides for diverse needs of adult students, both educational and personal.

5.2.3 Dimensions of Variation

Motivation

Experiencing online learning as a process that brings structure is an ongoing process. Through the experience of integration and adaptation to the new learning mode, regulations and requirements posed by the educational process are either accepted or rejected by a student. SDT explains that if external regulation is in line with the inner psychological needs of the individual, it can be internalised and become an internal driver for learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The reciprocal character of the learning process implies reorganisation of the student's life and work routine and development of a unique for each student approach to learning and learning behaviour.

This way of experiencing requires a student to negotiate requirements and regulations posed by the learning process, so they do not confront personal values and needs. Although for a student assigned into this category motivation for learning is initially extrinsic, negotiation may result to internalisation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) transforming external regulations into the accepted motivational driver. Following quotes show that the requirements posed by the learning process in the form of milestones, assignment or feedback (external regulation) are readily accepted by students, facilitating their intrinsic motivation for learning:

...the anticipation, you know, waiting to get those results and when you got a good result - it was a boost in energy and enthusiasm for the next part of the module. So, I really like the structured milestones... And that I think is a great way to keep people motivated... So, I recognise that those milestones create that sense of achievement for all of us and we feel motivated by that, oh I have reached another milestone - that feels

good. I got a good mark and I'm ready for the next one. And that is something the [university] does very well. (Participant 6)

...every time I complete an assignment, or I understand something or get feedback... I think it's feedback [excitement]. I think it's a positive feedback that motivates me. Or even negative feedback. I think I'm motivated by feedback. (Participant 10)

I do find the assignments motivating, though as I said it's a lot of work for a perfectionist, but I find the course challenging in a positive way and it's motivating to me. (Participant 3)

Students recognise the importance of internal motivation. In the following quote, the student expresses the opinion that internal motivation for learning helps to go through the challenges:

...the motivation is in the individual... I wanted to learn but I wasn't super-super motivated. Yeah, let's get the MBA! Okay, good to have, but you can do without [it]. So, this... did not help me mentally to cope with a problem. (Participant 1)

Yet, to nurture intrinsic motivation, it is critical that external educational regulations are accepted voluntarily. Furthermore, it is important to remember that evolving intrinsic motivation may be hindered by external regulations that conflict with the student's inner needs, beliefs, values, and preferences. A quote below illustrates that the lack of clarity and structure may result in a decrease in a student's interest in the learning process:

... they [tutors] couldn't understand that those lengthy one hour and a half of group work - when we were all by ourselves without knowing what they want from us - was

becoming a waste of time. And this was the attitude towards study: what do they want from me, from us? and why do we need this? (Participant 7)

Reflections of other students from this category also showed that active application of a newly acquired knowledge in different areas of life enhanced and contributed to the development of a student's internal self-regulation. This observation is similar to the conclusion made by Benware and Deci (1984), who found that students had a greater conceptual understanding when they aimed to put learned knowledge into practice.

Although students with initially external drivers may have different reasons for learning, reflections of the participants of my study showed that students could gradually embrace internal aspirations such as interest or a desire for self-fulfilment once they have internalised the requirements of the online programme.

SDT helps to understand how adult learners internalise regulations of behaviour that initially have been external in order to develop a feeling of confidence and self-determined approach to learning. The examples of the processes of structuring and re-structuring experienced by students suggest activation of internalisation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) - a change from external regulation to intrinsic motivation. A required internalised learning behaviour has a potential to influence the development of new habits and ways of thinking and acting, generating a feeling of autonomous self-regulation and allowing a student to adapt smoothly to a new learning culture.

The Need for Interactions

The way of experiencing online learning as a process that brings structure implies that a student undergoes ongoing integration and adaptation to the online learning environment. Participants'

reflections showed that at this stage, the need for feedback is particularly strong within the learner. Although the need for feedback and benchmarking is also present in category 1, in this category, feedback is associated with the validation of the educational and adaptation trajectory. Such validation can be achieved through interactions with other students or with the tutor. For examples, a tutor is expected to be there to clarify the alignment of a student's expectations with the course requirements, to assist a student in negotiating external regulations and adjusting approaches to learning.

Applying the concepts from the SDT, it can be suggested that autonomy-supportive, as opposed to controlling, interpersonal communications with the tutor and peers may assist a student in integration and adaptation to online learning, since it facilitates intrinsic motivation for learning. This is particularly critical in the first stage of learning when a student is not familiar with the learning environment and its explicit and implicit rules. A tutor can scaffold students' transitions within the online learning environment by timely feedback and targeted support. The following quotes illustrate students' reflections on the role of the tutor in the processes of integration to the online learning process:

I remember in the beginning I didn't understand the expectations... And even though I have looked through the materials, I didn't realise that I needed to reference that material. Nobody actually took time to explain how it worked... I was very lucky, the first teacher I had he seemed to recognise that, and he spent time outside the module emailing me and encouraging me and took a couple of calls and explained how I needed to be referencing the material and should use the material. (Participant 2)

The tutor is a facilitator who can clarify and give you his overview. Because, okay, he knows how things are working. And you know, he might recommend something if [a tutor] sees you are going in the wrong direction. (Participant 1)

A tutor, however, may contribute to a student's learning experience not only in a positive way but may also discourage a student from embarking on an online learning environment and embracing learning challenges. As the quote below illustrates, this is not due to the malicious intent of the tutor but can be a result of providing unsupportive learning conditions or a lack of understanding of students' needs:

...when we came for the first tutorial when we were first introduced to the course I was shocked by our tutor, shocked in a very positive sense of that word by the way... [he] was thinking, what he was talking about, how did he structure his speech, the consequence of the delivery of the speech, what emphasis he heeded - it was so close to me because he was talking about topics and themes I experienced recently... I was so impressed when I was coming back home, with a great state of impression, a feeling of looking forward to further study. (Participant 7)

For an adult learner from this category, feedback from a tutor was a necessary element to adjust to the learning process adequately. Moreover, counselling and support of a tutor were critical for understanding and negotiation of learning regulations, for understanding the learning materials and for facilitating the process of knowledge construction.

Interactions with other people may assist a student in reaching a more advanced awareness of the phenomenon of learning through the discussion of alternative opinions. Interactions with peers have different, more meaningful benefits for a student from category 2 compared to a

student from category 1. Communication and dialogue, especially during planned face-to-face interactions, bring a variety of views into the discussion and assist in shaping a more considered and mature opinion:

I like the part of different cultures because we think differently based on how we are taught, how we are brought up. And if you seek people that are from these different backgrounds in a group, let's say, to work in a team assignment like we did in the residential - it was a good start, and you could see complementarities or not with the team. (Participant 1)

The face-to-face element of online learning, with the opportunity of peer interactions, play an essential role in social adaptation to the unfamiliar mode of learning. In the following quotes, students describe how a meeting with peers helped them to eliminate the feeling of the surrealism of online learning:

So, for me the most part I liked, most of it, was a residential that we did because then you actually meet the people, you can interact with the people, and it is more, it is more lifelike. You know when you put the face to a name, and you exchange some words, it's easier to text or to call or to send a message. (Participant 1)

...a month into the program... I got the chance to meet a few people and... it helped alleviate a little bit the feeling of people understanding my comments at least, because I saw two, three, four people that when I spoke they actually responded immediately to my comment and saying yes, I understand what you say. So that helped me a little bit. It helped formulate what I will say also or how I should raise things in order for people to understand. (Participant 5)

Social interactions for a student who experiences online learning as a process that brings structure may assist in the adaptation and integration into the online space facilitates orientation and provide a means for validation. Thus, in contrast to the role of interactions from the previous category, they are needed not merely for benchmarking or informative purposes but have a function of developing an optimal approach to learning, negotiating external regulations and requirements, and shaping an individual's opinion.

Learning Outcomes

Experiencing learning as a process that brings structure is associated with the development of fundamentally new ways of maintaining a daily routine and behaviour that extends beyond the boundaries of the educational institution. The new patterns of behaviour articulated by students include rearrangement of the daily schedule, development of new habits, new approaches to learning, and theoretically enhanced ways to approach professional practice and other work. When external regulations, requirements and rules of the online learning environment are accepted, a student's life undergoes processes of reorganisation by eliminating unproductive, unnecessary or less prior activities, leading to the development of the advanced time management and organisational skills.

The learner also starts to develop a new way of thinking, which is influenced by the newly gained knowledge and acquired skills and theoretical tools. Since online programmes considered in this research had been designed to encourage students' reflexivity and critical thinking, once encountering reflection, a student from this category is able to realise its potential for an instrument for development:

...the first thing I would say that really made me realise some things also for my work was the reflection in action or on action... I think it's one of the most wonderful things that so far that I have learned, to really understand what the assumptions are and really reflecting on decisions and yeah steps that you take, etc. It was really motivating to find something this early. (Participant 5)

With the gradual development of new ways of thinking and behaviour, a student experiences a feeling of increased professionalism and readiness to take on board greater responsibilities:

I feel that I have developed my skills and gained knowledge and applied it in an independent mode. Responsible, independent. I have taken on the responsibility, evaluate the situation and make the right decision. This is in me.... Evaluate and look at the situation not only on my level but from above. This is a meaningful knowledge. (Participant 11)

Experiencing online learning as a process that brings structure can yield one of the two possible outcomes, the explanation of which can be enhanced by the SDT. The structure provided by online learning can be either embraced and successfully integrated into the student's life or rejected due to the conflict with the students' inner values and needs. The former outcome indicates a successful internalisation of external regulations and facilitates the learner's further progress and development through the learning process and a transition to the next level of awareness. Examples of how external regulations have been internalised, embraced and aligned with the learners' inner values or goals are as follows:

I had a mandatory test now, it wasn't just my own pace or for my own fun, so getting this sense of responsibility, being a responsible student... That was the tricky thing with the online version. (Participant 5)

And, it is clear that those intermediate activities [tests] were helping to confirm the knowledge better than the course where I had to read everything or some large book and then to write - by the time I finish it I don't remember the beginning, just because I am reading it with interruptions. I have many other activities, including job and family (and you usually read at night) and there is no knowledge left. (Participant 12)

On the other hand, the experience of rejection prevents the transformation of external regulations as an internal driver for learning. It thus hinders the opportunity to achieve higher-level learning outcomes, e.g. greater conceptual understanding or personal growth. Yet, a reference to the psychological research should be made with care since vast differences exist among adult students in their psychological attributes (Rotar, 2020). As a result of existing variations, some adults can internalise and accept regulations and requirements of the educational institution, whereas others cannot. This study supports experiential learning researchers (see Sisselman-Borgia and Torino, 2017) who recognise heterogeneity of the adult student population and propose new approaches to experiential learning pedagogy. Innovative pedagogies advocate an embracement of the baggage of experience that students possess as it assists in shaping of individually relevant experiences and learning outcomes that are internally accepted rather than rejected.

5.2.4 External Horizon

The context of experiencing online learning for a student from this category is not bounded by a single focus on a financial return or “hedging”, as it was the case for category 1. Instead, a

student is aware of the ability to translate gained knowledge to practice and see how what has been learnt can enhance a student's life and professionalism. This extension of awareness becomes possible with the developed ability to reflect and recognise connections between theoretical knowledge and its practical use.

Experiential learning research discussed in the literature review provides evidence that adult students value learning objectives that are related to their career or professional development (Sisselman-Borgia & Torino, 2017). Yet, this study showed that individual needs for such integration can be achieved through the learning process by a student him or herself, through the reciprocal process in penetration of newly-acquired knowledge and experience into professional practice. This research in some ways contradicts past research that advocated the development of experiential learning activities that consider complex needs of adult students. Instead, this study suggests that facilitating conditions for a dynamic and ongoing shaping and re-shaping of various dimensions of students' lives may naturally allow students to relate their learning with their professional practice and goals. Thus, this study agrees with experiential learning scholars (see Sisselman-Borgia & Torino, 2017) in that educational institutions should encourage students not only to gain knowledge, but also to actively apply it in a broader context.

In experiencing online learning in this way, the context within which this experience is discussed is around the power of online learning to influence different dimensions of the student's life and to gradually change the ways they are organised and approached.

The participants reflected on the permeability of an online learning experience and on a new order that it brings to their lives. Research by Gjestvang, Høye, and Bronken (2020) showed that for an adult to be a student requires additional planning and negotiation. Otherwise, the

learning takes on a hectic character and is difficult to manage alongside all other responsibilities, especially at the stage of the transition to higher education when academic workload is particularly difficult to manage (Gjestvang et al., 2020). Similarly, my study participants expressed a view that online learning requires them to be more efficient and to reorganise their life, so that not only learning but other dimensions of their lives are more organised. However, students' reflections also showed that there is an invisible influence of learning experience on students' approaches to everyday routine and professional practice that comes with the learning. Those adult students who were more successful in the process of negotiation and adjustment to the learning environment reported an experience of a newly-acquired structure in learning and life in general. Bringing Bourdieu's (1990; 2002) notion of habitus into the further discussion of the context, we can interpret online learning as a medium that can shape thoughts, behaviours, and practices, whilst, at the same time, being shaped by the individual's unique experiences. Thus, although referring to the individual experience of adaptation to and integration in online learning in different ways, students from this category emphasised an ongoing nature of these processes. Thus, through the acceptance of changes, learning experience is seen as a prerequisite for transformational processes and growth.

5.3 Category 3. Online Learning is a Process that Enables and Empowers

5.3.1 Referential Aspect

Experiencing online learning as a process that enables and empowers indicates the increase in awareness of how learning experience can facilitate an individual's growth and development. Additional elements of the learning experience that students refer to in this category are an ability to see from different perspectives, expanded horizons and changed ways of thinking and seeing the world. Whilst online learning continues to restructure and reorganise

multiple dimensions of a student's, it continues to impact the depth and the breadth of a student's understanding of the reality and a student's role in it. As a result, a student can discern the complexity of the phenomenon of learning:

...the one thing I should say thank you to this course - I finished it with an understanding of complete personal foolishness [kretinizma_- Russian], and obviously after the course, I started to seek and search and seek. I found resources that helped me to shape a vision on administration, direction, on management, and the course materials have finally assimilated. (Participant 7)

Haggis (2003) argues that a more advanced understanding of reality comes with the ability to be aware of different, sometimes conflicting perspectives and an ability to recognise reality as a complex phenomenon. In phenomenographic research (see for instance studies of Byrne & Flood, 2004; Marton et al., 1993), the experience of changing as a person is in some way different to the conception of this study, which offer a category of description that combines both professional and personal development. A unique combination of two concepts has been made due to the peculiarity of the considered online programmes. In particular, the content of the programmes under consideration was very specific, offering managerial study for people who are wishing to transit to or who are already in a managerial position. Therefore, in student's reflections on personal growth and development, these processes appeared to be strongly linked to their professional development. However, there were nuanced differences regarding the enabling and empowering mechanisms of the online learning process that justifies the creation of two subcategories, 3A and 3B, within one umbrella category.

According to Pring (2005), growth is a process that involves an expansion of an individual's understanding and experience through the stretch. Within the scope of professional practice,

Beairsto (1996) and Roisko (2007) differentiate two concepts, presuming that growth is an increase in the breadth of knowledge, while the development is associated with a more in-depth, qualitative change in professional expertise. In that sense, professional growth is an expansion of expertise, whereas professional development is a process that results in a radical transformation of one's professionalism. Although being aware of different interpretations of the notions of professional growth and professional development, in my discussion, I use these words interchangeably.

Although the tendency for personal growth has been apparent in category two, in this category, students embrace the responsibility to apply knowledge in critical ways, showing an improved ability to manage commitments and time, and an ability to cope with professional and personal challenges. For students, to achieve this often meant to try new ways of behaviour, move out of the comfort zone or make radical decisions. As Pring (2005) explains, the experience that involves stretch can be challenging and often uncomfortable. However, students were able to appreciate the experience and its influence on their personal and professional growth.

3A. Online learning changes the way of professional thinking (enables)

A student from this category experiences learning in an online programme as a process that fosters the development of professional thinking. An influence of a student's increase in knowledge on the professional practice had been discussed in category two. In this category, such influence has resulted in the development of a new way of professional thinking leading to the qualitative change of the student's professional expertise (Beairsto, 1996). In the quote below, a student reflects on learning experience contributing to his development and a selection of a new career trajectory:

I couldn't implement many things in my work in the old organization due to a number of reasons... That is why I changed my job, understanding that I can realize myself already in a new working place, while I could not do it in the old place for a number of reasons. Basically, I have opened for myself new horizons for development.
(Participant 12)

Cranton and King (2003) suggest that professional development influences not only professional practice but all areas of an adult student personality. The values, beliefs and a perspective of the world are changing as a result of this process. In this category, students emphasise a radical qualitative professional transformation rather than a mere professional upgrade:

First, in regard to the professional growth to tell you the truth I happened that all my study in [the institution] coincided not only with my career growth - I have been given a manager's position which I am holding for two years - but also with my professional growth. Because when you start to manage people, there is a big risk of making banal mistakes in terms of emotions, being too harsh, scream at people or something like that. [Studying at the programme] reversed me radically in that regard... (Participant 15)

...within my work, I am becoming more confident. And it allows you to be a more creative thinker and to give views on, it allows you to form arguments and give views and brainstorming... It also allows you not just to be, you know, talk about your own views, but actually to be able to listen to other people's views and understand where they're coming from as well. (Participant 3)

Powerful learning involves transformation (Bowden & Marton, 1998). Such transformation, in turn, requires a critical reflection and critical examination of one's own experience and practices, and a desire to seek for alternative ways of understanding reality. Reflections of my study participants indicate how active reconsideration on professional practices enabled students to become active agents in their professional practice. As a result, students were able to adopt a more mature approach within their professional behaviour:

I would always just decide on something, and that's what was happening. But I think now I'm more considered. I still tend to make decisions quite quickly, but I am more considered. (Participant 10)

So, while you are studying, you learn something new, answering the question and starting to think about how you would use it... And when you are reflecting how would you use it [in practice ... And already you slowly start to realize that yes, this is working and is useful... So, I would say I applied almost everything. (Participant 12)

3B. Online learning broadens horizons (empowers).

When experiencing learning as a process that broadens the horizons, a student embraces the opportunity for personal growth and development beyond the professional scope. Marton and Booth (1997) emphasize that the process of personal development presumes the “most extensive way of understanding learning” (Bowden & Marton, 1998, p.70). The analysis of students' reflections in this study indicates that these processes are longitudinal and reciprocal. Specifically, online learning experience may result in personal development and thus may reinforce a more transformative or powerful (Bowden & Marton, 1998) learning.

Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas (1996) argue that through the learning experience, a person matures and transforms in all areas and, consequently, may experience a sense of empowerment. A prerequisite for a personal transformation is the change in ways of looking at and seeing the world (Marton et al., 1993). This research provides empirical evidence that personal change goes in parallel with the development of the ability to see things from different perspectives. From this perspective, online learning has the potential to become not only a fact in a student's biography but also a part of personal development history.

Empowerment, as suggested by Marton et al. (1993), locates within the idea that a person develops a self-perception of being an active agent of life. In other words, life and professional trajectories are in control of the learner rather than determined by circumstances:

I think, personally, it shows me what I can actually achieve, both in a time management way, but also if you want to do something you can absolutely do it. I've always been a believer in that, but I think this has even pushed me further. (Participant 10)

The process of reflection is a necessary attribute of the person in this category and an essential part of the student's personal development. In the quotes below, students mention how learning experience encouraged greater reflectivity on the decisions about what is right and what is wrong:

That was the most difficult concept [there is no right or wrong answer] to meet and to get my grasp... I couldn't really say if it's right or wrong. So, only later I have realised it's more about how you justify your way of thinking and why you think this is a good answer rather than getting the right answer. (Participant 2)

There was constantly some kind of initiatory information for reflection. And many things you really had to get..._The programme was designed that way to make the students think more himself/herself, analyse more, look from a different perspective. And because of this, I had to immerse more and deeper into it, just to understand what it is about. (Participant 15)

One of the students reflects on how online learning activities she experienced were designed to assist in developing reflective thinking and to integrate reflexivity into everyday thinking:

I'm much better now at thinking through problems, thinking through issues at work in a much more logical way. Because of the models that we've been taught and because of the way you have to argue at a master's level, you are now thinking of both sides of the argument and forming your own opinion. They drill that into us in every assignment... (Participant 8)

Mezirow (1997) suggests that the process of making meaning of the phenomenon involves critical reflection, through which an individual recognises assumptions and becomes aware of unquestioned beliefs. When reflexivity is introduced into learning, a reality, including personal and professional practices, is perceived in a more critical way (Mezirow, 2000). For students from this category, critical reflection became an instrument for a more considered decision making:

I know I can talk to people and I can communicate with people but is there something more behind that? That's what helps me mentally. And even from chapter one or book one, let's say, of this module, I started immediately seeing things. That's right! I mean

I just stopped for a minute and really, I caught myself reflecting, you know? That's what I mean. (Participant 5)

The core meaning of this subcategory is similar to those described by Tsai (2009) and Zhao (2017). The conception of the highest level identified by Tsai is “seeing in a new way” or being able to interpret the reality in a new perspective (Tsai, 2009, p.1096), whereas the most advanced way of experiencing learning in Zhao’s (2017) study was “gaining a new perspective to view reality” (p.219). Within this concept, students perceived learning as a “development of a new perspective or conceptual framework through which they could re-examine the things they encountered in their surrounding environment” (Zhao, 2017, p.219).

Adult students in my study also experienced online learning as a process that changes the way of seeing the world, enabling a student to form an alternative opinion and develop a deeper understanding of reality. As a result of expanded awareness, a student gains the power to critically interpret and reinterpret the world, see things from an alternative perspective, broaden horizons and shape a more critical opinion. In other words, a student develops the ability to interpret the world and adapt the newly learned knowledge into it, rather than uncritically utilising theoretical facts and models as was the case in category 2.

Influence on the worldview can be expressed as a change of priorities or, using an expression of one of my study participants, shift of consciousness. This process of conceptual change has been explained by Chi (2008) as “mental model transformation” and “categorical shift”, indicating a radical ontological transformation within an individual (p. 61).

Similarly, the way students in my study talk about their transformation as a result of learning indicates that indeed learning experience can empower and transform:

I think it had an influence on my worldview and there was a change of priorities and I came to another job. Not very different from what I had before, but in my view, more appropriate from the perspective of the personal development strategy. I think it was not a mere coincidence... (Participant 12)

... it is a shift of consciousness, and you see the organisation from a different perspective... And even now, I have studied for two years, but I already realise that I have started to think in a different way compared to the colleague with whom I am working - despite all the issues we can find a consensus. And they can, of course, get offended, but I understand that sometimes it is difficult to explain my point of view because of the big gap in our knowledge. I can think over a few steps in front. (Participant 13)

I was surprised by how [the programme] made me immerse into it, just to completely switch on... I was struck by the design of the programme. There, you immerse entirely... you used to look forward, but you have to reverse 180 degrees to think through, to assess. This is cool. This is full immersion. And this is hard. And this is the case. (Participant 15)

As can be seen from students' reflections, online learning offers an opportunity to initiate professional development and personal growth, although it is not always an easy and comfortable process. In this study, the students reported the experience of being exposed to the situation where they stretched their capacities, explored different opinions, and questioned assumptions. In other words, online learning has been experienced as a holistic and twofold approach to professional and personal development.

5.3.2 Structural Aspects

Internal Horizon

A student from category three conceptualises the phenomenon of online learning in the most complex or advanced way. As a result, a student is not merely able to see reality in a more informed and organised way, as it is in category 2, but experiences reality differently. According to Mezirow (1991), this result indicates a transformation of old frames of reference. A learner from this category clearly experiences a shift to the way of thinking and seeing the world, referring to the enabling and empowering mechanisms of online learning.

Experiencing online learning as a process that structures and reorganises different dimensions of student life enabled students to initiate transformative ontological and epistemological change - a continuation of structuring processes that now take place within the individual. Vosniadou (2007) suggests that this process can happen through the of enrichment, revision, or transformation of old frameworks. While enrichment is a relatively straightforward way of conceptual change that may happen simply by gaining more rich information (a learning outcome common among students from category two), revision involves the use of new information to question or rethink held knowledge (Vosniadou, 2007). Lastly, a more radical conceptual change involves from the one hand, the transformation of the old frames to which an individual used to refer in the past and from the other, building new theoretical frameworks. According to my study participants who have been assigned to this category, such radical change may be experienced as a shift in consciousness and may not always be easy. According to my study participants who have been assigned to this category, such radical change may be experienced as a shift in consciousness and may not always be easy. When explaining a discomfort associated with conceptual change, Illeris (2007) refers to another transformative

learning experience - a change in a framework theory - which involves a transformation of the developed over the years of experience, yet unquestioned frameworks held by a student.

5.3.3 Dimensions of Variation

Motivation

Experience of online learning as a process that enables and empowers associated with an opportunity to unlock personal and professional potential through the learning process. The nature of student motivation is internal and inherited in the human tendency for growth and development (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Intrinsic motivation is facilitated by the learning experience that increases competence, more meaningful social interactions, and greater agency - inner needs that are in line inner psychological needs described by Ryan & Deci (2000) and Deci, Koestner and Ryan (1999).

As suggested earlier, the experience of learning as a process that brings structure facilitated ontological and epistemological change and enabled a student to transform self-perception. A student views online learning as a way of further development and increase of personal value:

Of course, I wish my learning to continue, to find an opportunity, financially mainly, to continue the study, I really liked it. And I hope it will contribute even more to my weight as a person and professional, and I will become a more valuable employee. (Participant 11)

In the following examples, students describe how online learning experiences fostered their personal development and inclination to learn more:

I had the desire to dig deeper into the core of their knowledge. Probably, it was mainly the influence of the tutor. (Participant 7)

Basically, later I started to record our tutorials, and I was coming home, transcribing them and was reading, rereading and rereading - it was really valuable material - that constant comprehension of the information he was giving us and that constant curious, warm digging inside, a worm in the form of not understanding, and the desire to find the understanding, to solve the puzzle. (Participant 7)

I have developed independence, inclination to study, to learn something new... I have got into a habit already of time organisation - when coming back from home - read actively, gain more information. (Participant 11)

Students reflect that they are motivated to progress by inner mechanisms, curiosity and personal interest in learning. The type of motivation that drives students is intrinsic.

The Need for Interactions

Social interactions during the learning process can create conditions for conceptual development and transformation. It is a practice that enhances the ability to look at things from different angles and stances. In the following quote, a student emphasises that interactions and group discussions were critical conditions to develop a new way of thinking:

... you are not just learning an equation, like doing just maths and just doing some calculus or geometry... I don't know what... your physics. When you are trying to bounce ideas off people and really contemplate on notions and theories, etc. I think it doesn't work otherwise. So, they will constantly encourage you, and that is the good

thing, of course. Also, they constantly encourage you to try to discuss these things either with the fellow students on the Forum or with you, you know, your spouse, your friends, etc. (Participant 5)

The role of a tutor in challenging an old way of a student's thinking is also distinguishing. A student reflects on his experience of interactions with a tutor and their transformational effect:

But when I saw that person [tutor], when he started to talk and build his terminological constructions, when he mentioned the word system and when he started to talk about things that are very close to me - critical thinking, system thinking at that moment I was exploring this area - I dipped into it, and I had a crazy excitement. The sunshine, it was summer, and everything was amazing. (Participant 7)

The need for social interactions in the development of a powerful way of experiencing online learning is in line with social learning theories (Bandura, 1977, Illeris, 2007). According to these theories, for new knowledge to be acquired and assimilated within the learner, it should be developed socially, through social learning activities. For a student from this category, online learning offered an opportunity to socialise knowledge in a unique way, assisted in developing reflexivity, challenging old ways of thinking, and promoting an opportunity to broaden horizons not only within the academic environment but far beyond it.

Learning Outcomes

A student from this category is seeking opportunities for personal growth and is ready to embrace learning challenges. Being open to new challenges, a student experiences a transformation of old mental habits and schemas, and, as a result, an ontological and epistemological change, including change of self-perception. The way students reflect on their

personal and professional growth throughout the learning process suggests that the result of experiencing learning is individual empowerment. According to Niemi (2002), empowerment is an improved ability or power to manage personal capacities. In line with that idea, a quote below shows that a student feels confident in the personal ability to initiate changes:

...I am trying to change the situation through self-learning, trying to find answers for the question that I ask myself, or those that arise during the work in communication with people. The key questions for me as a manager are how to influence people so I could achieve the aims that I need with the quality of work I need. (Participant 7)

Reflection appeared to be a vital element of personal growth, though this process is quite different from the type of reflection in category two. In category two, reflection was concerned with how students learn and how what they have learned can enhance their life, further learning and professional practice. That type of reflection may well be considered as a subset of the reflection in this category, which is more a reflection at personal or psychological levels, reflection on the interpersonal communications:

...within my work, I am becoming more confident, and it allows you to be a more creative thinker and to give views on it... it allows you to form arguments and give views and brainstorming... It also allows you not just to be, you know, talk about your own views, but actually to be able to listen to other people's views and understand where they are coming from as well. (Participant 3)

As a result, online learning empowers the individual to become open to new horizons and opportunities. The following quote, where a student refers to his whole learning experience as a game-changer, illustrates this idea:

It's a game-changer. I don't know what that change will be, but I know that I will look back and think in 10 years. The last ten years wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for my MBA. I know that for a fact. I just don't know what it's going to be. (Participant 8)

5.3.4 External Horizon

The context within which learning is experienced expands to a student's life beyond the academic or even professional frame. Moreover, it is not limited by the dynamics of the online learning environment and is an ongoing influence on the student's development which carries out even when learning is stopped. A student feels the ability and power for a change, experiences a shift in ontological and epistemological beliefs outside the scope of a learnt subject matter. The context of learning in this category is not bounded by career ambitions, although a student refers extensively to the examples of enablement and empowerment from professional life. Students associate themselves with active agents of their lives:

And when I reflect on where I was maybe three years ago in terms of work, I'm a different person, I think. And I get feedback from my boss that says how much he values what I'm learning. (Participant 8)

Within this broad context of experience, online learning provides conditions that have an enabling effect for the adult learner in a professional sphere, to obtain practices that support emerging opportunities for change and innovations. An adult student is capable of ideating innovative ideas, nurturing organisational processes, and proactive engagement within his or her organisation by utilising theoretical knowledge and abilities of critical and abstract thinking. The same context allows a student to experience empowerment and its multidimensional impact on personal, social, and professional levels. The results of this study suggest that empowerment represents the highest-level outcome associated with individual

growth and development because of the expansion of abilities and skills (Barak et al., 2008) and enhanced self-perception. As Gjestvang, Høye and Bronken (2020) state, understanding an adult student's growth as result of an individual learning experience is a very difficult task, but "it is possible to analyse aspects of a student's experiences of attending a learning programme to better understand the learning process" (p.72).

5.4 Discussion of the Findings for Research Question One

The discussion of the results of my research draw on the selected accounts of adult students who participated in my study. Findings from research question one uncovered three ways of experiencing online learning and the nature of variations in experience by this heterogeneous student population who differ in their personal characteristics, educational backgrounds, and psychological attributes. From adult students' accounts, online learning is not only a means of getting a degree, but a process that re-structures their lives and has an empowering and enabling effect on them. Furthermore, I revealed three ways of experiencing learning which are different by their nature, regarding adult student motivation, the role of interactions with others, and learning outcomes. These dimensions of variation run across each category of description.

The three ways of experiencing and three dimensions of variation in the experience of online learning shape an outcome model for research question one. The outcome space presents three different educational aspirations expressed by adult students, from the narrow and simplistic (investment into the degree diploma), to the point of experience where adult students experience integration of learning into major life dimensions (learning structures and re-structures), to the more complex and broader view of online learning (an extended capacity to grow personally and professionally). Identified ways of experiencing are different, regarding

their social context, influencing students' perception of the potential benefits of online learning experience.

Adult students appeared to perceive their online learning in different ways, and it was notable that, in their accounts, students positioned the process of learning in relation to three different contexts: the academic context; their professional practice; and a combination of their professional practice and personal agency. Thus, it is the context that seems to influence students' accounts of the process of online learning. It also suggests that contrary to what is implied by research into online students' experiences (Mansour & Mupinga, 2007; Dwyer et al., 2013; Ke, 2007; Shapiro et al., 2017), the factors that influence adult students' experiences are less significant than how adults understand their learning experience and how they understand the context of their online learning experience.

An ephemeral nature of an online learning environment allows great flexibility for adjustments to an individual's needs. However, the structure of the learning programme requires a student to adapt to the regulations and requirements too. This study showed that what is critical is whether a student is able to, at least partly, negotiate and internalise regulations posed by an educational institution, which may initially be in a conflict with an individual's needs and values.

This study supports the literature that argues that focusing on gaining a degree and being interested in knowledge for its own sake are not mutually exclusive (Ashwin et al., 2014; Hurst, 2013). Secondly, this study supports an argument that an examination of students' experiences should not be limited to solely educational aspects (Ashwin et al., 2014; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). As Ashwin et al. (2014) emphasise, "in implicitly assuming that all students perceive university as an educational experience, it misses those students who see higher education in

other ways” (p.975). This study suggests that personal and professional transformation from learning are as important as educational experiences.

Third, a more incisive category of description 3 contains a category of description of a lower level 2, a category that is focused on structuring power of online learning experiences on different dimensions of students’ lives. An interpretation of the results offered in this study emphasises that to experience online learning in a more powerful way, or to be better aware of a learning experience, it is necessary to go through the adaptation phase. A need for integration and adaptation to the learning environment has been emphasised in various theoretical and pedagogical models of students’ learning and success (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kember, 1995; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1975). Yet, those models stress the need for a student’s adaptation, whereas the results of this study suggest a mutual process of readjustment of both a student and a learning environment. In other words, the findings of this study suggest that what is important is how an individual student is able to negotiate the structure of his or her learning environment, to align learning to meet an individual’s schedule and professional and personal needs.

Following, I discuss three contexts of online learning experience in relation to popular discourse around higher education and learning environments.

5.4.1 Investment in Online Education

Experiencing learning as an investment, with emphasis on anticipated financial or economic benefits from the learning endeavour, mirrors past research on adult students’ reasons to return to universities and their motivational orientations (Milheim, 2005; Ross-Gordon, 2003).

It is not surprising that investment in online education is one of the contexts of experiencing online learning. It is documented in various studies that adult students tend to return to the

university with the aim to gain a degree and, thus, to stay “marketable and competitive” (Milheim, 2005, p.120). It is believed that “not only does a college degree allow one to remain competitive in the job market, it also provides a foundation on which to build a career that allows opportunity to transition their careers into other fields, rather than remaining ‘stuck’ in one career path all of their lives” (Milheim, 2005, p.120).

Similarly, Ross-Gordon (2003) emphasised that adult students experience “occupational pressures” that motivate them to return to studying (Ross-Gordon, in Jean Francois, 2014, p.20). Other scholars argue that adult students return to universities to improve their professional performance (Galbraith & James, 2002), or to make a change in their career (Aslanian, 2001). Jean Francous (2014) also suggests that professional advancement is the learning motivational factor for adult students’ involvement in education. This reflects accounts of students from category 1, who articulated that their study was an investment for the future benefits, and that they are driven by the anticipation to gain additional competences, knowledge and skills needed for their career progression. This finding reflects an argument made by Stone and O’Shea (2019) that for mature students the rationale for participating in education is shaped by “pragmatic and economic reasons” (p.57). However, it is important not to generalise that an investment into the career advancement is the predominant motive among all adults, since those who attend university also receive health and social benefits (Laming, Martin-Lynch, & Morris, 2016, in Stone and O’Shea, 2019), and may be able to gain empowerment and work towards self-actualisation, as happened with the participants of this study. Rather, what the results of the past research on adult students’ motivational orientations and reasons for returning to the university may suggest is that the economic and career benefits of education remain in the focus of awareness of a large proportion of adult students.

5.4.2 Structuring and Organising Power of Online Learning Environment

The participants of this study also reflected upon their learning experience as a process that shapes, structures, or re-structures their life routine, work behaviour and processes, or knowledge and experience. They talked about the permeability of online learning in positive ways and appreciated the order and efficiency that comes with that order. These reflections inspired me to discuss online learning through Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1990), although not overlaying my data analysis with this concept to avoid its heavy influence. Bourdieu elucidates habitus as a structure capable of creating and orienting thoughts, behaviours, and practices. That structure is shaped by the results of opportunities and limitations that frame an individual's experience. Previous experience serves as a foundation of structuring initial experience, and the previous habitus is diversified through the online learning experience, and in its turn, provides the basis for future experiences and actions. Thus, the process of structuring and re-structuring is an ongoing and active one.

The results of this study are in line with the argument offered by Cook-Sather et al. (2014) that a transformative education is shaped by the lives of students and thus is dynamic and non-linear. This study showed that an online learning environment is a space that is adaptable to a student's life but also requires a student to make some adjustments. In that process, both a space and student's life are affected by a change. Considering online learning through Bourdieu's notion, its environment can be seen as a powerful "habitus" that facilitates processes of re-structuration of knowledge, experience, and practice. Bourdieu argued that school could contribute to the learner's "cultural" habitus (Sullivan, 2002), a change of the trajectory of social and professional life. Indeed, in this category, the adult learners experienced internalization of external regulations as described by the SDT. Internalisation involves a transformation of values and beliefs into one's own. It is also noticeable, whilst not emphasised

in the SDT, that in this category there is an influence of newly-internalised regulations on the external dimensions of a student's life - everyday routine, professional practice, and gained knowledge and experience. Newly-internalised regulations structured a student's life. It is, however, important to note that adult students in this study did not use the term "structure". Instead, they were describing the examples and practical situations of how their personal and professional life gradually changed since they started their studies, how learning experience made their routine and professional practice more organised and efficient. In his structuration theory, Giddens (1984) explains that inertia of our actions and behaviours that prevents changes comes from routinisation (p.2). This study showed that online learning has the power to change the routine and bring change to an adult learner's life. SDT adds to the interpretation of the results regarding research question one, supporting the argument that for educators, it is critical to ensure the internalisation associated with the online learning process of external regulations. The failure of internalisation can result in thwarting learners' inner psychological needs. Although academic achievement as it is seen from the educators' perspective is not necessarily influenced, a learner's psychological state and well-being may suffer. A successful internalisation, on the other hand, will result not only in the acceptance of set values and requirements but also in the adaptation of a new, re-structured routine and re-organisation of a student's life. In that sense, the online learning experience modifies the "recursive routinization" (Giddens, 1984, p.2) of the adult learner to allow him or her to smoothly adapt to the new lifestyle. In his definition of habitus, Bourdieu (1977) explains,

the structures constitutive of a particular type of environment . . . produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations. . . . [T]he practices produced by the habitus [are] the

strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations. (Bourdieu, 1977, in Lizardo, 2004, p.378)

Morrison (2005) further elaborates that habitus is not only a product of historical development but that it has the power to structure or introduce changes, into the individual's social life, behaviour and routine. In other words, an online learning medium is both a result of the social structuring processes and a powerful environment. This environment has the potential for initiating changes in social life. In this study, an online learning environment can be seen as a habitus, and thus adult learners refer to their online learning experience as a process that brings structure.

This study showed that online learning influences not only social life or behaviour of the adult learner; it also structures the learner's knowledge and experience. Novak (2002) in his research on meaningful learning, explains the process of the meaning of construction which involves active integration of newly learned material with knowledge already possessed by the learner. The extent of this integration, he continues, depends on the effort made by the learner and only the learner can decide to put that effort in and thus, contribute to one's future empowerment. The results of this research study suggest the individual benefits of online education in all three categories. However, the benefits emphasised by adult learners are varied with regard to the context within which they are experienced.

5.4.3 Enabling and Empowering Potential of Online Higher Education

In this category, online learning is experienced as a process that leads to enabling the adult learner to grow, and to his or her empowerment. I mentioned that in Novak's (2002) argument it is the learner's choice and responsibility to seek for the integration of newly acquired knowledge within existing cognitive structures. This is especially true for the online learning

environment, whereby the simplest definition of this learning mode is a physical distance between tutor and learner.

In this category, online learning provides conditions that have an enabling effect for the adult learner in a professional sphere. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) when examining the complexity of a leadership phenomenon suggest that the concept “enabling” allows us to think of the practices that support emerging opportunities for change and innovations. Similarly, an online learning environment enables an adult learner by initiating the development of necessary skills for adaptive behaviour in a complex professional arena. An adult learner is capable of ideating innovative ideas, nurturing organisational processes, and proactive engagement within his or her organisation by utilising theoretical knowledge and abilities of critical and abstract thinking.

The adult learner who is enabled by the learning experience possesses a unique set of skills and is capable of complex thinking that allows a clearer vision of organisational development. An individual is capable of realising the full range of factors that are involved in professional practice, possesses a broader and deeper understanding of the organisational system, and has internalised theoretical knowledge of barriers for its change and development. In other words, an online learning experience allows the development of the mentioned unique professional skills that enable the learner to be agile and adaptive personally and professionally within the professional sphere. One instance is the development of ongoing adaptation to the “fluid” online environment where the requirements of social communication may not be explicit. Although being challenging, this experience is eventually rewarding for learners as it unlocks the ability to function efficaciously and confidently in complex and uncertain situations. Another example is the learner’s ability to take a new perspective and to embrace tensions and discomfort associated with negotiations and teamwork. An online learning experience can

make the learner feel comfortable with uncertainty, ambiguity, and the lack of information within his or her professional practice, while enhancing intellectual creativity and reflection.

Online learning can also be empowering. The concept “empowerment” has been extensively used in the past in relation to minority populations (Barak et al., 2008, p.1869). Although there is a discrepancy with regard to the exact definition of the term, there is a consensus among scholars about its broad conceptualisation. Barak et al. (2008) point out that research agrees that the concept “empowerment” represents a multidimensional phenomenon which has many elements, including social, economic, and political (Berton, 1994; Cowger, 1997). Moreover, the concept has been expanded and became concerned not only with group processes but also those of individual people. Individual dimensions of empowerment involve such factors as individuals’ decision making and critical thinking abilities, a possession of necessary resources (Wallerstein, 1992) and refer to the person’s capacity to effectively function when working towards anticipated outcomes (Lukes, 1974). Furthermore, as Barak et al. (2008) elaborate, empowerment represents an individual’s growth and development as a consequence of the expansion of abilities and skills, enhanced self-perception, and the development of a greater repertoire of coping mechanisms. Research that focuses on adult students’ experiences by encouraging students’ reflections also emphasises adults’ feelings of empowerments through learning (Knightley, 2007). In the study reported by Knightley (2007), such empowerment came from enhanced self-assurance and an enabled opportunity to contribute to the learning and other social communities more actively, whereas in this study students’ reflections indicated an increased agency and a readiness to accept expanded responsibilities.

Three categories identified in this study are non-rivalrous and non-excludable. Marginson (2011) argued that even an economically determined notion of “human capital” may be embedded into the idea of public good, the same way as Sen’s (1993) human capabilities are

associated with both individual and societal well-being. Yet, existing predominant economic and market perspectives on online higher education can create what Gramsci (1988) refers to as cultural hegemony. Öztok (2013) argues that cultural hegemony in relation to equitable learning opportunities in online education determines whether the learner's potential be fulfilled through the opportunity to select valued learning trajectories or be dismissed and replaced by dominant cultures.

5.5 Conclusion

Analysis of accounts of adult learners who participated in this study revealed that online learning can be experienced in three qualitatively different ways: as *an investment*; as *a process that provides structure*; and as *a process that enables and empowers*. In category two, there are two subcategories, which indicate the areas that are structured by the learning process, namely students' lives, work, and experience and knowledge, whereas in category three, there are two areas that are influenced by online learning in an enabling and emancipating way, namely professional thinking and personal transformation. The three ways of experiencing are represented by three hierarchically arranged categories of description within the outcome space.

The categories of description are distinctive with regard to their internal horizons, dimensions of variation, and external horizons. The internal horizon represents a student's focus on the phenomenon of online learning. In category one, a learner's focus is on meeting course requirements in order to gain a return on investment in the future. In category two, the focus is shifted towards the realisation of how online learning experience structures and restructures a learner's life and work and organises previous knowledge and experience. In category three, a

learner's awareness of the phenomenon is expanded, and the focus is on growth and development through the learning process, both professionally and personally.

The dimensions which vary across each category are the nature of a learner's motivation, the role of social interactions, and the outcomes of the learning experience. These dimensions of variation represent the themes that emerged from learners' accounts and, when moving across categories, show how learners' awareness of the phenomenon of online learning is expanding. In category one, where students see learning as an investment opportunity, they are motivated by the return of investment. In category two, motivation is professional growth and practical application of the skills and knowledge gained during learning. In the last category, the students' focus is on personal growth and development. With regard to the students' need for interactions theme, there is an expansion from the individualistic approach of seeing interactions with others as a way of benchmarking themselves (category one), to the desire to gain a reference about their progress and share experiences (category two), to seeing interactions with others, inside and outside the learning programme, and feedback as important elements of the developing process that enhances understanding and broadening horizons.

The context within which learning is conceptualised and discussed provides an explanation of the nature of identified variations. In category one, learning is experienced within the context of the economic benefits that come with education and reflects the neoliberal discourse. In category two, learning is experienced within the broader context of the dynamic and ongoing influence of the learning process of the learners' personal and professional life. It is shaped by the power of the online learning environment within and beyond the educational institution to change behaviour, actions, and approaches. In category three, the context is expanded to the learner's world view and involves conceptual change and the paradigm shift. Experiencing

learning in that context allowed the learners to become an active agent not only of their learning but also of their life.

Using Houle's (1961) typology of intentions, three categories of description of the online learning process can be allocated on a continuum, with category one on one extreme, representing the intention of gaining a degree certificate, and category three representing an intention for the personal and professional growth on the other extreme. In between, there are students who see learning as a process of gaining understanding, an instrument for improving professional practice and an opportunity to make new connections and reach for new job opportunities. An analysis of emerged dimensions of variations through the lens of SDT provided a better understanding of the participants' experiences. The identified dimensions are to a large extent in line with the basic human needs, namely need for competence, need for relatedness, and need for autonomy (Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995). According to the SDT, these needs are not assumed as physical or psychological deficits that may disturb the individual, but rather represent an individual's tendencies towards effectiveness, connectedness with the environment, and coherence of their behaviour. The analysis, however, did not intend to identify variations in the need's strength but rather attempted to explain these differences through the contexts within which online learning is conceptualised.

The results of this research support past studies that showed that adult students, despite valuing learning per se, may experience learning through the lens of professional aspirations (Reiff & Ballin, 2016; Sisselman-Borgia & Torino, 2017). In line with Reiff and Ballin (2016), my research found that online learning is experienced not only within the context of educational institutions, but also in relation to professional development opportunities.

The study also supports research findings that reported challenges of non-traditional students' adaptation to the learning environment (Baker, Irwin & Freeman, 2020; Gjestvang, Høye, & Bronken; 2020; Merrill, 2015; Reay, 2003). It adds to our knowledge of adult students' learning trajectories that may not be direct (Merrill, 2015) and may be associated with discomfort, stress (Tett, 2000) and sacrifices.

Finally, my study showed that for adult students, personal and professional aspects of their learning experience are intertwined, which adds to the discussion on the different domains of the worthiness of learning (Reiff, 1992; Reiff & Ballin, 2016).

6 Research Question Two

In this chapter, I present and discuss the results of the research in relation to the research question *What are the qualitatively different ways in which adult students conceptualise success?* The aim of research question two was to explore qualitative differences in the meaning assigned to the concept of success, rather than to identify the variety of definitions of success. Based on the empirical data gathered from adult students' accounts, the final set of categories of description is as follows:

- Success is measured by formal criteria.
- Success is understanding.
- Success is an improvement in one's work.
- Success is an opportunity to open doors.
- Success is self-actualisation.

To present and discuss the results of the data analysis, I employed the Referential/Structural and the structure of awareness frameworks (see 4.4 Theoretical and analytical frameworks). Variations in adult students' conceptualisations of success are discussed through the two themes that run across each category: anticipated learning outcomes and the role of the learning experience.

When asked to talk about academic success, participants voiced a range of perspectives (see Appendix 7). The hierarchically inclusive model of adult students' perceptions of success provides insight into the increased complexity of conceptualisations of this notion (Figure 6.1).

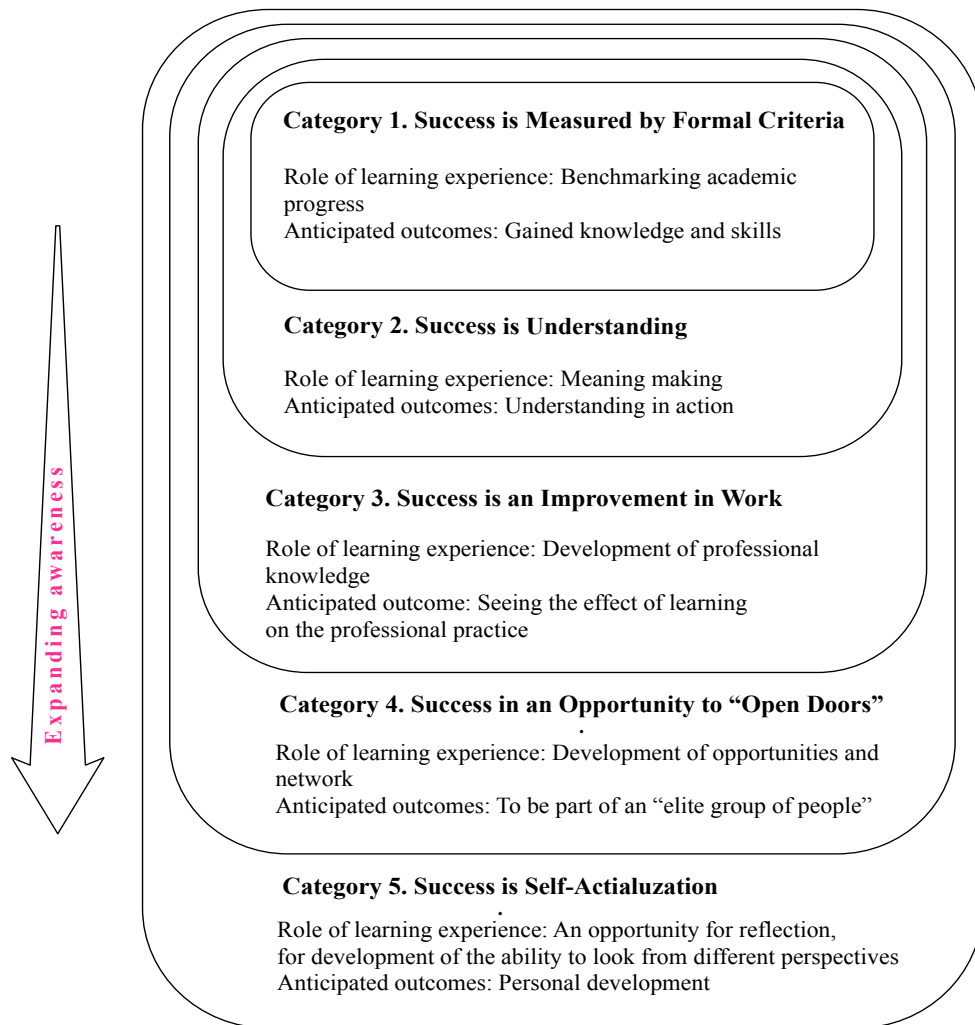


Figure 6.1 Outcome space: adult students’ conceptualisations of success.

Following, I describe the five categories and discuss the variations within the referential and structural aspects of the phenomenon of success. Different ways of conceptualising success are discussed within various contexts: academic environment; professional environment; labour market environment; and a broader context associated with the tendency for personal and professional growth and development.

6.1 Category 1. Success is measured by Formal Criteria

6.1.1 Referential Aspect

A student from this category conceptualises success through the lens of formal criteria. Successful learning is associated with delivering learning objectives and completing course requirements. This view of success is similar to that of Bunce and Hutchinson (1993), Finn and Rock (1997), and Trueman and Hartley (1996) who discuss the term within the formal evaluation frame, such as grades, examination scores, and other formal variables (Bunce, & Hutchinson, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997).

Adult students who experience learning in this way emphasise the value of a university diploma and received qualifications, and generally think of learning experience from an economic perspective. The learners tend to go about success using examples of passed assignments or examination results:

I passed all the modules. I haven't got as high an amount as I would like to get, so that was a personal disappointment. But it was a pass and therefore if passing is successful then yes, it's been successful. (Participant 6)

I think, I mean, that seems good [working online] but I have no idea how my classmates are performing in relation to me. So, I don't know if I'm at the top or the bottom or on track. And then I found that at the residential school as well. You talk to people in other tutor groups and... nobody's got above 60 in the assignments because actually it is really tough and [they] says that you know, if you get above 60 that's you almost at expert level. But then, all my marks have been quite high. So, I'm thinking okay, is my

tutor... is a bit easier [at] marking us? It is just that this is overall uncertainty of not knowing how you're doing. (Participant 10)

Although the learner from this category may develop an interest in learning, the emphasis is on formal assessment. Therefore, a distinctive feature of perceiving success from the formal perspective is that it captures only learners' performance ability and not necessarily their learning process or understanding of the online programme materials. In the quote following, the learner is referencing to the level of his work as measured by examination results and reflects on the minimal examination results as a personal failure:

I clearly understood the level of the exam work I have submitted. I have doubts that the minimal pass level that was received was the real level because my work was frankly weak. No feeling of pride, because I realised that either it was me who failed, or it was some other factors. (Participant 7)

6.1.2 Structural Aspects

Internal Horizon

In this category, students' focus is on successful or satisfactory grades, examination results, and other formal criteria of academic achievement. A student conceptualises success as determined by formal academic requirements.

When talking about their progress and prospects in learning, a student from this category refers to the adopted by an educational institution traditions of measuring success limited to the available instruments (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). Indeed, as York et al. (2015) pointed out, about 55% of existing instruments that measure the success of learning are based on the

grade point average (GPA). Although such a narrow perspective on academic success has been challenged in the past (McArthur, 2019), it is not surprising due to the availability of GPA and graduation data. Dictated by educational institutions criteria of success result in the lack of attention to the assessment of the broader learning outcomes and may lead to the adaptation of a narrow view on success by students.

6.1.3 Dimensions of Variation

Anticipated Learning Outcomes

The analysis of participants' reflections revealed two themes that were salient across all categories of description: anticipated learning outcomes and the role of the learning experience. In conceptualising success from a formal perspective, a student tends to associate success with grades, exam results or other formal criteria:

For me, I am quite competitive now with my study, so for me, it is obtaining high grades. But because I haven't received any yet, it's very hard to say if I'm successful or not.
(Participant 3)

If you get an assignment back and you get anything over about 50 per cent, then you feel like you've, you know, you are successful. And if your tutor has said "Well done" you feel competent. (Participant 8)

In other words, among available formal measures of success, academic achievement in the form of grades for the assignment was frequently mentioned by students from this category in relation to success.

The Role of Learning Experience

The role of the learning experience is another distinctive structural aspect of the considered phenomenon. In order to feel successful, a student from this category required an opportunity for benchmarking in order to compare the formal results of the learning process. Formal and informal feedback and discussion of the learning progress were significant for a student who conceptualised success from the formal perspective.

The role of the learning experience was to receive a formal confirmation of adequate progress. Apart from the validation of progress in the form assignment results and grades, the confirmation of success could have been received through an overall achievement that is recognised by others inside and outside the university (e.g. degree diploma, certificate of completion).

6.1.4 External Horizon

The environment of the academic institution frames the context of perceiving success as something that is measured by formally defined criteria.

The way how a narrow perspective on success can shape the discourse around this phenomenon is visible through the analysis of past research. Within such a context, students' academic success in OHE associated with retention and contrasted with attrition, withdrawal or dropout. Policymakers and educational institutions, too, encourage the aspirations for good grades and exam results among adult students (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). Thus, there is no surprise that dominant discourses and encouragements influence the way how adult students conceptualise success, limiting the context to academic achievement.

6.2 Category 2. Success is Understanding

6.2.1 Referential Aspect

Adult learners bring to their learning prior understanding of the world, experience, different expectations from learning, and possess various motivations to return to the university (Yoo & Huang, 2013). Yoo and Huang (2013) argue that existing differences inevitably impact adult students' engagement in their online learning, their motivation for learning and, consequently, their learning outcomes. For a student from this category, the desirable outcome of the learning process is understanding. A lack of understanding, on the other hand, may result in conflict of ideas, confusion and a feeling of discomfort (Smith, 1998). In the quote following, a student reflects on his experience of a state of "non-understanding" that, emphasising that knowing a direction of learning is important:

...I think if a person doesn't understand something, it pushes him or her away. And if you have to go and submerge yourself into that experience of "non-understanding", you feel disbalance or discomfort from within. And a constant exposure to that experience and the closer and closer [the time] to the writing of the TMA when I couldn't understand what do they want from me... all those questions were arising during the whole length of my study: "What do they want from me?" and "Why do I need that?" (Participant 7)

As emphasised by Entwistle and Entwistle (1991) student satisfaction with the learning process is strongly related to understanding. A concern expressed by a student in the previous quote suggests that the lack of clarity of the purposes of learning activities and a lack of understanding that emerged as a result of unfamiliar pedagogical practices were the primary source of disbalance and frustration.

Due to the differences in various respects between my study participants, their position on the meaning of understanding also varied. In contrast with a student who linked a lack of understanding of the unusual learning activities, another student experienced understanding as enhanced expertise in a professional sphere:

...it is a much better understanding that I can now use in my work. (Participant 9)

-I: What kind of understanding?

In the functional area, in the management of change, area of human resources management. (Participant 9)

Yet, for another student, an understanding was associated with a feeling of information going through the mind, with the ability to make connections between various things:

I would say that I'm successfully doing things. I base that on the fact that when I started writing the essay finally, and I saw that the information was flowing through my head. I didn't have to just keep reading and keep going back and see, okay, what did he say? Maybe I can write some of that. I already saw that more than half of the information that I had in my essay was already there in terms of theories in terms of models that I had connected to my evidence. So, I saw that I had made the connections, so that feels like a success to me. (Participant 5)

6.2.2 Structural Aspects

Internal Horizon

When talking about success, adult students from this category bring forward various forms of understanding, such as being able to make sense of the course materials, being able to make connections or better understand the functional area of professional practice. The conceptualisation of success that comes to the foci of students' awareness is more than a mere completion of assignments or a university degree. The notion of success is related to reaching a state of understanding:

... I think I recognise this is the success: my understanding of some of the concepts that I studied and being able to remember them and use them. It's again another proof that I've learned something, which is another success. And probably being able to recognise that people that at the same level as I am, they also struggled with some of the understanding of some of the concept. (Participant 3)

This perspective on success as understanding is in line with Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005), who emphasised that the ability to reflect and an understanding of how to apply knowledge to the challenges outside the learning environment are substantial components of success.

6.2.3 Dimensions of Variation

Anticipated Outcomes

In this study, an emerged conceptualisation of understanding is understanding in action or understanding of the process of learning. Although being able to pass the required assignments,

a student may lack an understanding of how theoretical knowledge is related to real-life situations. Understanding, however, implies meaning that can be unique for each adult student. Therefore, learning outcomes cannot be divided into understanding or non-understanding. What makes a learning experience meaningful for an individual student and result in the feeling of success is an experience of making sense at various levels of depth and breadth. When understanding is reached, a student's motivation is enhanced, and he or she may experience a feeling of satisfaction:

It was after meeting actually when I thought about it and it was kind of a feeling of satisfaction. So, I was happy, I was really happy and satisfied when I came out of the meeting where I understood everything. And I'm not necessarily then going to go on and do any of the maths they were talking about any of the sums because I don't work in finance. I don't really need to do that for my job. But it was just satisfaction that I could go into another meeting and I could know what they would start talking about.
(Participant 10)

A suggestion that different students may require different levels of understanding reflects the findings of the research conducted by Entwistle and Entwistle (1997) and Entwistle and Entwistle (2001). The authors reported that different forms of understanding and identified the following levels of making sense of information: referring to incoherent pieces of information, describing materials, referring to information without supporting by evidence, explaining information by using supporting evidence and conceiving unique conceptions as a result of deep understanding. Entwistle and Smith (2002) also described different forms of understanding based on an extensive review of the relevant literature. He argued that it is crucial to understand the difference between the objectives set by a curriculum or a teacher, and what is an individual need or perception of understanding. Furthermore, as Smith (1998)

elaborates, for an individual student, understanding implies something specific, and may result in a product that merges past and new experience. Due to the potential conflict of old habits, knowledge and experience and newly acquired information, concepts and ideas may overlap and contradict, creating a feeling of discomfort (Smith, 1998).

The Role of the Learning Experience

Learning experience plays an important role not only in learning new concepts but also in assisting a student in uncovering the meaning of these complex concepts (Pea, 1993). In other words, the learning process provides an opportunity to illuminate the uncertainty through the clarification and feedback of a student's interpretation of the course materials, and, in such way, to illuminate the missing meaning and "non-understanding". Indeed, one of my study participants explained the importance of making sense of the introduced concepts in order to progress and succeed in learning:

Once you missed it [the term, or the chain of the meaning] – that's it. The causal relation crashed, and further learning is pointless. Gradually, you will lose interest, because you do not understand, it does not fit in your head, and you experience indifference. So, this is the key principle - do not miss ever any concept or chain of meaning that do not make sense to you. (Participant 7)

Ideally, as later clarified by the same student, learning activities are designed to assist a student in reaching an understanding:

The question of learning, the technology of learning, is the key that I am working on at the moment. I always want to find literature where it says how to do it right. One key

principle I found for myself - the learning stops at the very moment when the student missed the meaning of the first unknown concept. (Participant 7)

External regulations and requirements, when accepted by a student, may support motivation to persist in the process of learning that may be challenging:

On the one hand, I was aware that I am developing new knowledge, learn new facets, and on the other hand, my marks were not bad at all. One TMA I had, if I am not mistaken, mark 90. And it was sent to the independent tutor for revision, and he confirmed the mark that was given by my tutor. I took this TMA quite scrupulously, and I remember even now what I was writing about. That knowledge assimilated well in my head. (Participant 14)

6.2.4 External Horizon

The conceptualisation of success as understanding is largely shaped by the making meaning of the learning materials. However, my study participants also refer to other forms of understanding, namely understanding in how to apply theoretical knowledge on practice or understanding the relationships between the concepts or complex ideas. Thus, the background of experiencing learning as understanding is not related to the academic requirements only but also covers a student's inner feeling of ownership the “product” of learning (Participant 7). One student, when discussing the anticipated outcomes of learning associated with learning progress and success, referred to understanding that presumed “knowing in action”:

And an understanding it is a knowing in action. E.g., not only the possession of the information, but I can to apply it in practice. This is I was lacking (Participant 7)

The main contextual difference between category one and this category is that when conceptualising success as understanding, a student not primarily interested in obtaining satisfactory grades and meet formal learning requirements in order to be successful (as in category one), but rather associated success with meaningful learning (Ransdell, 2013):

It's not just a paper for me [a diploma]... every single chapter that I read now; I'm trying to take something... Where does it fit in my every day that lets say role? So that's success for me. If I can find a connection, if I can find an explanation to something through something that I read in the module – that's a success. (Participant 5)

I know I have weaknesses in certain areas. For instance, budgeting and finance, I have no experience in that. So, when I get asked in an interview about my experience, I didn't have any, so I thought that doing the MBA at least that's giving me a background on all these weak subjects. And also, I do like to know the bigger picture of an organisation and so by doing an MBA then allows me to understand what goes on in marketing, what goes on in finance. So, then I feel more confident in that sense. (Participant 3)

Importantly, even when being formally classified as successful (after the successful completion of the final examinations), a learner who reported lack of understanding did not experience a feeling of pride and satisfaction. In other words, the context within which success is conceptualised is shaped by requirements that come not only from formal institutional regulations but also from within the learner.

6.3 Category 3. Success is an Improvement in Work

6.3.1 Referential Aspect

In this category, a conception of success is different from those associated with academic achievement or making sense of concepts or ideas. However, it is, to some extent, related to the anticipation of knowing in action. A student from this category refers to the evidence of the utility of new knowledge and acquired skills and competences. Thus, success is perceived as improved professional performance:

And I think because I can feel the effects of it [learning] every day at work. It's less tangible than assessment results. But work in a lot of respects has become much easier.
(Participant 8)

As the quote following illustrates, evidence of being successful for a student was associated with being better at what he or she is doing:

I think he [a learner's father] would not value the MBA as something that would help me achieve that [take the lead in a family business]. He values practical experience because he has not had an education. He values practical experience... I mean, it will help me because it will fill in the gaps of the bits I do not know. So, in that way, it will help me be successful in my future career, but it is not going to alter my career path... It is just going to make me better at what I do. (Participant 10)

The difference of this way of conceptualising success in comparison to previous categories is that it is associated with a student's anticipation to transfer and actively use acquired competences, knowledge and skills in professional practice. In order to do so, a student must

make sense of the theoretical knowledge and be able to adapt and transfer it to into the professional or occupational context. At the same time, the conceptualisation of success as an improvement in work may contain some elements from the previous categories, suggesting the expansion of a student's understanding of the concept:

... there's also different kinds of success which can be translated into key [areas], is like the development of the workforce, them around, how we feel about going to work are we enthusiastic motivated - all of that, you know, you can turn, you can put under that umbrella if you like, of success, and just about anything you think of can be measured somehow. In this case, like my simple explanation is if I pass the course and ultimately, when I get that qualification, I would consider that a success. Then separate to that, if I put that to use at work and it enhances my career, I would consider that a separate success. (Participant 6)

An extension of awareness of the phenomenon of success, a student is not only distinguishing such elements of successful learning as exam results and grades, and an assimilated learning materials, but also sees an enhancing professional performance as a composite element of success:

I was always quite confident in my ability to do my job. But I'm now more confident when I talk to the other functions like finance and operations... I now challenge them more rather than just accepting what they say. I would say "Why? Why are you doing it that way? Can you explain it to me?" (Participant 10)

6.3.2 Structural Aspects

Internal Horizon

In this category, students' focus is on enhanced professional practice. In this way of experiencing success, the models and theoretical frames developed or taken from learning are applied to professional practice or everyday activities and evidence their utility, and enhancement of a student's work. A quote following illustrates the core meaning of conceptualisation of success as an improvement in one's work:

But to me, you can pass [assignment] and still not be very good at managing all your job. So, I think being successful in relation to the MBA is probably understanding the course enough to improve in work. I think I am starting to do. So, I think the MBA as a whole has been a successful experience for me so far. (Participant 10)

6.3.3 Dimensions of Variation

Anticipated Outcomes

A student from this category experiences or is in anticipation of benefiting from learning in everyday work or professionally. Among the most mentioned implications of learning are the ability to look at an issue from alternative perspectives and an improvement in professional practice. In particular, students mention the developed ability to approach job-related tasks in a qualitatively different way. Thus, the conceptualisation of success among student from this category expands to include enhanced professional performance or advanced work:

You know, we were learning that there are successful managers and there are also productive [managers], and those two notions are differing. We were practising

reflexivity, and I was answering this question - I would rather be an efficient manager than successful. And the difference in those two concepts is that the successful manager is the one who is moving fast on a career ladder and the effective manager is the one who solves the tasks or problems in a maximum short term with minimum resources. And I would like to be an efficient manager. I would like to be an extra professional.

(Participant 14)

The anticipated outcome described by students in this category is similar to what York, Gibson and Rankin (2015) described as “post-college career performance” in their alternative academic success model (p.7). Baartman, Bastiaens, Kirschner, and Van der Vleuten (2006) and Baartman, Prins, Kirschner, and Van Der Vleuten (2007) refer to this learning outcome as competency development, e.g. a process of integration of new values, knowledge, skills that influence students' actions. Similarly, Nusche (2013) argues that the developed throughout the learning process competences may transform students' approach to real-life situations.

The Role of the Learning Experience

In this category, a student experiences the influence of learning on developing professionalism and professional competences. During the learning process, a student's professional confidence increases as a result of growth in professional knowledge. Bromme and Tillema (1995) explain this process as the development of professional knowledge. Such development happens when theoretical knowledge is successfully integrated into professional practice. The successful application of theoretical knowledge, however, is only possible if a student develops a clear understanding of the specialised concepts and how they can be adopted and applied in real-life. This suggests that the experience of understanding, or knowing in action (category three) is a necessary condition for the development of professional knowledge:

...within those three years the stuff that I will learn, I can already apply, and this is actually something that will shake me, not getting the MBA title next to my name, but actually, the things that I learn and apply already within those three years. (Participant 5)

I try to follow some of the motivation theories that I have learned about, so when I actually started my MBA, I was asked to start managing another team, another team of senior IT engineers, much older than me and they had been in the company for much longer than I did... I used some of the motivation theories... to help me to make sure that they were on my side and not against me. (Participant 6)

As a critical element of the learning process and the development of professional knowledge is feedback. However, for a student from this category, feedback plays a different function. Through feedback, learning experience and theoretical knowledge are shared, discussed and applied not only within the academic context but also in the professional sphere:

And when I reflect on where I was maybe three years ago in terms of work, I'm a different person, I think. And I get feedback from my boss that says how much he values what I'm learning. And I involve him if my assignments are case studies with my organization, then I will involve him in my research. (Participant 8)

The learning experience assists students in developing the ability to see and understand relationships in different processes or phenomena. This idea is in line with the experience of connecting dots that have been discussed in the previous category, but with expansion to the professional practice:

I would be completely honest. I don't sit at work and think about the theories... So, I need to do something in sales and then it's made me sit there and think okay, then I need to talk to purchasing because they're going to need to... you know if I'm driving this product forward they're going to need to order more. Then I think, okay, well operations need to know because they need to know to make sure they have the capacity in the warehouse. And the start and deliveries are gonna have to increase. So, I think it's understanding how everything interconnects... (Participant 10)

6.3.4 External Horizon

In this category, a student conceptualises success as an improved professional practice. Success is discussed through the impact of learning on professional performance and an enhanced ability to interconnect different real-life processes. A student's professional practice shapes the context of conceptualisation of success. Therefore, success for a student is a matter of a subjective evaluation rather than an instrumentally measured achievement:

...success to me is related to professional growth. And it is not that you are getting paid more, but because the scope of your competency is growing, the level of your professionalism is growing, the scale of your activity and your personality is growing. (Participant 14)

The context of experiencing success is in line with an aspiration of educational institutions to contribute to the development of workforce knowledge, skills and competences (Matthews & Kotzee, 2019). However, as Ng, Eby, Sorensen and Feldman (2005) emphasised, in regard to career success, there are subjective and objective evaluation criteria, not limited by obtained competences. Thus, an individual student, rather than educational institution, is more aware of

the need for professional development since that need is individually evaluated and depends on the scope and peculiarity of a student's professional practice and responsibilities.

6.4 Category 4. Success is an Opportunity to Open Doors

6.4.1 Referential Aspect

In this category, success is associated with the emerging access to privileges offered on the labour market. Specifically, a student conceptualises success as an opportunity to open more doors. The future aspirations are discussed through potential career opportunities that may become available to a student:

...if gaining those qualifications from the xxx enables me to apply for let's say a higher paying job or jobs at better companies, then it enhances my success there. And opening the door to some of those bigger companies is difficult, and they often have policies where they only hire people with formal education... So, it would be a success if it... increased the number of options that I have in the future. (Participant 6)

This perspective reflects the benefits of education as an increase in the number of career options and an emerging potential to realise career ambitions stressed by Kuh and his colleagues (2006). Similarly, Ng, Eby, Sorensen, and Feldman (2005) refer to students' success as a development of human capital and enhanced career opportunities. In particular, as evidence from this study shows, both educational and work experience have a strong influence on promotional opportunities for an individual student (Ng et al., 2005) and may result in an increased number of job offerings. At the same time, developed professional knowledge, reported by students in the previous category, may contribute to a greater feeling of competitiveness:

...I hope when I finish the MBA, I will be given an opportunity to step up to a different role within the organisation I currently work for. And when I finish the MBA, I think with the experience and the qualification, I'll be trying to get a job that is probably at the IT director level next. (Participant 2)

As Heckert and Wallis (1998) concluded, students see their educational experience as a practice that prepares them to be more competitive in looking for employment opportunities.

6.4.2 Structural Aspects

Internal Horizon

The focus of a student's awareness is extended from the academic context to subjective feeling of understanding, and further from the enhanced professional practice to the competitive labour market. Thus, a core meaning of conceptualising success is an opportunity to gain competitive advantages at the labour market that can assist in opening more doors.

6.4.3 Dimensions of Variation

Anticipated Outcomes

In this category, success is associated with the professional ambitions of a student. The motivation of a student is rooted in a developed feeling of competitiveness that resulted from enhanced professional knowledge. Indeed, in this category, the outcome of learning is to a great extent shaped by the anticipation of becoming a professional for whom more doors are open on a labour market. Success is thus equated to career success.

In the following quote, a learner talks about the anticipated outcome of his learning, mentioning new opportunities which were not available for him before:

I think the study will get me a qualification. Completing the study will open more doors. And I would be able to show up with confidence saying I have my MBA. (Participant 6)

Another learner reflects on her aspiration to reconsider her career and the role of her learning in it:

I needed to open some doors because... when the children were young, I worked... two or three days a week, and the priority was to get the money whilst they were young. And then when my youngest son went into full-time school and I couldn't see where my career was gonna go. (Participant 8)

The Role of the Learning Experience

Students' conceptualisations of success as an opportunity to open more doors relates to their anticipation to increase their weight or a price on a labour market through the validation of individual professionalism. The learning experience is thus seen as an opportunity to make career progress or change:

I hope that the management will favour me further and give me an opportunity to show myself in a higher position. Will make me a manager of the department so I can implement the knowledge I have got for the maximum benefits for the organisation. (Participant 11)

When reflecting on how the experience of online learning may assist students in reaching the anticipated outcomes, they referred to an online degree as a validator of professionalism that is widely recognised and serves as a means to develop relevant network:

Imagine there is a marketing project, and there is a need to do additional research. And they need to find a person who can do it. So, the recent tendency is to delegate it to me. So, it flatters me and at the same time, influences my [personal and professional] development. (Participant 11)

I unexpectedly found that one of the new bank managers also has a [university] diploma. And this what connects us... Therefore, to some extent, it [learning at the programme] is an extension of the network through those connections and, as I already mentioned, the recommendations from people who already finished the study... I think that the alumni community [has a significant impact]. (Participant 12)

6.4.4 External Horizon

The labour market scope frames a conceptualisation of success in this category. A student anticipates greater freedom in the form of emerged opportunities and opened “doors” (Participant 6) as a result of the completion of an online degree. However, when talking about success, students from this category are not merely seeking a degree to succeed on a labour market; instead, they are inspired by an opportunity to gain validation of their professionalism and an ability to be free from the pressure of job competition.

6.5 Category 5. Success comes with Self-Actualisation

6.5.1 Referential Aspect

In this category, success is conceptualised as a subjective judgment on personal development. When discussing success, students refer to emotional dimensions, such as a feeling of achievement, pride, self-confidence and accomplishment. A success described by students evokes a notion of self-actualisation through learning.

For a student with this conceptualisation of success, the future market benefits or increased employment opportunities were, although desired, not critical for their satisfaction with the learning process. Rather, an expansion of personal capabilities and emancipation from a narrow way of thinking and seeing the world was the outcome they valued the most. This conceptualisation of success is associated with anticipated individual growth and the development of higher-order skills such as self-awareness, critical and reflexive thinking, confidence and self-esteem:

...as I completed the course, and I got a pass, I had a great sense of accomplishment. And felt like I was joining an elite group of people, if you like, who had got their degrees and so on. And I felt I was on the path to becoming part of that group that I always wanted to be part of. So, a great sense of accomplishment, an improvement in self-esteem was definitely [there]. (Participant 6)

It's kind of puts you in the mood to keep learning all this kind of let's say a constant learning or lifelong learning. It is true. It's kind of motivates you and gives you something to deal with and you feel good about yourself because yes, see I can learn about it. If I don't know what I can learn about. So, this I like because it gives you

confidence, I think. It makes you feel better about yourself for having accomplished something. (Participant 1)

6.5.2 Structural Aspects

Internal Horizon

A student's focus when talking about success is on the potential of learning to gain a transformative experience that contributes to a student's self-actualisation. Success is perceived not only as a development of competences and cognitive skills, but also non-cognitive skills such as confidence, self-esteem, self-awareness and an active agency for further development. Success here is also associated with a feeling of accomplishment. It is discussed as a challenge that makes an individual feel good and successful:

Yes, I went and told myself that I can, I can finish with a good outcome; that if I have an aim, I go for it (Participant 11)

6.5.3 Dimensions of Variation

Anticipated Outcomes

In conceptualising success as self-actualisation, a student's focus is on personal growth and development and an associated feeling of increased self-esteem, self-confidence, feeling good about the self and improved interpersonal communication. Additionally, students' reflections on the successful results of the learning process include increased social and professional responsibility and the desire to learn further.

An important anticipated outcome for a student from this category is satisfaction from learning. The feeling of satisfaction, according to Deci and Ryan (2000) and Martens, Gulikers, and Bastiaens (2004), indicated an inner desire for learning due to joy and internal interest:

I had a nice feeling of accomplishment that I have finished, accomplished it, and I was looking forward to applying it in practice. (Participant 9)

And the most accomplishment moment - that would probably be the residential school, where you actually could spend some time with people similar to me, people who actually are looking to progress into management and have ambition and then realise that they are facing the same kind of difficulty that I did. So that was probably the best kind of enlightening moment. (Participant 2)

...it's made me feel better personally because I get a sense of accomplishment myself and it's something I've long wanted to do. And right now, I don't know why I didn't do it 20 years ago. (Participant 5)

Role of the Learning Experience

Within the tradition of personal development research, there is a focus on the development of an individual's knowledge and cognitive capacities. One area of such research interested in examining the impact of the social environment on the developmental processes, including cognitive development (Tudge & Rogoff, 1999) and moral development (Cowan, Longer, Heavenrich, & Nathanson, 1969; Duska & Whelan, 1975). According to this research, developmental processes are better facilitative in an environment that supports social learning. In this study, students reflected on how social interactions with others throughout the learning

process triggered their developmental mechanisms and development of a more considered opinion:

I feel that different students can give different perspectives on the subject. So, I suppose it is in that sense successful... having my perspective, my opinion from a scientific point of view. (Participant 3)

... I wasn't in this mindset of presenting both sides of the argument and having... It was a comment I had on a couple of different assignments to "give us your opinion and tell us what you think... I have quite a methodical way of coming to that opinion. Whereas I think before the MBA, I was having a hunch about what I thought was the right thing and I would put that forward in quite an unsure kind of way. So yeah, that's been quite a big change actually. (Participant 3)

Learning experience can provide an opportunity for shaping and sharing an opinion and, in that way, facilitates developmental processes.

6.5.4 External Horizon

For a student from this category, success is a complex concept. It is viewed as an opportunity for self-actualisation through the learning process, an extension of personal capabilities, and the emancipation from a narrow way of thinking and seeing the world. The context within which the notion of success is conceptualised is broad and includes personal and professional scope, as well as the inner world of the individual. The emergence of the emotional or affective domain in conceptualising success indicates an alignment of the anticipated learning outcomes with students' values and innate psychological needs. Confidence in personal competence and freedom of choice experienced by a student facilitate students' internal motivation and

contribute to the feeling of satisfaction. Furthermore, success is associated with an individual agency and an opportunity to develop an individual opinion.

6.6 Discussion

Within the context of HE, success has been predominantly associated with academic achievement and students' employability (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). A comprehensive analysis of studies that define and measure success conducted by York et al. (2015) resulted in a conclusion that past research is primarily concerned with academic achievement as measured by GPA,

The proliferation of studies concerned with identifying constructs that promote academic success is likely connected to the overall assessment movement and increasing pressures for institutions to evidence student learning and development. Assessing the psychological and psychosocial processes of learning and development have always been complex. (p.1)

Nevertheless, there is evidence that success can be conceptualised from various perspectives by different stakeholders. Prior research on students' voices shows that adult students distinguish between mere gain in knowledge that can be evaluated and an ability to use that knowledge which they define as success in learning (Donaldson, Graham, Martindil, Long, & Bradley, 1999). The findings of this study also suggest that adult students clearly see the difference between academic success in its traditional terms and other forms of success that they value, including an enhanced professional practice and emerged opportunities for professional and personal life. This is in line with Knightley (2007) who emphasised personal benefits of learning for the students in his study. The idea that learning influences various dimensions of adult students' lives is also articulated by Benton (2015). The authors, however,

urged use of that knowledge for assisting non-traditional students to succeed in their learning, pointing out that we need to look not only at the academic aspect of students' pathways through the college. York et al. (2015) emphasise the variety of elements that may constitute student success, exemplifying their argument in the following way:

Varying constituents view success, and thereby academic success, differently. For example, while the chair of an English department may not consider utilizing alumni's career promotion histories as an indicator of academic success, a director of career services almost certainly would. In this example, the faculty member may argue academic success refers specifically to the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills demonstrated through completion of courses. The administrator may in turn argue academic success refers to ability for graduates to obtain and advance in occupations within, or related to, their degree fields. (p.1)

York et al. (2015) and Kuh et al. (2006) provide an excellent summary of the dynamics over existing conceptualisations of student success and name its important elements. Among the constituents of success emphasised by Kuh et al. (2006) are "academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance. (Kuh et al, 2006, p.5), whereas York et al. (2015) identified "academic achievement, attainment of learning objectives, acquisition of desired skills and competencies, satisfaction, persistence, and postcollege performance". (p.5). Interestingly, York and colleagues (2015) did not include satisfaction with learning into their definition, explaining that it represents an "institutional fit, climate, or students' goal achievement" rather than an element of the success model (p.6).

Alternative line of discussion on success is related to the intrinsic and extrinsic career benefits (Fralick, 1993; Ng, Eby, Dorensen, & Fel, 2005; York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). While extrinsic indicators of success are well-known (career goal attainment and satisfaction), there is little attention to intrinsic indicators, such as unlocked potential, realised career ambitions, increase in number of career opportunities and associated increase in satisfaction (Fralick, 1993). This issue indicates a functional view on learning, especially in the field of adult education (Grummell, 2007). Grummell (2007) emphasise, “adult education is often described as “second chance”, offering adults a chance to re-access education systems or to re-train in new educational skills and knowledge” (p.183). She argues that such a functional perspective “promotes an approach to adult learning that works to the advantage of the marketplace, enabling economic flexibility for a global and casualised labour force” (p. 182). The orientation of both adult education and HE towards its firm position on a marketplace leaves little space for the intrinsically important benefits of higher education for an adult student. Thus, alternative indicators of success, such as a developed ability for critical thinking, personal growth, well-being, obtained the freedom of choice (Sen, 1993), or contribution to social justice and moral development (McArthur, 2019) are often neglected.

The results of this study add to the research on students’ voices in relation to their academic success. It supports the proposed matrix of student success (Reiff, 1992) where a factor of worthiness of the learning is emphasised, and personal and academic domains are connected in the learning process. In other words, this study supports Reiff’s (1992) suggestion to look at a holistic learning experience and learning outcomes of adult students that are not limited to the academic context only. Nussbaum (2006) also advocates an exploration of learning benefits beyond the educational institution and beyond the focus on the human capital and economic outcomes. She invites thinking about the contribution of education in terms of human

capabilities, suggesting that learning experience can nurture personal development and well-being. Considering the findings of the research question two in that light, adult students hold the variety of aspirations that are arguably rooted in differences in educational backgrounds, cultural capital, socialisation experience and “the capacity to think and act” (Otto & Ziegler, 2006, p.271).

The focus on the learning outcomes that are valued for adult students does not dismiss the value of the measure of academic achievement (Sen, 1993). Indeed, this research has shown that adult students may be interested in gaining a degree for strategic purposes to advance on a labour market. Yet, it is important not to limit learning outcomes to achievement and employability issues, so that individual functioning is neglected (Walker, 2008).

Narrative research shows that students’ voices can reveal a much more detailed picture of learning outcomes gained by the learners, even those who are formally not successful (Reay et al., 2001). As Merrill (2015) found, the student who dropped out from the study can still experience a transformative effect of learning expanding the life of a student. The participants in this study articulated qualitatively different perspectives on success, starting from a formal passing of the exams and gaining a degree to aspirations for self-actualisation.

Although adult students enrolled in two considered programmes represent a sample of the heterogeneous adult student population, study findings do not suggest that there are commonalities that can be generalised. Furthermore, the considered programmes have been designed for an adult student population with interest in professional development, and, thus, the generated conceptualisations of success are arguably very nuanced and context-specific. However, findings of the research question two suggest that the heterogeneity of the ways success is conceptualised reflects the heterogeneity of the adult student population. Thus, I

argue that for adult students online higher education can provide an opportunity (in the unique for each individual way) for gaining instruments for empowerment (Walker, 2008) if learning experiences support students' aspirations. With this discussion, I invite educational institutions to embrace the diversity of students' values and aspirations, to develop a more nuanced and inclusive of adult students' voices understanding of success and to promote and celebrate various forms of success.

6.7 Conclusion

Research question two aimed to problematise the simplistic understanding of the concept "success" based on accounts of adult students. Adults who participated in this study perceived success in five qualitatively different ways, with variations regarding students' motivation, expected outcomes and the role of learning experiences that ran across each way of perceiving success. In the first category, success is seen through the lens of formal criteria. Successful learning is associated with delivering learning objectives and completing course requirements. Adult students tend to go about learning from a formal perspective and tend to focus on assignments and benefits of gaining a degree. For a student from category two, success comes with the improvement in the work a student does. Students' motivation is to understand enough to improve professional practice and be more effective at work. An outcome that students from this category are looking for is to be able to see and feel the effect of learning in professional practice. In category three, success is associated with new opportunities that come with learning. The motivation for a student from this category is to increase the number of options on the labour market and anticipate outcomes to become a member of an elite community of learners with a degree, to connect to people with whom it would otherwise be impossible to connect. In category four, success is seen as understanding in its broad sense. In the fifth category, success is self-actualisation. The motivation for learning for a student from this

category is an interest in self-development, and an anticipated outcome of learning is, therefore, personal growth.

This study adds to the research of adult students' voices about their success. Past research indicated that success in learning is seen by adult students in a broader way than it is positioned within the formal education system (Donaldson, Graham, Martindil, Long, & Bradley, 1999). The findings are in line with research on students' voices that associates success in learning with personal and professional achievements of various types (see Benton, 2015; Knightley, 2007), personal struggles and even experiences of formal failure that have been beneficial for the individual (Magro, 2008; Merrill, 2015).

The results of the study suggest that understanding of the notion of success is subjective and differs from the one that is commonly accepted by educational institutions. Moreover, the study findings show that variations in individuals' perceptions of success may occur with regard to what they expect to achieve at the end of the learning journey. Bunce and Hutchinson (1993), Finn and Rock (1997), Trueman and Hartley (1996) discussed success from the formal perspective, as measured by grades, whereas Entwistle and Entwistle (1991) and (Smith, 1998) emphasised the importance of understanding in learning and understanding of how to apply what has been learnt on practice. Those alternative perspectives on success are similar to the first two lower-level categories of description that have been uncovered in this study. Adult students' conceptualisation of success as an improvement in work is in line with research that is focused on competency development and career performance (Baartman, Bastiaens, Kirschner, & Van der Vleuten, 2006; Gibson & Rankin, 2015; Nusche, 2013), as well as with the discussion on the contribution of education to the workforce development (Matthews & Kotzee, 2019). A perception of success as an opportunity to open doors also reflects the

discourse around human capital development (Ng et al., 2005). Similar to the argument provided by Ng et al. (2005), this study suggests that online learning experience enhances promotional chances for an individual. Finally, an important anticipated outcome for a student from this category is self-actualisation. A need for self-actualisation, according to Deci and Ryan (2000), indicates an inner desire for development that can be achieved through learning.

The findings in regard to the research question two suggest that the predominance of the formal view of success might be limiting when evaluating learning outcomes of adult learners. Such a narrow perspective on adult students' academic success has the risk to hinder our understanding of what contributes to success in online education (Kuh et al., 2006). The results of this study also support research that advocates a need to stretch the definition of success that, on the one hand, includes formal measures of academic outcomes and, on the other, considers potential outcomes of learning that are valued by adult learners.

7 Research Question Three, Discussion and Conclusion

Chapters five and six presented outcome spaces developed for two phenomena of interest for this study - the process of online learning and concepts of success. The developed categories of description provide insights into the variations of how adult students experience their learning and conceptualise success in their online postgraduate programmes at a UK university and its partner institution in Russia. This chapter aims to discuss the relationships between the two phenomena in more detail, answering the third research question three *How do the different ways of experiencing learning by adult students relate to the different ways of conceptualising success?*

An analysis has been focused on a discovery of relationships between adult students' conceptions of the online learning process and their conceptualisations of success, with the aspiration to identify apparent links. To explore the potential relationships, I bring together findings of research question one and research question two and compare different aspects of the two phenomena. The analysis revealed noticeable relationships between the two phenomena through the learning outcomes theme.

Within this chapter, I also consider the limitations of my research and explain how these have been addressed. I specifically emphasise the issues of validity, reliability and credibility. I then discuss the implications of my research for theory, research and practice. Lastly, I provide an

overview of the research results and an overall conclusion and suggest directions for future research.

7.1 Research Question Three

Trigwell, Prosser, and Waterhouse (1999) and Ramsden (1992) emphasise the relation between students' perceptions of their learning environment and the ways they approach learning. Furthermore, previous research, including phenomenographic studies (see Marton & Säljö, 1997; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991; Ramsden 1992), provide evidence about the existence of a relationship between students' learning behaviours and the ways they approach learning and the quality of learning outcomes (Biggs, 1987).

The phenomenographic methodology employed in this study allowed me to identify variations in adult students' learning experiences and perceptions, including students' perceptions of the learning process and their conceptualisations of success. The relationships between online learning experiences and conceptualisations of success observed and highlighted in this research aim to inform online tutors' pedagogical actions.

When comparing categories of description of the two considered phenomena, an alignment of articulated meanings within the learning outcomes theme can be noticed (Table 7.1). Following, I discuss identified relationships between the following meanings of the process of online learning (phenomenon 1) and conceptualisations of success (phenomenon 2):

- Experience of OL as an investment (phenomenon 1) and adult students' conceptualisations of success as measured by formal criteria (phenomenon 2).

- Experience of OL as a process that brings structure (phenomenon 1) and adult students’ conceptualisations of success as an improvement in work you do (phenomenon 2); as understanding (phenomenon 2) and as an opportunity to open doors (phenomenon 2).
- Experience of OL as a process that enables and empowers (phenomenon 1) and adult students’ conceptualisations of success as an opportunity to open doors (phenomenon 2) and as a self-actualisation (phenomenon 2).

Table 7.1. Relations between phenomenon one and phenomenon two.

	Phenomenon 1	Phenomenon 2	
<u>Categories</u>	<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Anticipated outcomes</i>	<u>Categories</u>
“Investment”	Satisfactory assessment results, grades	Successful passing, diploma	“Formal criteria”
“Structure”			
Knowledge and experience	Integration to the previously held knowledge and experience	Understanding	“Understanding”
Work	Integration into work	Increased options, becoming a part of an elite community	“Improvement in work”
Life	Integration of learning into life/experience/work	Practical application of knowledge	“Open doors”
“Enabling/empowering”	Increase in self-esteem, confidence, feeling of achievement, broadened horizons	Increase in self-esteem, confidence, feeling of achievement, broadened horizons	“Self-actualisation”

7.1.1 Experience of OL as an Investment and Adult Students’ Conceptualisations of Success

In chapter five, I discussed that adult students who experience online learning as an investment opportunity tend to see their learning through the lens of formal requirements. The motivation that drives the learning process is external, and external regulations of the learning process can be either internalised (potentially leading to stronger motivation for learning) or rejected (leading to amotivation) (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994). As presented in Table 7.1,

the outcome of learning that is valued by the learner who experiences learning as an investment mirrors anticipated outcomes of the learner who conceptualises success from a formal perspective.

In both categories, the view of online education adopted by learners is instrumentalist, determining a broad conceptualisation of online education as a means for achieving economic or labour market-oriented benefits:

In my mind, I am aware that I haven't done everything that I wanted to yet, because probably I don't yet know the right tools - and that is why I have plans to study further... I have felt that I am lacking knowledge, lacking education. (Participant 13)

...I knew exactly why I went to that course. I was aware of what kind of competences I was lacking. (Participant 9)

It was rather an instrument. What do I need to become a top manager? What education and where shall gain it? There is an organisation, supported by the company [Russian partner institution]. That's it! (Participant 11)

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991; 2005) provided a extensive analysis of research on how learning affects students and found that for novice learners, satisfactory grades were highly associated with academic success, although this association was diminishing over the study period. Educational institutions support such instrumentalist approaches to education by measuring student success predominantly through assignment results, graduation rates (York, Gibson & Rankin, 2015) and students' employability (Gyamera & Burke, 2018; Matthews & Kotzee, 2020). The predominance of neoliberal thinking about higher education among adult students is not surprising. This agenda is a leading line in many governmental policy

documents, which promote such elements as an acquisition of skills and employability and emphasise the need to prepare people for the labour market (Gyamera & Burke, 2018).

Houle (1961) represented adults' intentions in learning on a continuum, where on one extreme were those students who came to achieve particular competence that related to their current life patterns or those who see education as a means to achieve more ambitious, external goals by gaining a degree. The intentions of those learners are associated with the investment as they learn because they want to get something out of the learning. For adult learners with this kind of intention, learning activity tends to come to an end once the objective has been achieved. As a result of conceptualising learning as an investment, a learner's perception of success is also limited and associated with formal requirements of the learning process.

7.1.2 Experience of OL as a Process that Brings Structure and Adult Students' Conceptualisations of success

When conceptualising success as a process that provides structure, a learner gains an awareness of how learning shapes and re-structures various dimensions of life, including learning, work and personal life and experience. The learner develops an understanding of how new knowledge and learning experience advances and shapes previously acquired knowledge and experience. A similar process has been mentioned within a discussion of the ELT (Kolb, 1984).

The meaning of online learning as a process that brings structure, specifically with regard to previously held knowledge and experience, is in line with the conceptualisation of success as understanding. Furthermore, as a result of an integration of new knowledge into existing cognitive structures, learners indicated an awareness and provided examples of the

opportunities for enhancement of professional practice. An expanded awareness of the phenomenon of online learning as a process that structures knowledge and experience is visibly related to the articulated conceptualisation of success as an improvement in work. Moreover, an analysis of the empirical data showed that experiencing learning as a process that brings structure is a condition for developing a more expanded conceptualisation of success, success as an improvement in work and success as an opportunity to open more doors.

Experiencing learning as a process that brings structure suggests that the learner succeeds in integrating online learning into his or her life. A quote following indicates a progression of the learner's familiarity with the learning process and consequent growth in confidence that came with adaptation to the learning routine:

I am kind of was thinking "Oh my goodness, I'm going to be rubbish at this. I'm not gonna be able to get through this pre-course activity. And once the course started, I found myself getting more confident. But I think that was quite overwhelming to be bombarded with all that information before we even started. Now I understand why they do it, is to get everybody to understand what's expected of you. (Participant 10)

In other words, integration of online learning into a student's lifestyle is a necessary step for expanding the awareness and moving learners' focus from mere formal requirements of the learning process to the realisation of how learning can support different areas of life.

7.1.3 Experience of OL as a Process that Enables and Empowers and Adult Students' Conceptualisations of Success

The conceptualisation of success as self-actualisation appeared to be related to the experience of online learning as a process that enables and empowers. As discussed in chapter six, a

dominating economic and market-oriented view on success has been introduced by educational institutions without considering the variety of students' voices and aspirations. This approach is designed to identify failures rather than to praise the successful students. Individual scholars and educators have made some progress in promoting alternative criteria of success (McArthur, 2019; Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019). However, online tutors still face challenges in implementing pedagogies and assessment instruments that facilitate alternative learning outcomes.

The term "satisfaction" is often used as an alternative to a formal evaluation approach to measure success in online learning (Chyung, Winiiecki, & Fenner, 1998; Kuo, Walker, Belland, & Schroder, 2013). For the learner who experiences learning as a process that enables and empowers, the process of learning has been associated with the feeling of achievement and satisfaction:

I had a nice feeling of accomplishment that I have finished, accomplished it, and I was looking forward to applying it in practice. (Participant 9)

But I decided for myself if I will finish that way and will pass the exam. I will be a great fellow and will be proud of myself. And my son will be proud of me... (Participant 15)

I feel a sense of excitement of getting signed up, and then as I completed the course, and I got a pass, I had a great sense of accomplishment... great sense of accomplishment and improvement in self-esteem... (Participant 6)

Data gathered from adult students' accounts suggest that conceptualisation of online learning as an empowering and enabling mechanism related to students' conception of success as self-actualisation. Students talked about course completion as an achievement that they are proud

of and satisfied with, the process that shaped their new personality, equipped with new tools and opened up opportunities.

A continuum provided by Houle (1961) suggest that, apart for the specific investment or professional oriented goals, students may be interested in learning as an opportunity to address personal needs for growth and development. From the process of learning, Houle explains, those students expect to gain more than just a degree or knowledge of subject matter. This study provided evidence that having such perceptions on online learning, adult learners reach for a learning experience with aspiration for self-actualisation.

7.2 Discussion of the Findings for Research Question Three

Comparison of the two outcome spaces developed as a result of the phenomenographic analysis revealed that adult students' experiences of learning and conceptualisations of success relate through the theme *learning outcomes*.

Rogers (2002) argues that for students with different learning goals, the perceptions of success also vary, as well as the role of learning in achieving these anticipated outcomes. In my study, the range of aspirations articulated by adult students within the concept of success varied from the concrete aims (gaining a degree) to the less defined outcomes, such as understanding, or professional and personal development. In other words, some adult students returned to the university to receive a degree certificate, whereas others were seeking learning for symbolic reasons (to be a part of an elite community of people). Some students valued online education for opportunity reasons (to open more doors, to gain access to further learning opportunities), some for practical reasons (to improve professional practice or everyday work), and others for a potential to self-actualise. In each case, participants associated success with anticipated learning outcomes. A similar evolution of the complexity of conceptions is noticeable within

the hierarchically structured ways of experiencing online learning, starting from relating it as an investment and reaching the discussion of online learning as an enabling and empowering process.

The results of the interpretation of adult students' conceptualisations of success show that they bring with them certain expectations of what they want out of learning in order to feel successful. At the same time, there is evidence in the rich data that online learning can produce additional, unplanned outcomes. Some of these outcomes are perceived as a success, while others are perceived as a "nightmare". Although sometimes having a negative sense, such undesirable outcomes might have a delayed, either positive or negative impact on different areas of a student's life and, therefore, should not be neglected. In the following quote, a learner reflects on the negative experience. That negative experience produced an outcome in the form of increased motivation:

I received the mark that I haven't expected. I would give myself a higher mark, while the tutor gave me a lower. And at this moment I had experienced a serious breaking point. I even wanted to withdraw, feeling that I was undervalued. But it later served as a stimulus to better show myself in future work. (Participant 11)

When discussing the learning outcomes, it is also useful to be aware of the adverse and delayed results of the learning experience. Data gathered from the participants of my study indicates that not all expected outcomes can be achieved within the learning experience in the educational institution. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that impact from learning can be delayed, with some results appearing at the end of the study, and others after a while. The following quote shows a learner's disappointment with the results of his learning

experience. However, when reflecting deeper on it, he acknowledges that a “failure” experience has been a trigger for developing a desire to learn more:

It is great when the negative experience left... Positive experience doesn't have value. Wins are not teaching anything, failures do. That is why I am happy and thankful to this course, for that failure that I had experienced. It taught me a lot, gave me a push to be stronger, to seek, to think about who I am and what I am doing, and what kind of product I am producing and does anyone need it at all. And if no one needs it maybe I have to change something in myself. Something like that. (Participant 7)

It is evident from the results of this study that there are learning outcomes that are located beyond standard assessment targets. An alternative approach to evaluating learning outcomes could be gained by considering the impact that learning has beyond the classroom and outside the traditional measures of success (Rogers, 1992). A student, for instance, can assess the impact of learning by seeing how it contributes to different dimensions of his or her life or personality development. According to Rogers (1992), such assessment is commonly used in developmental education. This approach may be helpful when developing a holistic view on success for adult students due to the existing variations within the student population. There is, however, one limitation in this kind of evaluation. Specifically, it tends to focus on major societal issues such as widening participation agenda, marginalisation, or a decrease of inequalities or poverty, while for adult educators it is important to look at the unique results of learning interventions, whether they are expected or not (Rogers, 1992). In other words, the holistic view on success in online learning for an adult student population should aim to embrace rather than limit the variety of learning aspirations, as well as consider seemingly adverse (but not less valuable) learning outcomes. The consideration of the unexpected learning

outcomes is important since the results of this research show that learning experience may influence different areas of adult students' lives.

7.2.1 Foreseen, Unforeseen and Unexpected Outcomes

The results of this research showed that learning outcomes could be foreseen, unforeseen or unexpected. Such incidental results of learning may be as impactful, influential and recognised by learners as formal objectives set by educators. Moreover, as the results of this research showed, such incidental results of learning as personal growth and development may be very well anticipated by learners, while dismissed by educators due to their focus on assessment practice and an association of the academic success with retention and successful graduation. The following quotes provide examples of such outcomes:

...even within my work, I am becoming more confident, and it allows you to be a more creative thinker and to give views on, it allows you to form arguments and give views and brainstorming. So yeah, I think I think it's definitely beneficial and I think in a workplace it is beneficial. It also allows you not just to be, you know, talk about your own views, but actually to be able to listen to other people's views and understand where they're coming from as well. (Participant 3)

I would always just decide on something, and that's what's happening. But I think now I'm more considered. I still tend to make decisions quite quickly, but I am more considered. (Participant 10)

According to these results, incidental learning outcomes should be given greater attention by online educators when discussing results and success of the learning process. In the following quote, a student talks about online learning as a transformational experience in terms of

emerging opportunities. Although this is not the main objective of the programme, such an outcome might be considered as foreseen and desirable:

And many things became clearer to me. As I could not implement many things in my work in the old organization due to a number of reasons (although LINK teaches that the responsibility of the manager not only set a task but to find the answer as well) I had realized that I could not find the answer. And here I have this opportunity to find the answer. That is why I changed my job, understanding that I can realize myself already on a new working place, while I could not do it in the old place for a number of reasons. Basically, I have opened for myself new horizons for development. (Participant 12)

Apart from expected and incidental learning outcomes, learning can produce unexpected results, which may have long-term effects on a learner. One example of the unforeseen unexpected outcome is the relationships between the learner and the tutors whose personality had a great influence on the learner's experience:

I would prefer to separate the study and the character of the tutor. My opinion, that on me and on many from our group, the personality of the tutor had the primary influence: strong, powerful, and having a great power to influence people's minds. In terms of study - the materials of the course I basically wasn't reading. (Participant 7)

I would say every meeting with our tutor was something I was looking forward to. Of course, not all the tutorials were equally valuable, because sometimes he was shamelessly cheating. But I was looking forward to meeting him because of my communication with him was like a revelation. (Participant 7)

Evaluation of adult learners' success in online programmes has almost always ignored these other outcomes of the learning experience. Indeed, there is no systematic investigation of the impact that online learning has on adult students' lives and personalities.

7.2.2 Towards a Holistic View on Students' Success

Since the phenomenon of online learning may be experienced differently by a heterogeneous adult student population, the results of phenomenographic inquiry can produce a holistic picture of a collective experience of the learning process and success, highlighting rather than dismissing identified variations. As Åkerlind (2005b) points out, phenomenography allows to develop a holistic view on human experience.

A formal perspective to measuring learning outcomes perpetuates examination results, GPAs, graduation and other measurable rates due to easy access to relevant quantitative information. It is more challenging, however, to appreciate the value of alternative outcomes identified in this research, even those that are foreseen, not mentioning the unforeseen or delayed. Does it mean that educators should leave the idea of identifying and evaluating the alternative impacts of the learning intervention? When doing so, they leave themselves no opportunity to contribute to and understand the real impact of online learning on an individual adult student. Asking adult students themselves to express ideas about their learning experience and articulate anticipated learning outcomes remains the only option to investigate the influence and significance of the phenomenon of online learning on students' lives. Thus, it is important to listen to and trust the opinions of adult learners regarding their experiences and perceptions. Moreover, since the impact of online education can be best evaluated through the eyes of learners, the discussion on student success must involve learners' opinions. In other words, the value of learning experience and the evaluation of success should be based on students' values.

I believe that by listening to adult students' voices and by considering the diversity of their experiences, educators and programme designers have an opportunity to adjust and develop some elements of the programme in order to create a truly transformative, enabling and empowering learning experience. In addition, by allowing adult students' voices, alternative learning outcomes can be reached and negotiated. This step will contribute to ensuring the openness, equality of opportunities and freedom of choice for diverse student populations in OHE.

7.3 Limitations of the Research

In my research, gaining a better understanding of adult students' experiences of online learning and their perceptions of academic success was fulfilled by my asking them to describe their experiences and perceptions in their own words, and mapping their descriptions as interpreted by the researcher. I consider that the phenomenographic methodology worked well for this research project. However, I have reflected on three methodological issues specific to the study which deserve further attention.

First, the method itself faces criticism that it is not explanatory and does not attempt to provide a model of the world. Phenomenographic results have been criticised for being a simple description of individuals' conceptions of the phenomenon (Richardson, 1999) which are arranged into structured categories (Marton, 1986). Negative comparisons with more objectivist research techniques are not levelled solely at phenomenographic research but are a general issue faced by many qualitative methodologies. However, phenomenography explicitly sidesteps the concern that qualitative judgements may stand as a poor analogue for objective measurements. Rather, it embraces the aim of cataloguing how people *experience* the phenomenon, while making no claim to establish what the reality is.

Secondly, the contribution of the researcher to interpret and aggregate themes may be said to introduce an inconsistency. We may imagine results varying with the personality and perspectives of different interviewers. To mitigate this when analysing data, a phenomenographic researcher needs to set aside pre-existing conceptions of the phenomenon and personal biases as far as possible and focus merely on the participants' understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, a researcher is expected to demonstrate accurately and as faithfully as possible what the participants communicated during interviews. In other words, a researcher is expected to show an ability for interpretative awareness (Sandberg, 1997) - the awareness of the ways personal assumptions, biases and interpretation may influence the research process. This, again, does not apply only to phenomenographic research, but is a common concern of many qualitative methodologies. I sought to address this issue and make this limitation explicit by introducing a reflection process into the research design. With the assistance of the reflective practice framework, I bracketed my understanding of the phenomenon as far as I was able to, so that I could report participants' conceptions of the phenomena as directly as possible.

Reflecting on the process of data collection, I was aware that it was sometimes difficult for me to input follow-up questions to a participant's answer without my interpretation of what had been said. Therefore, in the earlier stages of conducting interviews, I was confirming with the participants whether I understood an expressed view correctly by sharing my understanding with them. Only when transcribing the first interview, I realised that my approach could have led to an influence or directed students' reflection towards my interpretation. Fortunately, when rereading responses, I was reassured that the first participant of my study had a firm position, and my interpretation had no impact on it. This experience assisted me in adapting the way I

conducted interviews in time, at an early stage of data collection, avoiding potential negative implications for the quality of the data.

During the in-depth qualitative interview, some individuals can describe their experiences more freely than the others, affecting the quality and richness of the collected data. This typical issue facing any qualitative methodologies can be mitigated by a considered approach to the interview process. By gradually gaining more experience of introducing follow-up questions, I was able to encourage participants to reflect more on the phenomenon under question until I felt, or was explicitly told by the participant, that there was nothing else to add.

Lastly, criticism of any phenomenographic investigation is related to the generalisability of the results. During the analysis, notable features emerge from first-person accounts in a systematic way. However, no attempt is made to establish measures of confidence - how representative those features of experience are within the wider population. This criticism can be levelled at any qualitative interview that gathers very rich descriptions from an inevitably small sample of a population. To address this limitation, in my thesis, I emphasise that my study did not intend to make generalisations. Instead, the aim of this research was to describe qualitative variations in students' experiences and perceptions rather than to make general conclusions. Therefore, criticism associated with my study not meeting scientific rigour standards regarding generalisation is irrelevant, due to the explicit articulation of context-specific intent to meet this criterion.

The importance of this research comes from its search for an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions. The data are rich, deep and context specific, limited to the peculiarity of two considered online programmes, the peculiarity of the phenomenographic methodology and its data collection method. This, however, does not mean

that the data collected for this study is lacking. Rather, it is a very specific and different type of data that needs clear and transparent procedures for handling it.

To ensure that all the necessary data collection procedures are followed, this research provides an explanation of the data evaluation and validity check steps, guided by the practice of reflexivity as a tool for increasing the transparency of the process. Although the phenomena of interest were adult students' experiences of online learning and their perceptions of success, the course of the study that participants undertook was very specific, designed for professionals in the business and management area with practical experience. Thus, in my research, I was seeking to make an argument that a particular population of adult students in a particular course of study experience online learning and perceive academic success in multiple ways that are likely to be seen in my findings. In other words, the results of the research should not be generalised beyond the context of two considered programmes without considering their match to another new context.

7.3.1 Validity

Collier-Reed, Ingerman and Berglund (2009) argue that research validity is “the extent to which it is possible to show that a study measures what it sets out to measure” (p. 4). It is, thus, concerns how accurately the research methods corresponds with the study aim and objectives and research questions (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000) and whether the results of the research adequately represent a phenomenon under investigation. Despite the origin of the concept of validity in positivism, phenomenographic research nevertheless are expected to explain how the issues of validity have been addressed (Åkerlind, 2005b). When discussing validity of phenomenographic study, Åkerlind (2005b) suggest considering the specific ontological and epistemological assumptions of this research approach.

In a phenomenographic study, validity indicates how well the research findings represent “the human experience of phenomenon” (Åkerlind, 2005b, p.330). Validation procedures commonly used in phenomenographic research has been termed by Kvale (1996) as communicative validity and pragmatic validity checks. Communicative validity refers to the ability of the researcher to persuasively argue own interpretations within the research. Åkerlind (2005b) suggests that communicative validity is ensured by the process of seeking feedback from the research community through “research seminars, conference presentations and peer-reviewed journals” that are “an obvious source of such validity checks” (p. 330). Following that suggestion to ensure communicative validity in the current research, I presented the results of the research at multiple events such as conferences, seminars and symposiums. The reflectivity framework and its use in my research has been presented at the Qualitative Research Symposium at Bath University, UK, and a paper describing main findings of my research with regard to research question one has been granted a Semenov Award to be discussed at the Innovative Proceedings and Analytics (IPA) Symposium at the National Research University – Higher School of Economics, Moscow. The presentation at the IPA symposium received positive and constructive feedback from both Russian and international academics, including Professor John Meyers, Professor Simon Marginson and Tomasso Aggassi. In addition, I presented the results of my research as a podcast speaker for the Higher Education Researcher podcast of the Centre for Higher Education Research and Evaluation, Lancaster University. I also explained my research, with the focus on the data analysis process and the use of conceptual, theoretical and analytical frameworks, at a Departmental seminar in the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University. These numerous attempts ensured that I communicated my research process and the research results with educational researchers, educators and experts within the fields of online higher education and higher education.

Another type of validity, pragmatic validity, determines the extent to which the results of the research are meaningful for the intended audience (Kvale, 1996). Åkerlind (2005b) explains that the outcome of the research can be evaluated based on generated insights into how to improve a problematic issue. In educational research such insights can be judged by their “value in producing useful insights into teaching and learning’ (Entwistle, 1997, in Åkerlind, 2005b, p.331). I believe current research addresses the issue of pragmatic validity by offering insights not only of qualitative variations in experiences and perceptions of adult students, but also on the nature of identified differences.

7.3.2 Reliability

As Åkerlind (2005) explains, in any qualitative study, reliability refers to the appropriate choice of the research methodology and the accurate application of the methodological procedures to ensure “quality and consistency in data interpretations” (Åkerlind, 2005b, p.331). Thus, to ensure reliability, I provide justification of the relevancy of the employed methodology as well as the selected analytical tools. In the methodology chapter, I emphasise that ontological and epistemological assumptions of phenomenography and phenomenographic principles are in line with the aims and objectives of this study and reflect my study focus on the diversity of an adult student population. Additionally, the reliability of data analysis has been ensured by the elaboration of the analytical tools and frameworks used to support the development of the outcome space. The reliability of the interpretations is guaranteed as far as is possible by setting the goals for each step of the data analysis, reflecting on the process of data interpretation on each step and providing a structured presentation of the research results with examples of how interpretation has been supported by the data.

7.3.3 Credibility

Stenfors-Hayes, Hult, and Dahlgren (2013) discuss credibility of a phenomenographic study in terms of the relationships among the developed categories and the data. Thus, the credibility of the research results can be strengthened by the participants' quotes (Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013), or by ensuring that the results are "empirically grounded" (Ashwin, Abbas, & McLean, 2016, p.966).

Sandbergh (1997) and Sin (2010) point out the need for reflexivity and the researcher's awareness of the process of interpretation and subjective influence (Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013) at all stages of the research as a way of enhancing credibility of phenomenographic research. Stenfors-Hayes et al. (2013) further explain that due to the existing differences in the phenomenographic research process, the ways how analytical procedures are held, and results are presented, a clear description of the research process, including intermediate steps can ensure the credibility of the phenomenographic study. In my research, I have taken Stenfors-Hayes et al.'s (2013) suggestions on board and adhered to the utilised frameworks for data analysis and reflection. I also used the designed reflexivity tools to describe the process of my research in as much detail as allowed within the limits of this thesis. Reflection of my interpretation of the data and about how I position my voice within the research has also been done through the blog posting exercise (Appendix 8). In addition, to increase credibility of the research, Guba (1981) and Stenfors-Hayes et al. (2013) recommend peer debriefing and presentations as ways to discuss preliminary categories and address issues that may occur. Following this suggestion, the initial categories have been individually discussed with my research supervisor and a senior academic from the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, during the annual evaluation process. As a result, I made several important considerations and rearrangements before the presentation of the initial research

results at the Work in Progress Conference at the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, on June 2019. Consequently, the work in progress has been discussed at numerous academic events. In doing so, I aimed to review the quality of the developed outcome space following three criteria suggested by Marton and Booth (1998). Firstly, Marton and Booth (1998) argue that all categories are distinct from each other and represent a unique way of conceptualising the phenomenon. Secondly, the developed categories within the outcome space are logically related. And lastly, the final set of categories should be as small in number as it can be, representing only critical variations in how the phenomenon is conceptualised. The process of the development of the concepts following three criteria and evolution of the final outcome spaces are presented in Appendices 5 and 6. The procedures described in this part of the chapter were aimed at replacing inter-judgement reliability and increasing the credibility of this study.

7.3.4 Ethical Considerations

During this research, I encountered different ethical issues that needed to be articulated and addressed.

Ethical approval to conduct this study was sought from two institutions - Lancaster University and a UK university. The Ethics Application Form obtained from the FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee was approved by the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University through the research supervisor.

Additionally, in order to collect data from the two research sites of this study (a UK university and its partner institution in Russia), I had to obtain a permit from a UK university's Review Panel. The Panel evaluated my research using established criteria and provided feedback on how to develop a stronger rationale on the benefits of students who would be invited to take

part in the study. To address feedback given by a UK university's Review Panel, I included in a participant information sheet a description of potential benefits of my study and explained the validity of including them in the target population. In addition to that, I provided a stronger case of how the two research sites might benefit from my study. An invitation email, consent form, participant information sheet, interview questions and a feedback form were reviewed and approved by the Review Panel. Once I was notified by the Panel of the successful outcome of my application, potential study participants were contacted.

A consent form and a participant information sheet were sent to the study participant before the interview. Information provided in the participant information sheet explained the aims of my study, why the student had been contacted and what the benefits of their participation in this project might be. I also explained the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part in my study. One of the ethical concerns was that students' personal information might be identifiable. To address this concern, I provided reassurance to my study participants that the phenomenographic approach employed in this study decreased that risk. I explained that when working with data, I focused on a collective experience of the phenomenon, rather than on individual reflections.

Another concern that needed to be addressed was that students' in-depth reflections might trigger various emotions and cause discomfort. To minimise risks to participants' well-being, I explained that a participant could refuse to answer any uncomfortable interview question while continuing to participate in the rest of the interview. Moreover, I reassured participants that their participation was voluntary, and if for any reason they decided to withdraw from taking part in this research, this would not affect their studies.

A further ethical concern was related to information security. I provided a written reassurance that I would keep all personal information about the study participants (e.g. name and other information that could identify a student) confidential and would not share it with others. Before commencing the interview, I offered each participant an option to select a pseudonym to be used throughout the study and in any subsequent publications. As no pseudonyms were used, when writing up findings of this research, I decided to refer to participants as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc., to ensure anonymity and protection of personal privacy.

Finally, ethical concerns with regard to information security and data protection needed to be addressed. Audio recorded data, transcriptions and working materials of this study were stored on Lancaster University's network and were available to me only. No hard copies, apart from printed anonymised transcripts for the manual data analysis, were used in this research project. Only I had access to the audio-recorded interview data and other pre-anonymised data, whereas other researchers (my supervisors) only had access to the anonymised data. In accordance with Lancaster University guidance, the data obtained during this research project were to be kept securely on Lancaster University's network for a minimum of ten years.

7.3.5 Reflections on the Research and Development as a Phenomenographer

My development as a phenomenographer started with conducting a pilot study prior to the main research. It is well acknowledged that the pilot study serves an essential role of testing the methods and research protocols of the main study (Kim, 2011), allowing the research to identify and address potential limitations and difficulties and make considerate changes in the research design. However, for me, a pilot study also offered lessons related to the areas of study design, access to data, ethical concerns, and resources involved in working with data.

The pilot study conducted for this research offered me an excellent opportunity to practice the majority of techniques related to phenomenographic data analysis. The data of the pilot study were collected for a research project and, thus, open-ended interviews were not specifically designed for phenomenographic study. However, evaluation of the interview questions reassured me that the questions were sufficiently open to collect rich data on adult students' experiences in their online postgraduate programmes.

As a novice social researcher and phenomenographer, the process of undertaking a pilot study provided an opportunity to develop an understanding of the specificity of the phenomenographic research, to explore the procedures of phenomenographic data analysis and to better engage in the practical issues of the research. Thanks to the pilot study, I became aware of the benefits of establishing relevant connections not only with gatekeepers (Kaba & Beran, 2014), but also with academic staff who could facilitate the process of student recruitment. For the pilot study, programme administrators provided their assistance in enhancing students' interest in the study, resulting in the recruitment of a significant number of volunteers in a short period. In contrast with the pilot study, I could only contact and recruit participants for the main study through the academic sponsor of my application due to the established procedures of conducting research in the selected research sites.

For the pilot study, I analysed interviews of thirteen online students. The participants were mature postgraduate students with different demographic backgrounds. However, I learned that more effort is needed in choosing the potential participants of the study in order to ensure the diversity of the sample. Therefore, for the main research, the sample was carefully planned to select students with diverse demographics and previous experience.

Talking with pilot study participants was my first experience in interviewing individuals for research purposes. It allowed me to gain qualitative interview skills, reflect on the way I conducted interviews and to adjust my interpersonal communication. I learned about the risk of unconscious and unintentional influence on students' responses and developed a framework for dealing with and reflecting on my own biases and assumptions.

During the pilot study, I interviewed participants face-to-face, via Skype, and via WhatsApp calls. By conducting interviews, I had an opportunity to reflect on the means for interviewing study participants and challenges of the interview method that I needed to consider in the main study. I also learned about the advantages of the open-ended way of conducting interviews and how participants' reflections may be better encouraged. For instance, I learned that discussions about a real event, or around a concrete example provided richer and more detailed data on students' perceptions and experiences. Therefore, interview questions for the main study were designed to examine learners' experiences through the examples they were willing to share with me. This allowed participants to talk more naturally and openly, and the researcher to encourage students to talk more about the meaningful experience chosen by the participant. Additional prompts that were added to the main study interview protocol assisted the participant to stay focused during the discussion.

An academic blog posting instrument was used for documenting some of my thoughts and insights for the pilot study and then throughout the main research. Blog posting allowed me to reflect on personal biases and evaluate the influence of my assumptions and experience, as well as enhance my reflection skill through continuous practice. These notes proved to be a valuable source of data and provided a picture of my academic development as a social researcher and a phenomenographer. The pilot study gave me an opportunity to develop a reflexivity skill through continuous practice. In order to guide the process of reflexivity, I developed some

principles and questions that I asked myself at the different stages of my research. For instance, after each interview, I asked myself the questions, “Was I listening carefully and in an engaging way to a participant’s reflection?”, “Were there moments where I could have influenced a participant’s response?” Such techniques allowed me to stay aware of the potential risks of a researcher’s interventions.

Another important lesson was related to the use of recording devices and to the quality of connection. In some instances, the quality of the connection was poor, and I had worries that the recording device was not reliable. Reflecting on this experience, I realised that such concerns were affecting my attention. To address these risks, for the main study, I used two recording devices and tested the quality of connection in advance. Lastly, I became more aware of the importance of the choice of the space for discussion with students (Gagnon et al., 2015), even when conducting the interview at a distance.

This pilot enabled me to develop a clear understanding of the methodological specificity of phenomenography. The analysis of data for the pilot study was my first contact with phenomenography. In fact, the interviewing process was my first experience of: i) conducting qualitative interviews, and ii) communicating with study participants in a foreign language. After analysing pilot study data, I was struck by the complexity and ambiguity of the phenomenographic data analysis process. I also became more aware of the limitations of phenomenographic methodology, which allowed me to develop strategies and frameworks to address potential risks, improve the validity, reliability and credibility of my study.

7.4 Implications

In the following subsection, I evaluate the theoretical, pedagogical and methodological contribution of the present research. In the field of online education, there is a lack of research

that includes the perspective of the largest online student population in the discussion. Although there is an interest in phenomenographic investigation in educational research in general and in areas of online, distance and technology-enhanced learning in particular, adult learners' experiences and perceptions have been neglected to a large extent. Furthermore, the population of the majority of phenomenographic studies in higher education is traditional students (see e.g., Tynjälä, 1997) rather than adult learners.

This research aimed to give adult students voices to talk about their experiences and perceptions in their own words and from their own perspectives.

With regard to research question one, my study adds to the body of research on adult experiences of online learning from the diversity perspective. Although showing some similarities with other phenomenographic studies (Gibbins, 2008), the findings have some important differences. Experiences of online learning as a *process that brings structure* are a distinctive feature found in this study. I believe that the mapping of qualitatively different ways of experiencing online learning can contribute to educators' and course designers' awareness of the differences that exist within the adult student population. Although it was not an explicit objective of this research to develop follow-on recommendations, its findings have indicated some important implications for practice. I hope this will contribute to the development of more inclusive online programmes for the adult student population.

The results related to research question two offer an important contribution to understanding success in OHE. In their notions of success, adult students as a group showed differences in how they relate to success. The hierarchically inclusive structure of the different ways of conceptualising academic success showed that differing perspectives are not mutually exclusive and that a more complex, emancipatory perspective on success (success as self-

actualisation) actually embraces all the more simplistic ones. Students who perceive success in a more powerful and complex way still value high grades and degree certificates. However, their focus and expectation from the learning process go beyond the neoliberal meritocratic frame and tend towards personal development and nourishment.

Furthermore, my research offers a unique methodological contribution. I provided a detailed step-by-step explanation of the analytical process, supported by the developed reflective practice framework. I also explicitly showed and explained the use of the referential/structural and the structure of awareness frameworks. Therefore, I believe that my research offers a contribution to the development of methodology, aiming to increase the clarity of analytical procedures and increase the transparency of the research process.

7.4.1 Implications for Theory

Conceptualisation of Online Learning

This study aimed to contribute a wider and more detailed conceptualisation of online higher education as experienced by adult students through the analysis of qualitative variations in their experiences of learning. It presents adult students' voices and shows that online learning means different things to different students based on the relative emphasis learners place upon components of motivation for learning, interaction with others and learning outcomes.

Findings of this study have significance for the existing conceptualisation of online learning. In the literature review, I have discussed the dominating economic discourse of online higher education and its emphasis on providing access and flexibility to adult learners. Yet, past research tends to categorise and classify adult students' experiences in online education through various theoretical models, and online learning has been rarely guided by the principle

of diversity and from students' perspectives. Since adult learners present the majority of the online student population, my study provides useful empirical data to re-think the way we discuss online higher education and how the principle of diversity can enhance the very definition of online learning.

This research presents the online learning process as a continuum, showing varying degrees of regulation, preferences for interaction with others, and differences in learning outcomes as students' awareness of the process was expanding. Although the provided model is not necessarily developmental, in this research I argue that the learning process can support individuals' tendencies for personal growth. Therefore, online learning can be seen as a powerful habitus, or mechanism for individual growth and development (if the processes of online learning and educational goals are successfully internalised) or a process of production of "failures" or "dropouts". I agree with Öztok (2013) who stresses the importance of the context within which online learning is experienced given its power to shape learners' motivation and subjective relationships and to impact learning outcomes. The conceptualisation of online learning must reflect how online learning environments determine, and are determined by, internal and external processes in a unique way for an individual learner.

Conceptualisations of Academic Success

The diversity of perspectives on success evidenced by the adult learners interviewed contrasts with more narrow and formal utilisation of the term "success" common to online higher education (York et al., 2015). Current conceptualisation of adults' online learning is to a great extent focused on factors that are critical for adult students' formal success. A reliance on this narrow definition will inevitably influence learning priorities and the design of online learning programmes. In attempts to understand the problem of online students' attrition, there has been

an extension of various theoretical models of retention and attrition, while adult students' voices and perceptions of the phenomenon are commonly neglected.

This study's analysis suggests that there are different types of learning outcomes that adults seek and value. The conceptualisations of success from students' perspectives varied from passing required assignments, being satisfied by understanding the learning material, being able to apply new knowledge in practice, being able to join an elite community, and having an opportunity for self-actualisation. Such alternative conceptualisations of learning outcomes should be acknowledged and added to the discourse on success and failure. It should be recognised that adult student populations have needs and motivations for learning which extend beyond the educational goals set by educational institutions (Donaldson et al., 1999). Research shows that meeting learners' expectations is important due to its links to their inner psychological needs and thus critical for learners' growth, development and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The multidimensional view of success that recognises diversity exemplified in this study respects the variety of adult learners' experiences, needs and anticipated learning outcomes.

Conceptualisation of the Adult Learner

This study has important implications for the current conceptualisation of an adult student population. Past research tends to oversimplify adult populations and discuss them as a homogeneous group with no emphasis on their diverse nature. As a consequence, adult students' experiences of online learning have been rarely investigated with the diversity principle as a point of departure. This study undermines assumptions that adult students can be seen as a single homogeneous population that has particular characteristics, features, and possesses particular skills. Quite the opposite, adults can vary greatly in their motivations for

study, their needs to interact with others and their learning outcomes. This study promotes a more complex consideration of the adult learner concept with not only differences as opposed to other student groups emphasised in Knowles' (1973, 1984) assumptions, but also variations in many dimensions of the learning experience within a single adult student population and even differences within an individual learner at different stages of the learning process. Differences were discovered with regard to motivation, level of self-directedness, need for interactions with others, and anticipation of learning outcomes, to name but a few. Adult learners in this study expressed different needs for the degree of control over their learning, with some seeking more guidance while others required less direction.

The study also questions historical assumptions about adults' self-direction and readiness for learning. The successful integration of the learners into the learning process required them to adapt to the learning routine by restructuring their lives, work, knowledge and experience. This process of adaptation has been associated with the internalisation of the educational goals and their alignment with the inner needs of the individual adults. The encounter with online learning led to seeking of support and guidance, through lack of online learning experience and lack of clarity of expectations required of adult students. This occurred despite the individuals' self-directedness in other areas and high levels of achievements in the professional arena. As well as overturning the assumption that adult students can be relied on to self-direct, we may need to re-examine assumptions that adult learners require more control over the learning process. The discussion of learning outcomes established that the adult students vary in the control they wish to take, with varying motivations and levels of need for interaction with others depending on the context in which learning is experienced.

Study findings indicated that a learner's autonomy would be satisfied differently for different students during the learning process, presenting clear objectives for course design. Instructors

should be aware that some learners, especially those with less experience or who experience online learning in a particularly formal context, lean towards less autonomy in the learning process and, therefore, require more guidance and support.

7.4.2 Implications for Practice

Findings from Research Question One

Mapping adult students' experiences in online higher education in relation to previous research highlights implications for practice in relation to online programme design, learners' motivation and the development of more adequate support systems for adult students.

The study sample included participants from two identical postgraduate programmes in one UK university and its partner institution in Russia. The results of the study showed that different ways of experiencing learning are associated with differences in expected outcomes, the need for interactions with others and students' motivation. Three focuses of variations can be interpreted through the lens of the SDT. The need for interactions with others represents the need for relatedness, different for different learners, but still a necessary element of motivations. Outcomes that are expected by the learner represent the need for competence. Finally, learners' motivations differ in respect to the regulatory processes which can be intrinsic or extrinsic, internalised or not. These insights can be used for designing online learning activities that address the variety of learners' needs in order to support students' motivation during the learning process. The identified variations in needs are determined by individual differences and variations in the social contexts in which online learning is experienced.

The results of the analysis showed that there are variations in the need for interaction with others, including tutors and peers. This raises questions around participation in face-to-face

activities and whether a face-to-face component can or should be reintroduced and integrated into an online programme structure which is delivered at a distance. I suggest course designers must offer flexibility not only within one programme, but also that requirements for face-to-face activities should be able to be negotiated by individuals. The face-to-face component, specifically meeting peers and tutors in person, has proved to be a valuable element in the learning experience and added to the satisfaction of the need for relatedness and competence. However, the perceived value was different among study participants, supporting the idea of individual negotiation of the mandatory online face-to-face elements of group communications. Course designers should therefore consider how students can fulfil course requirements in flexible ways, complementing the inherent flexibility afforded by the distance learning modes of online courses.

In the hierarchical model which emerged from analysis, three categories of increasing awareness of online learning were identified. These three ways of experiencing indicate how learners' understanding of online learning can progress and how the contexts within which they experience learning can shift. This information can be used by course designers to improve online courses, supporting learners' easier integration of learning into their lives, and their learning experience into their past knowledge and experiences. Creating a scaffolding for the smoother integration of learning into the student's life can support their progression through the levels of awareness which were identified. The findings suggest that the expansion of awareness may be supported by ensuring that learners' inner needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy at the current stage of awareness are satisfied, and thus the learner can make steps towards growth and development.

The structure of the course appears to be an important element of adults' learning experiences. The way learners experience the influence of learning on their lives in terms of structure has

been described in three ways: structure of daily routine; structure of past experience; and structure of knowledge. Experiencing learning as structure precedes an awareness of learning as a process that enables and empowers. Therefore, structuring online courses in a way that they fulfil learners' needs is an important recommendation for online course designers to create satisfying and powerful online learning experiences.

Findings from Research Question Two

Research question two uncovered different perceptions of success and provided an extended picture on variations in adult learners' perceptions of success in online learning programmes, including the neo-liberal perspective on learning success as an investment, as an opportunity to open more doors in accessing the labour market, as an understanding of programme materials, as a way of connecting to the elite community and as an opportunity for self-actualisation. These findings offer several implications for practice. For educators and scholars who are involved in teaching, designing a programme and evaluating learning outcomes, they provide an insight into the perceptions of success and anticipated outcomes of learning from adult students' perspectives. These include, but are not limited to, traditional evaluation criteria. The results of this research indicate that the notion of success is misused on many occasions when discussed from the traditional point of view, focused on traditionally accepted learning outcomes. The findings also provide an alternative picture of the notion of success which goes beyond the taken-for-granted association with academic achievement. They suggest that educators should consider aspirations and anticipated outcomes of learning held by adult learners themselves.

Analysis revealed that understanding and transformational experiences involving the strengthening of cognitive capacity and the development of the non-cognitive dimension are

highly valued by adult learners. The awareness of academic success as self-actualisation acknowledges that the learner can grow and develop through the learning process. Thus, when evaluating the learning process or learning outcomes, it is suggested that educators see the concept of academic success as a multi-layered construct and develop multidimensional assessment instruments.

Findings from Research Question Three

Research question three was dedicated to examining how various patterns of experience align with adult students' perceptions of success. Results indicated there may be a close connection between variations in the learning experience and variations in perceptions of success among learners. Following this suggestion, a model that aligns students' experiences with their perceived success was proposed. However, more research is required to confirm this connection and to determine to what extent different experiences of learning may influence adult students' perceived success.

7.4.3 Implication for Online Teaching

Learners in this study described the importance of interactions with others, which vary due to individual differences and the social context in which learning is experienced. Some students relied upon instructors to understand the expectations of the course and connect content from course readings to relevant, real-world situations and applications. Others needed interactions to benchmark themselves and see their progress. Some students felt belonging to the community, either academic or professional, provided valued social interactions through feedback. In an online learning environment, the need for interactions with others has been identified in multiple studies (Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Kuo & Belland, 2016; Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). This study added to a deeper understanding of the

role of interactions for adult student populations by providing a map of variations with regard to the need for interactions with others among adult students depending on individual differences and social context. This is in line with the SDT, which advocates the need for relatedness to be one of the most essential inner needs that determines an individual's development and psychological health.

The asynchronous nature of the online learning mode of delivery creates challenges for the design of interactions with others in the learning experience. The distance between the learners and between the learners and the instructor is not only geographical, but also transactional (Moore, 1993). This transactional distance is an issue that should be addressed by learning designers when developing learning activities. Elements of learning such as timely feedback and synchronised communication activities are proven to decrease "transactional distance". These elements address learners' needs for relatedness by interacting with others in ways that are accommodating for them. Nevertheless, in developing an online course, it is critical to understand that there are differences with regard to the role that interactions play for different adult learners.

In online programmes, learning activities should be integrated in a way that promotes adult students' awareness of the interconnection between elements of motivation, interaction and learning outcomes and their connection to the context in which learning is experienced. Activities that support learning experiences in all three contexts - purely academic, job-related and personal development contexts - should be offered to the learner to be able to select what better reflects his or her needs. The flexibility of such an offer can promote an increase of adult students' awareness of the online learning phenomenon and the potential benefits of online learning. The findings of this study do not suggest personalised learning or support during the learning process but suggest that there is opportunity to develop a deeper learning experience

for adult students who will be motivated not by rewards, but by working towards satisfaction of their inner needs. This study maps distinct ways in which online learning was experienced in a sample population, prompting consideration of course designs that avoid one-size-fits-all approaches.

To help students move to more powerful ways of experiencing learning, not only should learning activities be developed to support each way, but also the transitions from one way of experiencing to the next should be facilitated. In one way of experiencing, the role of interactions with a tutor is critical for the learner to gain better understanding of course expectations and to gain an idea of learning progress. Once this need is satisfied, the learner could be encouraged and supported to become involved in communication with peers, closely guided by a tutor towards positive outcomes. In the next stage, the learner can be encouraged and supported to pursue learning-related communication beyond the university or professional context to kick-start the next stage of their learning development. The study findings revealed that only after experiencing learning through more organised ways of living, knowing and experiencing, does the learner consider and become aware of the enabling and empowering possibilities of the learning process.

Educators should not assume that all adult students possess the same level of self-direction or have similar needs for autonomy. In fact, some learners, especially those with little experience or a long absence from learning, need guidance, structure and more frequent interactions with a tutor. Therefore, whenever possible and appropriate, learners' support and additional guidance should be integrated into the course structure to be utilised by those learners who require that support. In addition, opportunities for transition should be built into the course structure, with time flexibility allowing learners' reflection to increase the learners' awareness.

7.4.4 Implications for Methodology Development

The insights that surfaced from the phenomenographic research approach demonstrate that this methodology is suitable for investigating the domain of online higher education. By clarifying the analytical procedures and introducing the reflective practice framework, I intended to enhance the phenomenographic method of data analysis as a holistic framework for in-depth investigation within the field.

I agree with Åkerlind's (2005a, b) statement that phenomenography is often adapted without a clear understanding of its unique methodological requirements. Although the approach was selected with justification, a lack of guidance on the analytical process and the wide variety of practices adopted by phenomenographers left several problems open to be solved when applying the technique. It was only during the course of the study, and the development of the frameworks for data analysis and reflection, that the nuances of the approach, its specific requirements, strengths, weaknesses and necessary mitigations became clear. In explaining and clarifying these aspects of the study I hope to provide a more stable ground for future phenomenographic research. In particular, I hope to convince those pursuing phenomenographic research of the importance and the role of reflexivity in this highly interpretive approach. In my view, failure on the part of the researcher to make a commitment to a phenomenographic framework can jeopardise the rigour of their research.

In the field of the present research, phenomenography is often applied as just a method of analysis, adrift from its basic premises. I have paid attention in the methodological peculiarity of research to manifest the commitments required of a phenomenographic approach. I do not claim that in the present research those requirements are exhaustively understood or adapted. However, my practice endeavoured to take account of the ontological and epistemological

assumptions, theoretical basis and methodological requirements which underpin the phenomenographic research approach.

7.5 Overview of the Findings and Conclusion

This section offers an overall summary of the results of the three research questions and highlight the unique importance of this research.

I wanted to research this topic for several reasons. The first one was my professional interest in a better understanding of the online learning phenomenon. I wanted to understand why, despite the proffered benefits of online education such as flexibility and openness, the literature tells us that adult learners face various challenges when adapting to it (Simpson, 2013). Secondly, I was interested in adult learners' perceptions of their success and aimed to investigate the existing conceptualisations of success without narrowing adult students' focuses of reflection merely to academic success.

My research has also been motivated by the assumption that students' learning experiences influence their learning outcomes (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996) and this resulted in the formulation of research question three that aimed to explore relationships between the two phenomena, online learning experience and perceptions of success. With this research, I aimed to contribute to a better understanding of online higher education from the diverse accounts of adult learners.

When analysing prior research, I found that despite the recognised diversity of the adult learner population, scholars tended to oversimplify this group without uncovering the diversity of adult students' experiences and perceptions of their online learning. Claims that online education provides an inclusive environment to meet adult students' needs are unsupported by sufficient

evidence. My study addressed this gap. Not only was I interested in exploring the differences that existed among adult learners, I also wanted to uncover the nature of existing variations, and therefore to gain a more expanded understanding of the online learning phenomenon based on multiple, often dismissed, perspectives.

This research explores a phenomenon of online learning through the accounts of adult learners to a depth not known to have been explored before, rather than providing another descriptive exploration of adults' online learning experiences or analysing factors that influence adult students. I focus explicitly on the variations in which online learning is experienced by a group of adult learners in their online postgraduate programmes and aim to bring into sharper focus the different ways in which two different phenomena (online learning and students' success) might be experienced and alternative ways in which eliminated variations might be portrayed.

To respond to research question one, the study delivered a holistic portrayal, in the form of a phenomenographic outcome space, of adult learners' ways of experiencing learning in the online learning setting. First, I identified three qualitatively different ways. Online learning as an investment, with the focus on meeting course requirements in order to gain a return on investment in the future and with some cost of investment involved, and online learning as a process that brings structure, with the focus on realisation that online learning environment is a unique habitus that impacts not only learning, but also multiple dimensions of students' life. Here there are three subcategories: learning structures life routine, it structures work and professional communication, and it structures knowledge and experience. And lastly, online learning as a process that empowers and enables in two areas presented as subcategories - professional thinking and individual transformation.

The categories are distinctive from each other with regard to their internal horizons, the dimensions of variations, and external horizons. In category one, the students' focus is on meeting course requirements in order to gain a return on investment in the future. In category two, the focus is shifted towards the realisation that online learning is structuring students' lives and work and organises previous knowledge and experience. In category three, students' awareness of the phenomenon is expanded, and the focus is on growth and development, professionally and personally. The themes that run across each category are the nature of students' motivation, the role of interactions with others, and learning outcomes. The changes within each theme explain how learners' awareness is expanding from category one to category three and how the context within which the experience is described is shifting. Learning is experienced in qualitatively different ways because the context in which it occurs to the learner is different. In category one, it is experienced as an investment into the university degree in the university context and associated economic benefits. In category two, learning is experienced in the broader context of professional and personal life, while in the third category it is experienced as a process that enables and empowers in the context of a life world.

With regard to research question two, principal findings indicate that adult students who participated in this study perceive success in five different ways, with variations with regard to students' motivation, expected outcome and the role of learning experience that run across each way of perceiving. In the first category, success is seen through the lens of formal criteria. Successful learning is associated with delivering learning objectives and completing course requirements. Adult students tend to go about learning from a formal perspective and tend to focus on assignments and benefits of gaining a degree. For a student from category two, success comes with the improvement in work the student does. Students' motivation is to understand enough to improve professional practice and be more effective at work. An outcome that

students from this category are looking for is to be able to see and feel the effect from learning in professional practice. In category three, success is associated with new opportunities that come with learning. The motivation for a student from this category is to increase the number of options on the labour market and anticipate outcomes to become a member of an elite community of learners with a degree, to connect to people with whom it would otherwise be impossible to connect. In category four, success is seen as understanding in its broad sense. In the fifth category, success is self-actualisation. Motivation for learning for a student from this category is an interest in self-development and an anticipated outcome of learning is, therefore, personal growth. Findings of this study suggest some interesting perceptions of success from the collective perspective that have not been previously presented in the literature. They suggest that an understanding of the notion of success is subjective and differs from the one that is commonly measured by educational institutions. Moreover, the results showed that the differences between individuals' perceptions of success may occur with regard to what they expect to achieve at the end of the learning journey. In the discussion of the results of addressing research question two, I argued that the quantitative evaluation of students' success is problematic. This argument draws upon the differences of students' reported perceptions of learning and of success. Thus, a shift of emphasis from a quantitative measure of learning outcomes to a qualitative one is needed. The results of research question one show that during the learning process a student can undergo structural changes in how they organise their life, approach work-related activities, and the ways they see the world and themselves. These transformations are of a qualitative nature unsuitable for quantitative instruments. The view of the students' success should, therefore, be of a qualitative nature, rather than, as it is until today, based on a positivist position. Scholars and educators put a lot of effort into identifying success attributes in online education. However, the understanding of the very concept of success is poorly developed and, therefore, often misused in the discussions on retention and drop-out in

online education. The meaning of the concept of success should not be assumed to be the same for adult learners. The weight they put into this notion may be different as well, with some students looking for a confirmation of gained knowledge, competences and the completion of the programme while others are seeking for a personal transformation.

The current project aimed to add to the body of knowledge on adult learners' experiences of online learning and their perceptions of success in the field of online higher education. It also aimed to advance methods of examination of the adult student population from the diversity perspective. The theoretical importance of the research is that it provides a map of the online adult students' experiences and perceptions in online higher education from a diversity perspective. The principal outcome of research question one is a development of a stable set of categories that represent how adult students experience their online learning as a process (Figure 5.1). The investigation guided by research question two led to a map of various ways of conceptualising success by adult students, indicating the difference and similarities between and across the various ways of conceptualisation and the relationships between them (Figure 6.1). The outcome spaces portray the adult learners' awareness from a collective perspective.

In conclusion, this research has shown that there are notable variations in the ways the adult learners experience their online learning and conceptualise success. The findings oppose the predominant association of online education as the "second chance" for adult learners to secure a formal qualification, retraining to update skills and develop competences for the complex and constantly changing world. Rather, the "soft" benefits of education, such as personal growth, increase in self-esteem and confidence should be substantially considered. The results of the study add to the discussion that the formal view of success might be limiting when evaluating learning outcomes of adult learners. Although students might fail to successfully complete the

programme, they can still successfully achieve their bigger goals or experience positive transformations in life.

7.6 Further Research

Given the significance of qualitative variations regarding the role of interactions with others, further research is needed on the significance of this element of learning in online programmes to promote learners' conceptual development and complexity of the learning experience, whether the face-to-face component can be fully replaced by online communications and how adult students' experiences are influenced by that change.

Although this research uncovered differences in the role of interactions with others, or differences in the need for relatedness, it did not particularly focus on the effect of different types of interactions on the learning experience. Interaction, however, has been suggested to be an important element for positive online learning outcomes and, therefore, should be explored in more depth. For instance, what interactions can be planned into programme design to enhance learners' motivation for study? As some learners in this study emphasise interactions with others during the residential experience, or communication with a tutor as critical and transformative in their learning experience (including the instructor's influence over the development of conceptual understanding and motivation), further research is required on the role of the instructor and on interactions with other learners in online courses and how these interactions contribute to variation in learners' experiences of the phenomenon.

Since study findings revealed differences in adult students' motivation to online learning, and not just differences in the extent to which some people are better motivated than others, more research is needed on how these insights can be used for the development of more adequate support systems for adult students. Since the motivation for learning is named among the most

significant predictors for online students' retention, the further implication of the results of the current research for the development of a more adequate and diversified support system is a next step for addressing the attrition problem.

In addition, the analysis showed that learning experience influences the way adult learners perceive success. This suggests that adult learners possess various degrees of awareness of the benefits of online learning, and how online learning impacts their lives. Understanding variations in the ways students themselves perceived their learning success has a potential to enhance and expand online learning experiences. This is not only true of marking systems or formal criteria for success, but also of those valued elements that come with learning experience, an opportunity to gain a better conceptual understanding and opportunity to belong to a different community that has not been open to them before. Critical theory perspective, and specifically the capabilities approach suggested by Sen (2000), should be employed to look at the elements of success and their value for adult learners in more depth as they have potential to enhance students' learning experiences.

Lastly, the idea of investment in education uncovered in this study reflects a larger idea of neoliberalism influencing educational institutions and its stakeholders. The neoliberal agenda, first articulated in the 1980s, primarily defined benefits of higher education in terms of economic outcomes, thus dissolving the rationale for a university's role to contribute to the public good (Marginson, 2011). Not surprisingly, the practice followed ideology, and universities and their students embraced economic mindsets. Further research should investigate the potential influences of a neoliberal agenda on students' learning, and consequences of positioning individual benefits of learning, including financial aspirations, in the centre of the learning process as more significant than wider societal benefits.

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Appendix 1 Consent Form

Consent form for persons participating in a research project

Phenomenographic research on adult students' experiences of learning and conceptualisations of success in their online postgraduate programmes

Name of participant:

Name of Researchers: **Olga Rotar**

Email: **o.rotar@lancaster.ac.uk**

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written statement in plain language to keep.
2. I understand that my participation will involve interviewing and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.
3. I acknowledge that:
 - a. the possible effects of participating in this research have been explained to my satisfaction
 - b. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before or during the interview, and within 2 weeks after the completion of the interview, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 2 weeks after the interview, my data will be destroyed.
 - c. the project is for the purpose of research
 - d. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements
 - e. I have been informed that with my consent the data generated will be stored at the Lancaster University network, will be available only for the researcher and will be destroyed after 10 years
 - f. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s and, internally, by a UK University staff and researchers, but my personal information will not be included and I will not be identifiable.
 - g. If necessary any data from me will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research
 - h. I have been given contact details for a person whom I can contact if I have any concerns about the way in which this research project is being conducted
 - i. I have been informed that a summary copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I request this.
4. I consent to this interview being audio-recorded
5. I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings **yes** **no** (please tick)
6. Email or postal address to which a summary should be sent:

Participant signature:

Date:

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself: Olga Rotar (o.rotar@lancaster.ac.uk; County South, Lancaster University, LA1 4YD, UK) or my supervisor: Don Passey (d.passey@lancaster.ac.uk; +44 (0)1524 592314; County South, Lancaster University, LA1 4YD, UK)

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact the head of the Educational Research Department at Lancaster University: Paul Ashwin (paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk; +44 (0)1524 594443; County South, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YL, UK)

This study has been also reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix 2 Participant Information Sheet2

Department of Educational Research
County South, Lancaster University, LA1 4YD, UK
Tel:+44 (0) 1524 592685

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Project title: Phenomenographic research on adult students' experiences of learning and conceptualisations of success in their online postgraduate programmes

Researcher: Olga Rotar
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Tel:+44 (0) 1524 592889
Email: o.rotar@lancaster.ac.uk

Supervisor : Professor Don Passey
County South, Lancaster University, LA1 4YD, UK
Tel: ;+44 (0)1524 59231
Email: d.passey@lancaster.ac.uk

Dear student,

I am Olga, a PhD candidate in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University supervised by Professor Don Passey. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study about the experience of adult students in online graduate programmes at the XXX University. This research aims to contribute to the better understanding of the variety of experience and perceptions of adult learners of their learning, progress and prospects in online postgraduate programmes, and will provide insights on how to improve tuition on the XXX modules, more specifically the MBA, for adult students.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

This study aims to uncover the variations in experience and perceptions among adult students as they transit to online graduate study at the XXX. In particular, I would like to understand the different ways of experiencing online learning from your own perspective. Moreover, I want to explore how do you perceive success and learning progress in your online postgraduate programme, and how it may be experienced by your learning experience.

² Amended to ensure the anonymity of the research sites.

Why have I been invited?

I have approached you because you are a student who finished your first module in MBA programme at the XXX, and you are 25 or more years old.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decide to take part in my research, we will conduct an interview that will last for approximately 40-60 minutes. The interview will be held at any convenient for you day and time via Skype, telephone, or WhatsApp call. The interviews will be audio recorded and fully transcribed after completion. You will be asked to talk about your experience of studying in online MBA programme at the XXX, your perceived learning progress during the first year and your future prospects. If you feel uncomfortable with an interview question, you can refuse to answer it while continuing to participate in the rest of the interview.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

Taking part in this research project will allow you to express with your own words and from your own perspective how do you feel about your learning in online MBA module at the XXX. Participation in this study will also provide you an opportunity to reflect on your progress and learning prospects, and to revisit the learning that has happened during the MBA course.

In addition, your feedback will inform teaching and learning at the XXX for adult students in an online environment and will provide insights on how to improve teaching practices in the XXX modules, more specifically the MBA, and design more inclusive pedagogies for adult students pursuing post-graduate degrees online.

Do I have to take part?

No. Your participation is voluntary, and it is completely up to you to decide whether or not to take part in it. If for any reasons you decide to withdraw from participation in this study, this will not affect your studies.

What if I change my mind?

If you no longer wish to participate in the project, you are free to withdraw from the participation at any time before or during your interview and up to two weeks after the completion of the interview. If you decide to withdraw from the study, your data will be destroyed. After two weeks all the interviews will be transcribed and anonymised and, therefore, it won't be possible to extract individuals' data from the data pool.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Although there is a danger in any quantitative research that individuals' personal information could be identifiable, phenomenographic approach employed in this study decreases that risk. In analysing data, I will be focused on the identification of the collective experience of the phenomenon, rather than on interpreting individuals' experience. If you decide to take part in my research, you may need to invest 40-60 minutes of your personal time for an interview. Except of this, it is unlikely that there will be any other major disadvantages or risk of taking part in this study.

Will my data be identifiable?

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information that can identify you) confidential and will not share it with others. Before commencing the interview, you will select a pseudonym to be used throughout the study (during the interview as well) and in any subsequent publication. Only I will have access to the audio-recorded interview data and other pre-anonymised data and other researchers (my supervisors) will only have access to the anonymised data. Moreover, as I will employ a phenomenographic approach, the data will be analysed from the whole- group perspective and results of the analysis will represent a collective experience.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you shared with me for the research purposes. This will include my PhD thesis and publications in journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences. In addition, the information you provide to me could be shared internally with the XXX staff and researchers.

When writing up the findings from this study and developing the picture of collective experience, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, you cannot be identified in my publications. The summary copy of the results will be available for you and you will have an opportunity to request it via email.

How my data will be stored

Audio recorded data will be stored in the Lancaster University's network and will be available to me only. No hard copies will be used in this research project. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with Lancaster University guidance, the data will be kept securely on the University's network for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself: Olga Rotar (o.rotar@lancaster.ac.uk; County South, Lancaster University, LA1 4YD, UK) or my supervisor: Don Passey (d.passey@lancaster.ac.uk; +44 (0)1524 592314; County South, Lancaster University, LA1 4YD, U

If you have any concerns that you want to discuss with XXX staff, please do not hesitate to contact XXX, a Lecturer in e-Learning at the Faculty of Business and Law of the XXX University.

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact the head of the Educational Research department at Lancaster University: Paul Ashwin (paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk; +44 (0) 1524 594443; County South, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YL, UK)

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Best regards,

Olga Rotar

Appendix 3 Invitation Email³

Dear student,

I would like to invite you to take part in a research project that aims to understand how adult students experience online learning in their graduate programmes. This research is being conducted by Olga Rotar, a PhD student at the Educational Research Department, Lancaster University as part of a wider study looking into adult students' experiences in online programmes. As an MBA student who has completed your module, you are in an ideal position to provide the first-hand information with your own voice and from your own perspective. Your feedback is very important and will provide valuable information on your experience of your first module to feed into the design of the new MBA programme due to be launched in Autumn 2019. In addition, participation in this study will give you an opportunity to reflect on your learning progress and prospects, and to revisit the learning that has happened during the course of your studies. Further details about the project and what is involved in taking part are provided in the participant information sheet.

If you decide to take part in this research, we will conduct a 40-60 minutes interview via Skype, telephone or other preferred means of communication. Your participation is voluntary, and it is completely up to you to decide whether or not to participate in this study. If you would like to take part, please respond to this email at o.rotar@lancaster.ac.uk and provide your name and telephone number or Skype name. Olga will get back to you shortly and arrange an interview.

Thank you very much in advance!

³ Amended to ensure the anonymity of the research sites.

Appendix 4 Demographic Data Request

This list shows current student demographics that can be added to your sample.			
Age	V	Motivation for study	V
Education	V	Occupation	V
New or continuing	V	Qualification intention	V
Previous study history	V	Socio-economic group	V
Region	V	Market segment	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gender	V	Preferred email address	V
Daytime, evening and mobile phone numbers	V	Postal address	V

Appendix 5 Instruments for Reflection

Reflective instrument	Reflexive practice	Outcome
Academic blog	<p>Reflection on your own subjectivity at different stages of the research, including data collection, data analysis and interpretation.</p> <p>Documentation of the analytical process and reflections.</p> <p>Positionality of your own voice within the research.</p>	<p>An ongoing way of addressing issues of subjectivity and personal biases during the research process.</p> <p>An honest and open discussion with self around such topics as the strength of your own voice and the change in perception of the self and the data during the research process.</p>
Participation in the events that encourage reflexivity	<p>An opportunity to learn from different perspectives what reflexivity is, what positionality is, and what are the ways to reflect and position yourself within the phenomenographic research.</p>	<p>Development of the personal model of reflection on phenomenographic research.</p>
Work on the academic paper that involves reflexivity	<p>Reflection through academic writing.</p>	<p>An opportunity to ask yourself questions about what you are bringing into the research, and how you can articulate your work to the reader in a transparent, coherent and comprehensive way.</p>
Phenomenographic research training	<p>Group work on the specific phenomenographic task, articulation of the data analysis process and outcomes in front of the experienced phenomenographer and other researchers.</p>	<p>This practice aims to develop skills for the phenomenographic data analysis as well as a better awareness of the various ways of interpretation of the same data sets.</p>

Appendix 6 Initial Categories of Description (RQ 1)

Online learning is an investment in a long- term goal:

- Sacrifice for the long-term goal, p. 6
- The sacrifice of emerging opportunities for the future big goal, p. 28
- Something that is good to have in your CV, validation of knowledge, p. 6
- Gaining experience and qualification, p. 6
- The positive thing in the eyes of others helps appreciate what you are doing yourself, p. 13
- Career ambition, an instrument for achieving career goals, p. 6, p. 40
- Elevating career and getting to the next step, p. 13
- Makes better at what you do, p. 37
- Increase in “personal price”, p. 42
- Gaining competence that was lacking, p. 30
- Filling a gap, p. 45, p. 33, p. 50
- Opening doors, p. 53

Online learning is a process that gives structure:

- How to approach certain things, p. 5, p. 53
- Allows learning within my own time, p. 11
- A set pace, deadlines that involve responsibility (you’ve got to be disciplined), p. 12, 13, 46, 21, 22, 38
- Allows to develop independence through the challenge, p. 38, 39
- Structure the existing knowledge and experience, p. 51, p. 17
- Structure learning activities, p. 17
- Leaving personal experience aside to a certain extent, p. 20
- Enabling to relate the existing knowledge with the theory, p. 20, p. 15
- Enabling to relate the theory to life situations, p. 15
- Allows you to see different ways that you can use someone else’s work in order to help yourself in day-to-day job, p.6,7, 54
- Structured socialization p. 36, structure the communication, p. 39, p. 30
- Enables to structure the system, p. 49
- Well designed methodologically, p. 45
- Enhance strategic planning, p. 49
- How to organization life, p. 38
- Planning life considering challenging learning situations (planning of the challenge), p.15
- Self-organization with the lack of formal structure, p. 53, p. 23
- Makes you plan and manage time, p. 29
- Re-structure your life, p. 31, 39, 32
- Allocation of priorities, p.44, p. 32
- Forces to structure, p. 35
- Gives structure to life, sets the rhythm, p. 53
- Pushes to increase effectiveness productivity, p. 50

Online learning is a process that triggers lifelong learning:

- Puts it the mood to keep learning and research, p. 5
- Motivates to learn further, p. 5, p. 43, p. 52, p. 36
- Gives the motivation to read more, p. 9, p. 39
- Gives something to deal with, p. 5
- Encourage curiosity and desire to learn, p. 17
- Causes insight, the desire to dig deeper into the core of knowledge, p. 24
- Tutor and non-understanding were triggers, p. 24
- Triggers realization of personal foolishness, p. 27
- Triggers reflection, p. 38
- Triggers deeper involvement through critical feedback, p. 41
- Change of consciousness that trigger the desire to learn, p. 49

Online learning is a “game-changer”:

- Allows to be a more creative thinker, p. 11
- Allows to form arguments and give views, p. 11
- Allows to listen to other people’s views, p. 11
- Allows learning within your own time, p. 11
- Allows to see the bigger job perspectives, p. 30
- Empowers to push me, p. 30
- Allows personal development through opened new opportunities, p. 42
- Improving yourself through learning, p. 16
- Enables professional development, p. 46
- New connections, development of the network, p, 47
- Enables to connect theoretical knowledge with practice, apply ideas on practice, p. 49, p. 46
- Enables to see the personal development strategy, opened new horizons for development, p. 45, p. 47
- Giving tools, p. 51
- Opens the doors, p. 17, p. 27, p. 53
- Closing the gap, p. 17, p. 35
- Overcome barriers, p. 18

Online learning is a process that influences the way of seeing and thinking:

- Enhances the way I think about things and perspectives, p. 9
- Allows to see the bigger picture, p. 10, p. 16
- Enables to consider alternative views, p. 37
- Allows to evaluate and look at things from above your level, p. 38, p. 40
- Triggers reflection on gained knowledge, p. 13, 14, 38, 46
- Influence the world view, change the perspective on personal development, p. 44, p. 46
- Enables strategic thinking, prognosis, p. 57
- Trigger the analysis of the core reasons for the situation, be more judicious, deep, p. 54, p. 55

Societal level

- Enables to be more active and engaged in various life dimensions, p. 9
- Enables to form personal views, opinions, and arguments, p. 11, p. 29
- Changes the way you approach work, p. 37, 46

Personal level

- Causes change of self-confidence, p. 35
- Causes change of self-perception, p. 52
- Causes the shift of consciousness, p. 48
- Totally immerse, p. 53, 54

Online learning is a challenge that makes you feel good:

- Feeling of accomplishment, p. 19, p. 6, p. 11
- Feeling good about yourself, p. 21
- Feeling that I am doing it all myself, an investment into a challenge that makes you feel great, p. 29
- Challenge, go outside the comfort zone, p. 14
- A positive challenge that motivates me, p. 10
- Good results caused a boost in energy and enthusiasm- gives milestones that trigger them, p. 20
- A negative reaction from society, p. 41
- Helps to appreciate what you are doing yourself, positive thing in the eyes of others, p. 13
- Show my manager that I was worthy of investment, p. 42
- Gives you confidence, p. 5, p. 29
- Feeling a part of a community, feeling that I am not alone on that trip, p. 8
- Online collaboration- there was a sense of online community, p.19, Feeling a sense of community, belonging to the elite group, p. 28, p. 19
- Confirmation of the quality of the character, p. 42
- Determination to form the baggage of knowledge, p. 50,
- Now or never, last chance, p. 53
- Feeling of increase in personal value, p. 42

Initial and the final drafts of categories of description

<p>The first draft of categories</p>	<p>OL is an investment in a long- term goal OL is a process that gives structure OL is a process that triggers lifelong learning OL is a “game-changer” OL is a process that influences the way of seeing and thinking OL is a challenge that makes you feel good</p>
<p>The second draft of categories</p>	<p>OL is an investment in a long-term goal OL is a process that influences the way of seeing and thinking OL is a process that triggers lifelong learning OL is an opportunity to “open doors” OL is a process that enables and empowers</p>
<p>The third draft of categories</p>	<p>OL is an investment OL is a process that gives structure OL is a process that influences the way of seeing and thinking OL is a process that enables and empowers</p>
<p>The final draft of categories</p>	<p>OL is an investment OL is a process that gives structure A. OL structures life. B. OL structures work. C. OL structures experience and knowledge. OL is a process that enables and empowers A. OL changes the way of professional thinking (enables). B. OL broadens the horizon (empowers).</p>

Appendix 7 Initial Categories of Description (RQ 2)

- Being able to understand, remember and use concepts, p. 9
- Not feeling behind other people, p. 8, p. 10
- Having a motivation to study, p. 3, p. 8
- Personal development, p. 9
- Sharing struggles with others, p. 8., p. 10, p. 2
- Obtaining high grades, p. 10
- Interesting, therefore that my personal development, p. 10
- Success is actually learning and making connections between theory and practice, p. 15
- Being able to connect dots, p. 37, p. 16
- People see me at the leading position, p. 16
- Being more effective, p. 42
- Success is being able to learn from mistakes, p. 16
- Success is an acknowledgement that you did something right, confirmation of understanding, p. 16
- Successful passing, gaining a qualification that enables to apply for higher-paying jobs, p. 20, 21
- Opening doors for bigger job opportunities, p. 21, 27, 42
- Increase the number of options, p. 21
- Successful passing, p. 20, p. 30, p. 42
- Feeling the effect of learning every day at work, p. 30
- Gaining knowledge, p. 33
- Understanding enough to improve in work, p. 37, p.
- Increase in a level of knowledge, p. 46

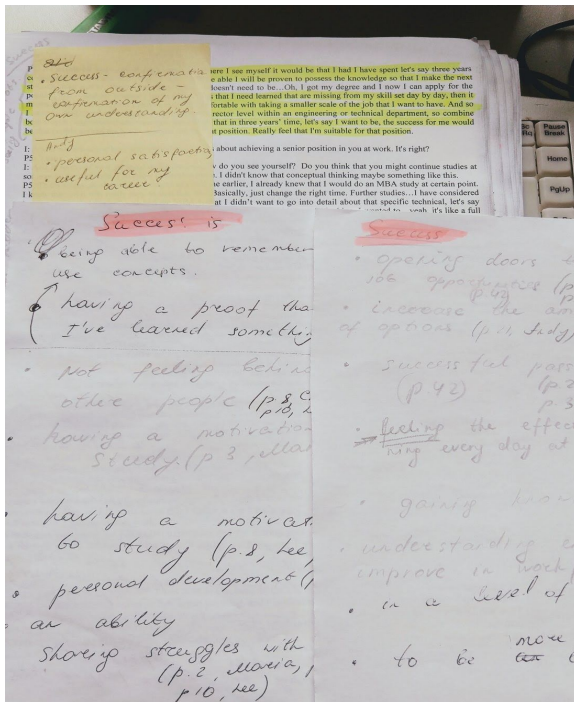
1. Success is measured by formal criteria
 - Successful passing
 - Obtaining high grades
 - Gaining knowledge, increase in the level of knowledge
2. Success is a relational achievement
 - Being a part of the “elite group of people”
 - Being not behind other students
 - Understanding personal progress
3. Success is an improvement in work you do
 - Understanding enough to improve at work
 - Feeling the effect of learning every day at work
 - Being more effective
4. Success is an opportunity to open doors
 - increase in the number of options
 - Access to the understanding of the situation
5. Success comes with personal development
 - Developed Interest in the learning process
 - An ability to learn from mistakes

Appendix 8 Extracts from the Academic Blog

What are the qualitatively different ways adult learners perceive their academic success? Reflection on the development of the initial model

Olga June 14, 2019, 23 Minutes

I would like to reflect specifically on the process of gathering data for the second research question, as well as on the process of developing the model of students' perceptions of their academic success (in the form of an outcome space). I first start with



a reflection on the data collection process. As my research interest was around understanding the students' perceptions of their academic success, the questions I asked my study participants were: Would you say that you are a successful student? and if yes, why? and Could you please describe the meaning the success have to you? However, when talking with students about their perception of success, I was collecting data for the third research question: How does adult learners' experience influence their perceived academic success?

Our communication with each student was more like a discussion or dialogue (e.g. Marton & Booth 1997) rather than a structured interview, and, naturally, the trajectory of each interview was somewhat different due to their exploratory nature (e.g. Cope 2004). Apart from the questions that I have mentioned earlier, I was also asking follow-up questions when I felt it was relevant (mainly on occasions when I wanted to ensure that I had understood the interviewees' expressions correctly, or when I wanted to encourage the student to reflect more on the question or her/his answer).

There is a concern in the phenomenographic interview about how not lead the interviewee, to the desired by researcher reply when asking the follow-up questions (see e.g. Francis 1996). As a novice phenomenographer, I was worried that I might have manipulated the data by giving some examples of the potential answers to the students. When reading and analyzing the data, however, I was reassured that although

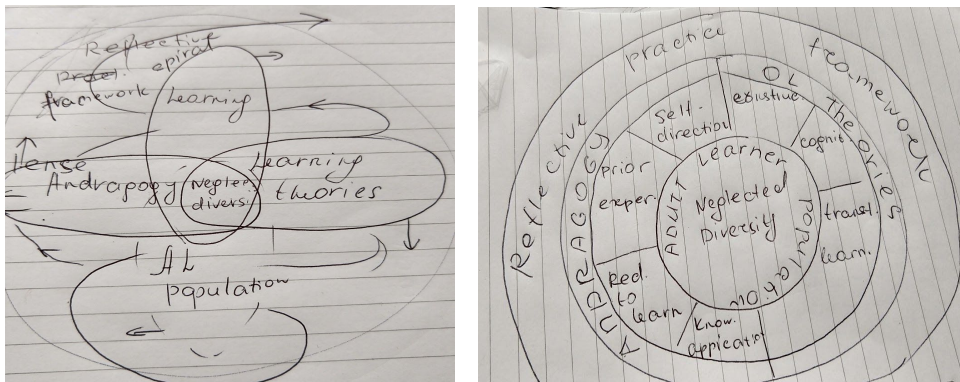
there were some occasions of using the leads, they did not influence the students' replies. I was reflecting on it even further and one possible explanation was that my study participants have their own, strong opinion on the discussed question. However, I must admit that I was lucky to have mature study participants with established opinions, and should avoid using lead questions during the exploratory interviews in the future.

I will not describe the evaluation procedures of the data collection process and the data itself- this reflection is an interesting topic for another blog post. Instead, will move to the reflection on some processes of the data analysis. It is not a secret that the overall aim of any qualitative data analysis is to bring structure and meaning to the collected empirical data. In regard to the phenomenographic research, the purpose is to identify in the empirical data descriptive categories of the qualitatively different ways people experience a particular phenomenon (Sandberg 1997). In this case, I was focusing on identifying the critical/interesting differences in how adult students' perceive their academic success and what are the variations in the meaning of success.

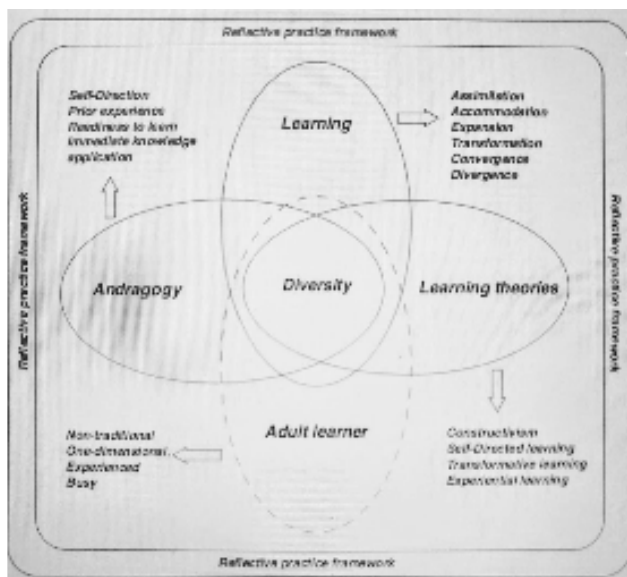
Development of the conceptual framework

Olga April 12, 2018

The development of the conceptual framework underwent several stages.



Following strategies for developing a conceptual framework by Antonenko (2015), I have selected several “areas” that are related to my research in one way or another. Those areas are learning theories, andragogy, such notions as learning and an adult learner, and the principle of diversity. I had a few attempts to graphically present those areas so they will make sense in terms of their interconnectedness (see above).



As a result, I have developed a conceptual framework that, in my opinion, reflects the presence of the main concepts within my research projects. On top of the figure, I have set the concept of learning to consider alternative ways of looking at the learning process and discuss its various forms. From the sides, I have placed four adult learning theories, including constructivism, self-directed learning, transformative learning, and experiential learning and andragogy as a most distinguished area of debate around adult learners.

An adult learner - the main concept of adult learning theories - is placed at the bottom of the framework as it provides an understanding of the modern conceptualization of the adult student population. The central area of the conceptual framework is a concept that is often neglected in discussions on adult learners, namely diversity. The principle of diversity has been placed in the centre of the framework to emphasize its significance for this research. And finally, a framework that shaped an overall approach to adapting an interpretative phenomenographic methodology is the reflective practice framework inspired by the research of John Dewey (1910), David Kolb (1984) and Donald Schön (1983).

