A Mixed-Methods Study of Sociocultural Factors Influencing Mature Undergraduate Student Engagement in Omani Higher Education

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Abstract

This research explores the engagement of mature students in higher education (HE) in Oman, focusing on how structural and psychosocial influences shape their academic experiences. While existing literature on student engagement primarily reflects Western contexts, this research highlights the unique challenges and opportunities faced by mature learners in Oman, where engagement is not just an individual process but a socially negotiated experience involving family, employers, and institutional structures.

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study combines survey data and semi-structured interviews to examine cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement in both academic tasks and extracurricular activities (ECAs). The findings reveal that while mature undergraduate students in Oman exhibit high behavioural and emotional engagement in academic tasks, their participation in ECAs is limited by time constraints and institutional barriers. A key contribution of this research is the identification of engagement as a three-way negotiation between students, their families, and their employers. The finding challenges existing models that focus only on the student-institution relationship.

In addition, this study attempts to examine the structural and psychosocial influences impacting on mature undergraduate students in Omani HE. The findings indicate that these influences are intertwined and closely connected, even though they seem to be separated theoretically.

This research contributes to the global discourse on mature student engagement by expanding it into a non-Western, Middle Eastern context with a unique culture and distinctive values. It offers practical insights for policymakers, educators, and HE institutions to better support diverse student populations. It also underscores the need for more inclusive institutional policies that recognise the complex realities of mature learners.

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ECAs	Extracurricular Activities
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
HE	Higher education
HEAC	Higher Education Admission Centre
HEI	Higher Educational Institution
HEIs	Higher Educational Institutions
MoHERI	Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation
NCSI	National Centre for Statistics and Information
SE	Student Engagement
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University
UTAS	University of Technology and Applied Sciences

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Author's declaration: This thesis is entirely my work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The experiences of mature students in higher education (HE) have long interested me, both as a teacher and a part-time PhD student. I have witnessed their ability to balance work, family, and academic responsibilities with determination and focus. These observations led me to explore what drives their engagement and the challenges they face. While student engagement is widely studied (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Krause & Coates, 2008; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012a; Zepke et al., 2010), research in Oman rarely focuses on mature learners, despite their growing numbers. This study addresses that gap by examining how mature undergraduate students engage in HE and what structural and psychosocial factors shape their experience. This chapter outlines the study's background, research problem, objectives, questions, and personal motivation, and concludes with an overview of the thesis' structure.

1.2. Context of the Study

This study is conducted within the context of higher education (HE) in the Sultanate of Oman, a country that has experienced major developments since 1970 (Al-Lamki, 2002; Bhandari & Mohite, 2024; Donn & Issan, 2007; Sujee et al., 2024). Oman is a high-income country located on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. With a population of approximately 5.3 million people (NCSI, 2025), it is known for its strong tribal structure, Islamic values, and a deeply rooted cultural emphasis on family and community life (Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007). Governed as an absolute monarchy, Oman has experienced steady political stability and economic development over the past five decades (Al-Ismaili, 2018). In recent years, the government has launched long-term strategies to diversify its economy beyond oil, guided by the national Vision 2040 framework (Bhandari & Mohite, 2024). One of the central pillars of this vision is human capital development, viewed as essential to national progress.

Since the early 1970s, the government has made education a national priority. A significant milestone in this progress was the establishment of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in 1986 (Al'Abri, 2019), which marked the beginning of formal HE in the country (Al-Lamki, 2002). Since then, Oman has expanded its higher education sector to include both public and private institutions, with the aim of increasing access and supporting national development goals (Al'Abri, 2019; Yarahmadi, 2019).

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI, 2022), Oman had a total of 71 higher education institutions in 2022. These include 35 private universities and colleges, Sultan Qaboos University (the national university), and several specialised public institutions. In 2020, a major restructuring of public higher education institutions was implemented through Royal Decree No. 76/2020, which merged the six Colleges of Applied Sciences and seven Colleges of Technology into a single public university: the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) which is now operating across 11 regional branches (Royal Decree No. 76/2020, 2020). Additional institutions include the Oman College of Health Sciences and the Higher Institute of Health Specialisations (9 campuses), three military and security institutions, the College of Shariah Sciences, the Military Technological College, and eight vocational colleges, including the Vocational College for Marine Sciences.

As for the number of enrolled students in HEIs in Oman, a total of 126,030 students were registered in the academic year 2022/2023, of whom 114,872 were studying within the Sultanate and the remaining were enrolled abroad. Female students constituted 57.5% of the total, reflecting their consistent and prominent presence in higher education (Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, 2023).

The admission to HEIs in Oman is governed by a centralised Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) (Al Kindi, 2016). All secondary school graduates apply through this system, which matches students to HE programmes based on their academic achievement (General Education Diploma scores), programme capacity, and declared preferences. While this system promotes fairness and transparency, it also reinforces competition for limited seats in high-demand disciplines, particularly

in public universities where tuition is state-funded (Al-Lamki, 2002; Donn & Issan, 2007). To widen access, the government offers scholarships for studies at private institutions and abroad, although private HEIs often rely on tuition fees, limiting access for economically disadvantaged students (Al-Barwani, Chapman, & Ameen, 2009).

Despite these efforts, the HE system in Oman continues to prioritise younger, full-time students who enter university immediately after completing their secondary education. Mature students, defined here as individuals aged 25 and above who start or return to education after a break, remain underrepresented in institutional policy and national discourse. These learners often enter private HEIs, which offer more flexible study formats (e.g. evening and weekend classes), making them more accessible to working adults and family caregivers (Taderera, 2024; Chatty, 2000; Al'Omairi & Amzat, 2012). Although mature students are increasingly present in Omani higher education, national statistical reports do not provide specific data on their enrolment, retention, or graduation rates. Most official datasets report on student populations without distinguishing between traditional and mature learners, making it difficult to assess the scale of their participation or the challenges they face. This gap in data highlights the need for more targeted research and institutional monitoring to inform policy development.

The need to support mature learners aligns with national development goals. Oman's Vision 2040 emphasises the importance of a skilled and adaptable workforce to meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy (Bhandari & Mohite, 2024). Lifelong learning and professional development are positioned as strategic priorities; however, institutional practices, such as rigid attendance policies, inflexible assessment schedules, and conventional curriculum structures, are still primarily tailored to traditional learners (Al-Barwani, Chapman, & Ameen, 2009; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). As a result, mature students often struggle to maintain consistent academic engagement while balancing employment and family obligations.

In addition to institutional barriers, mature learners, particularly women, often face social and cultural constraints. Omani society is deeply rooted in Islamic and tribal

traditions, with the family as the central social unit (Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007). While education is highly valued and considered a path to social and economic advancement, traditional gender roles continue to hold influence. Women are expected to prioritise domestic responsibilities, and societal attitudes still tend to favour male leadership in both public and private life (Chatty, 2000). Al'Omairi and Amzat (2012) highlight the paradox faced by educated Omani women: while they are increasingly present in universities and the workforce, their authority in leadership positions is often contested, and their educational aspirations must be reconciled with expectations to fulfil familial roles.

These cultural dynamics are especially relevant for mature students, many of whom are married and employed. Their academic engagement is shaped by intersecting social, emotional, and logistical pressures that differ significantly from those of their younger peers. Although HEIs increasingly acknowledge the importance of diversity and inclusion, few offer targeted support services such as academic advising tailored to adult learners, recognition of prior learning, or family-friendly policies.

Considering these challenges and demographic shifts, this study examines the extent and nature of mature undergraduate students' engagement in Oman. By focusing on structural and psychosocial influences within both public and private HE sectors, I seek to inform institutional practices and national policy aimed at fostering a more inclusive and equitable higher education environment. This contribution is especially relevant because Oman is working to improve its education system and develop its human capital.

1.3. Background and Research Problem

The HE landscape has undergone significant changes in recent decades (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002a; Teichler, 2003). Universities and colleges are no longer exclusively places for young students transitioning from secondary school. Increasingly, higher education institutions (HEIs) are enrolling non-traditional students, including mature students, part-time students, and working professionals. According to Kasworm (2003), these students often have different life circumstances, such as full-time jobs,

family responsibilities, and financial obligations, which can impact on their engagement with academic tasks.

In Oman, the HE system has expanded significantly in recent years (Al'Abri, 2019; Al-Lamki, 2002; Carroll et al., 2009), with more universities and colleges offering a variety of programmes to meet the needs of a diverse student population. The government's focus on lifelong learning and the promotion of professional development have encouraged more adults to return to education (Bhandari & Mohite, 2024; Sujee et al., 2024). However, despite this growing trend, little is known about how mature undergraduate students in Oman engage with their studies and the challenges they face. Existing research on SE in Oman primarily focuses on younger students or traditional engagement models, which do not fully capture the complex realities of mature students' experiences.

International research shows that mature students are often highly motivated but face unique barriers to engagement, such as time constraints, work-life balance issues, and family commitments (Gregersen & Nielsen, 2022; Hayes et al., 1997; Heagney & Benson, 2017a; Kasworm, 2018; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Mercer, 2007; Norton et al., 1998; Shanahan, 2000; Sibson et al., 2011). These challenges can affect their behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement, as well as their participation in extracurricular activities (ECAs). However, most of this research is conducted in Western countries, and so there is a need to explore these issues in different cultural and educational contexts, such as Oman. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how mature students in Oman engage with their academic experiences and exploring the factors that impact on their engagement.

The problem that I attempt to address in this thesis is the lack of understanding of mature undergraduate students' engagement in Oman's HE system, viewed through a sociocultural lens. While mature students make up a growing proportion of university students in the country, little research has been conducted to explore their experiences, motivations, and challenges. Most existing research on engagement in Oman primarily focuses on traditional students (e.g., Gasmi & Thomas, 2017;

Sulaiman & Takhur, 2022), whose engagement patterns and influences may not apply to mature learners, who have different priorities and responsibilities.

1.4. Research Questions and Objectives

This study is guided by two main research questions:

1. **To what extent are mature students in Oman engaged in higher education activities? How is this related to their behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement?**
2. **What are the main factors that mature students in Oman perceive as impacting on their engagement in higher education activities?**

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Explore the levels of engagement of mature students in Oman across behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and extracurricular domains.
2. Identify the structural factors (e.g., institutional policies, student background) and psychosocial factors (e.g., teaching, motivation) that shape mature students' engagement.
3. Make practical recommendations for HEIs in Oman to improve policies and practices that support mature learners.
4. Contribute to the global conversation on lifelong learning by offering context-specific insights from Oman.

1.5. Personal Motivation

My interest in this research comes from my background as a teacher and a part-time PhD student. Over the years, I have taught two different groups of learners: young students who entered higher education directly after school, and mature students who returned to study later in life. The difference in how these groups approached learning made me want to understand more about what supports and motivates mature students to stay engaged in their studies.

I started teaching English in higher education in Oman in 2006. During that time, I used to teach foundation-level English to 18- or 19-year-old students in the mornings. In the afternoons, I had classes with mature learners, many of them in their thirties or forties, who came straight from work. While the younger students were sometimes less focused, the older ones came to class with strong motivation, even when they were clearly tired. They were trying to manage family life, work, and study at the same time, and I always admired their commitment.

These students decided to pursue their studies for different reasons. Some were preparing for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam because they wanted to continue their education abroad. Others were hoping to get better jobs or advance in their careers. A small proportion of them were studying just because they wanted to learn more. I still remember one student, aged 58, who had already achieved a lot in his career. He once said to me, “I want to learn!”. That simple sentence left a strong impression on me.

Later, when I moved to a public university in 2010, I met fewer mature students. Still, I often talked about my earlier experiences and shared stories of those learners with my new students. Although I had been thinking about doing a PhD for some time, it was not easy for me to take that step. Like many mature learners, I had to think about things like funding and how to manage my responsibilities. But when I remembered the determination of my former students, I felt encouraged to begin my own research journey.

In many ways, this study is a way for me to show respect to mature learners who are often not given much attention. Their challenges and strengths have remained in my mind, and they continue to give me purpose in my work. My own experience as a PhD student has not been easy. I have also faced the pressure of managing study, work, and family. These personal experiences have helped me better understand the mature students I interviewed and have made me more determined to share their stories. With this research, I hope to support changes that can make higher education more welcoming and flexible for mature learners, not only in Oman but also in similar contexts.

1.6. Overview of the Thesis

This thesis comprises seven chapters, each representing a step in my quest to explore the engagement of mature students in HE in Oman. Chapter 1 has introduced the research by outlining the problem, questions, and objectives. I have also explained my personal motivation, shaped by my teaching experience and academic journey as a mature student. Chapter 2 conducts a critical literature review, focusing on student engagement (SE), the factors influencing it, and the particular needs of mature learners. I highlight gaps in the literature, especially in non-Western contexts, and argue for the importance of exploring mature students' experiences in Oman. Chapter 3 introduces the conceptual framework, adapted from Kahu and Nelson's (2018) model, which offers a sociocultural lens to examine structural and psychosocial influences on engagement. Chapter 4 details my mixed-methods design, including questionnaire development and interviews, as well as ethical considerations and recruitment challenges. Chapter 5 presents the findings, showing that while mature students demonstrate strong engagement, they still face significant challenges. Chapter 6 discusses these findings in relation to the literature and research questions, identifying institutional and personal factors shaping engagement. Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarising key contributions, making practical recommendations, and reflecting on the impact of this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I critically review the literature on student engagement (SE) and mature students to build a solid foundation for my research. The review is organised around three key themes: SE, the factors influencing it, and the experiences of mature students. First, I explore how SE is defined, focusing on its behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions and the role of ECAs. Next, I examine structural and psychosocial factors shaping SE through a sociocultural lens. Finally, I examine mature students' unique challenges, motivations, and life experiences. This review helps to identify key gaps and informs subsequent chapters.

2.2. Student Engagement

2.2.1. Defining SE

SE is the subject of a large body of research in HE because of its essential role in measuring the success of the mission of universities and colleges (Ashwin, 2014; Ferrer et al., 2022; Kahu, 2013; Tight, 2020). Various scholars have consistently recognised it as an important vehicle for the promotion of students' learning and attainment of course objectives (Leach & Zepke, 2011; Lowe, 2023; Trowler, 2010). Sinatra et al. (2015) described SE as "the holy grail of learning" (p.1). Due to its impact on all the functions of HEIs, many surveys have been conducted to collect data on how engaged students are in academic and non-academic activities. By analysing and studying these data, universities and colleges review their policies and practices to meet the expectations of all stakeholders (Coates, 2005).

Author(s) and Year	**Definition of Student Engagement**
Kuh (2009)	The time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired college outcomes and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities.

Coates (2007)	A broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience, including active learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences, and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities.
Axelson and Flick (2010)	How involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other.
Fletcher (2015)	Any sustained connection a learner has towards any aspect of learning, schools, or education.
Skinner and Belmont (1993)	Students who are engaged show sustained behavioural involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. These students tend to select challenging tasks, show initiative in learning, demonstrate intense effort and concentration, and express positive emotions, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest during learning.
Barkley (2010)	A process and a product that is experienced on a continuum and results from the synergistic interaction between motivation and active learning.
Trowler (2010)	The investment of time, effort, and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance and reputation of the institution.

Table 2.1 Common Definitions of Student Engagement

Despite the importance of SE, there is no clear consensus on what SE means (Groccia, 2018). Table 2.1 above shows how different scholars and researchers have defined the term. According to Sinatra et al. (2015), four main reasons might explain this. First, SE is multidimensional. Engagement is often conceptualised in various dimensions, including behavioural, cognitive, and emotional aspects (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Groccia, 2018; Trowler, 2010). Researchers may prioritise different dimensions based on their theoretical perspectives, leading to varied definitions and understandings of engagement. Second, various theoretical frameworks influence how engagement is defined and measured (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Groccia, 2018). Researchers may select measures based on prior studies without critically examining the assumptions underlying those frameworks, which can result in inconsistent definitions across studies.

Third, the context in which engagement is studied (e.g., different subjects, educational levels, or cultural settings) can also affect definitions (Groccia, 2018; Sinatra et al., 2015). What constitutes engagement in a science classroom may differ from engagement in a history class. These contextual differences further complicate the task of arriving at a universal definition. Finally, the challenges associated with measuring engagement, such as the grain size of measurement and individual differences among students (e.g., age, race, gender), further contribute to the ambiguity in defining engagement. Researchers may focus on different aspects of engagement based on the measurement tools they choose, leading to varied conceptualisations (Sinatra et al., 2015).

2.2.2. Characteristics of Student Engagement

According to reviews of academic engagement, two main characteristics are crucial to understanding its complexity: its multidimensionality and malleability. First, academic engagement is multidimensional, comprising three dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional. These dimensions represent different manifestations of students' investment in their academic work (Coates, 2005; Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010). This multidimensionality of SE is discussed further in the following subsection.

Second, SE is malleable rather than static (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Degol, 2014). Hence, SE is subject to contextual influences and can vary depending on their context. For example, Quinlan (2019) found that students' engagement levels vary from one course to another depending on their interest in the subject and their views of how enthusiastic and approachable their teachers are. Therefore, it can be argued that SE is situated on a continuum (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2013), rather than there being a clear distinction between complete engagement and full disengagement. Students may exhibit a range of engagement levels in their studies. This engagement continuum includes higher levels, where students dedicate significant amounts of time, effort, and energy to their academic work, and lower levels, where students are less engaged or disengaged.

Researchers (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2013; Wang & Degol, 2014) argue that different contextual factors lead to varying levels of engagement, and changes in these factors might impact on students' engagement levels. Bryson and Hand (2007) add that the same student might experience different degrees of academic engagement on the continuum, depending on the contexts in which they are situated. This suggests that it is important to understand how students perceive their engagement in their studies and what factors contribute to it.

To summarise, understanding the multidimensionality and malleability of SE is fundamental to this research. SE does not mean the same thing for all students, as it encompasses how they approach their HE experiences behaviourally, cognitively, and emotionally. In addition, different students are impacted by different influences, be they social, economic, or personal.

2.2.3. Dimensions of SE

Many influential scholars agree that SE has several dimensions, as discussed in 2.2.2. These dimensions represent several interconnected aspects that account for how students interact and respond to different factors in their educational experiences (Lester, 2013). The main advantage of examining the dimensions of SE is that it helps all stakeholders, including educators and institutions, to understand

and address what drives students to be engaged, and what ultimately leads to students' success. Several researchers (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Krause & Coates, 2008) have reached a consensus that SE has three main dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, and affective. These dimensions are interrelated, as shown in Figure 2.1, below.

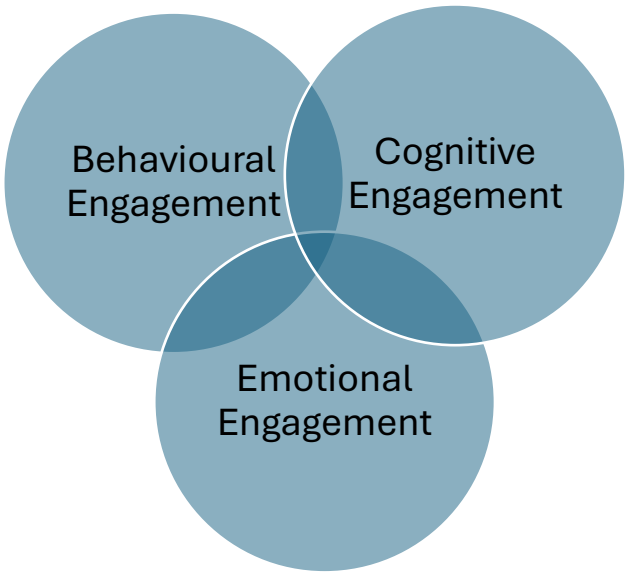

Figure 2. 1 Dimensions of SE

2.2.3.1. Behavioural Engagement

The first dimension of SE is behavioural engagement, which refers to the observable academic performance and participatory actions of students (Appleton et al., 2008; Schaufeli et al., 2002). It might be described as the "doing" aspect of engagement, including students' visible, more straightforward actions that can be measured (Appleton et al., 2008).

The literature on SE presents several indicators that determine behaviourally engaged students. These indicators include attending classes.

Bowden et al. (2021) argue that behavioural engagement fosters students' self-esteem and self-efficacy. They add that the link between students' behavioural engagement and self-efficacy is significant for students, as they usually measure

their self-efficacy based on how well they perform on their academic tasks. For example, students who attend classes regularly and consistently review their studies are more likely to develop confidence in their educational activities. It also increases their willingness to interact with their peers and commitment to studying (Appleton et al., 2008). This is significant for boosting their belief in their academic abilities and enhancing their readiness for future careers. In addition, given that behavioural engagement is the visible aspect of SE, understanding behavioural engagement allows educators to identify at-risk students and implement targeted interventions (Appleton et al., 2008). By focusing on enhancing participation and engagement, HEIs can address issues of disengagement and improve educational outcomes for all students

Although behavioural engagement is vital for SE, it cannot be the sole determinant of engagement. Relying only on behavioural indicators to assess which students are engaged and which are disengaged may provide a shallow understanding of their overall engagement. For instance, a student might attend all classes on time but not grasp the content of lessons or feel emotionally connected to them.

2.2.3.2. Cognitive Engagement

The second form of engagement recognised by scholars to shape students' overall engagement is cognitive engagement. Greene (2015) defines this as a construct encompassing the type and degree of cognitive strategy use, self-regulatory processes, and the degree of effort learners exert. It is influenced by early cognitive research on memory, particularly the levels of processing theory proposed by Craik and Lockhart (1972), who distinguish between deep and shallow engagement. Deep engagement involves the active use of prior knowledge and the intentional creation of complex knowledge structures, while rote processing and mechanical cognitive actions, such as verbatim memorisation, characterise shallow engagement.

Another significant dimension of understanding cognitive engagement is investment in the learning process, incorporating thoughtfulness and a willingness to try to grasp complex ideas and master difficult skills (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). This definition aligns

with the broader research on learning and motivation, emphasising the importance of cognitive strategies and self-regulation in the learning process.

Different scholars, including Appleton et al. (2008) and Greene (2015), have noted that cognitive engagement involves the least observable indicators compared to other forms of engagement. This characteristic of cognitive engagement relates to its involvement in mental processes that are not easily gauged, including problem-solving skills and reflection on one's own thinking and understanding. Therefore, it can be argued that cognitive engagement is demonstrated by students who manifest two main traits: striving for a deep understanding of course content by employing cognitive strategies and using self-regulated learning techniques to oversee their study habits, as shown in Figure 2.2 (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Degol, 2014).

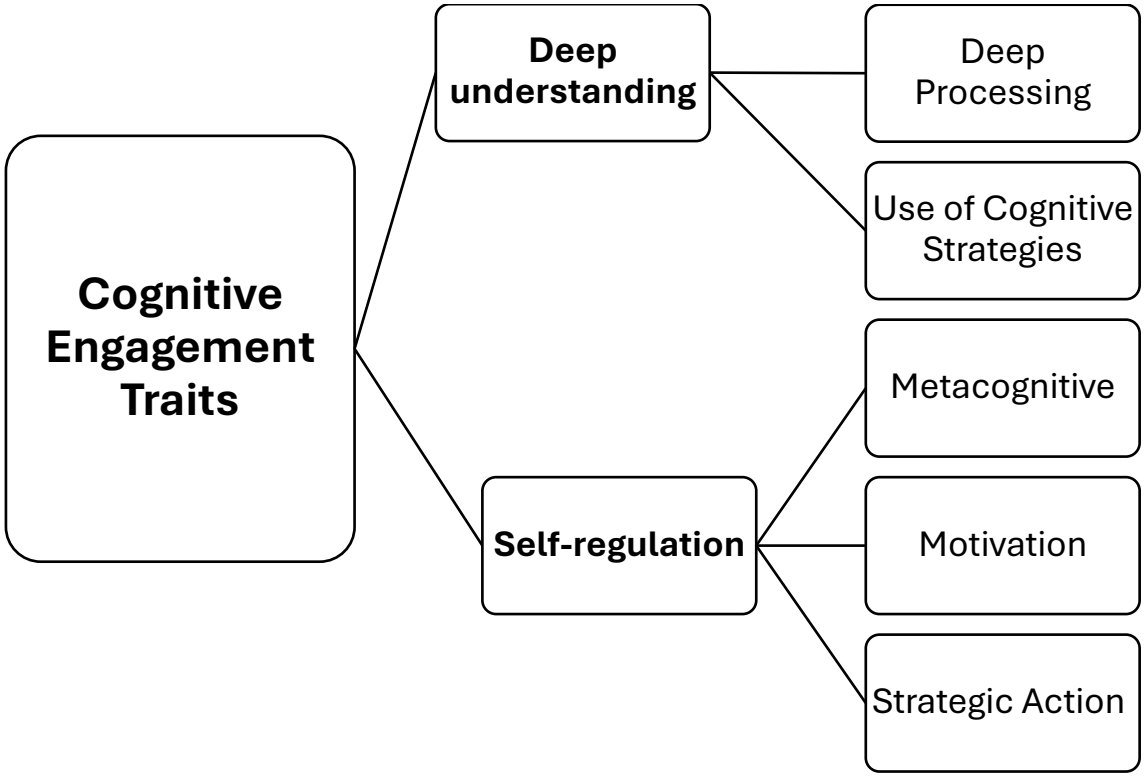

Figure 2.2 Cognitive Engagement Traits

A. Deep understanding of course content

The first trait that cognitively engaged students demonstrate is their ability to fully understand their study materials and courses by going beyond the surface level

(Fredricks et al., 2004). As Ramsden, (2003) explains, “surface approaches have nothing to do with wisdom and everything to do with aimless accumulation. They belong to an artificial world of learning, where faithfully reproducing fragments of torpid knowledge to please teachers and pass examinations has replaced understanding” (p. 59). To illustrate, when students are cognitively engaged in their studies, they often utilise various cognitive strategies that enhance their learning experience. For instance, they may relate learning materials to their own experiences, which helps them to understand and internalise information more effectively. In addition, they tend to make connections between new concepts and what they already know, creating a richer framework for comprehension. Furthermore, these students actively seek evidence and information to support their conclusions. Doing this ensures that their understanding is grounded in solid reasoning and thought. This multi-faceted approach not only promotes better retention of information but also encourages critical thinking and analytical skills (Ashwin, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2004). In contrast, students who approach learning at a surface level usually seek to satisfy the course requirements with minimal effort. They tend to reproduce the factual information found in course materials without taking the time to understand its meaning (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004).

B. Self-regulation

The second trait of cognitive engagement is self-regulated learning (SRL), which has received considerable attention. Based on the work of Winne and Perry (2000) and Zimmerman (2008), SLR encompasses three main aspects: metacognition, motivation, and strategic action. According to Brenner (2022), students with metacognitive abilities know their personal learning strengths and challenges. They know about learning strategies and are familiar with others’ needs and interests. Students with high motivation are willing to put effort into difficult tasks. They are persistent and believe that, with effort, they will succeed in learning tasks. Finally, students who employ strategic actions have large ‘repertoires of learning strategies’ (Brenner, 2022). They are adaptive and flexible in their use of strategies and able to adapt them to meet the needs of various tasks. Greene (2015) suggests that self-regulated students employ various processes, like goal-setting, planning,

and monitoring. These processes have been proven to be fundamental to fostering deeper cognitive engagement among learners (Greene, 2015).

2.2.3.3. Emotional Engagement

The third dimension of SE discussed here is emotional engagement, which some studies refer to as affective engagement. This complex construct includes students' feelings about their learning, such as enthusiasm, enjoyment, interest, and belonging. Many studies have highlighted emotional engagement's pivotal role in producing good outcomes in educational settings by making students more persistent, better achievers, and feeling positive (Fredricks et al., 2004). Emotional engagement is fundamentally linked to self-determination theory, which emphasises that intrinsic motivation and strong emotional connections are fostered by fulfilling three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy refers to the need for individuals to feel in control of their own actions and decisions; competence pertains to being capable and effective in one's activities; and relatedness involves forming meaningful connections with others.

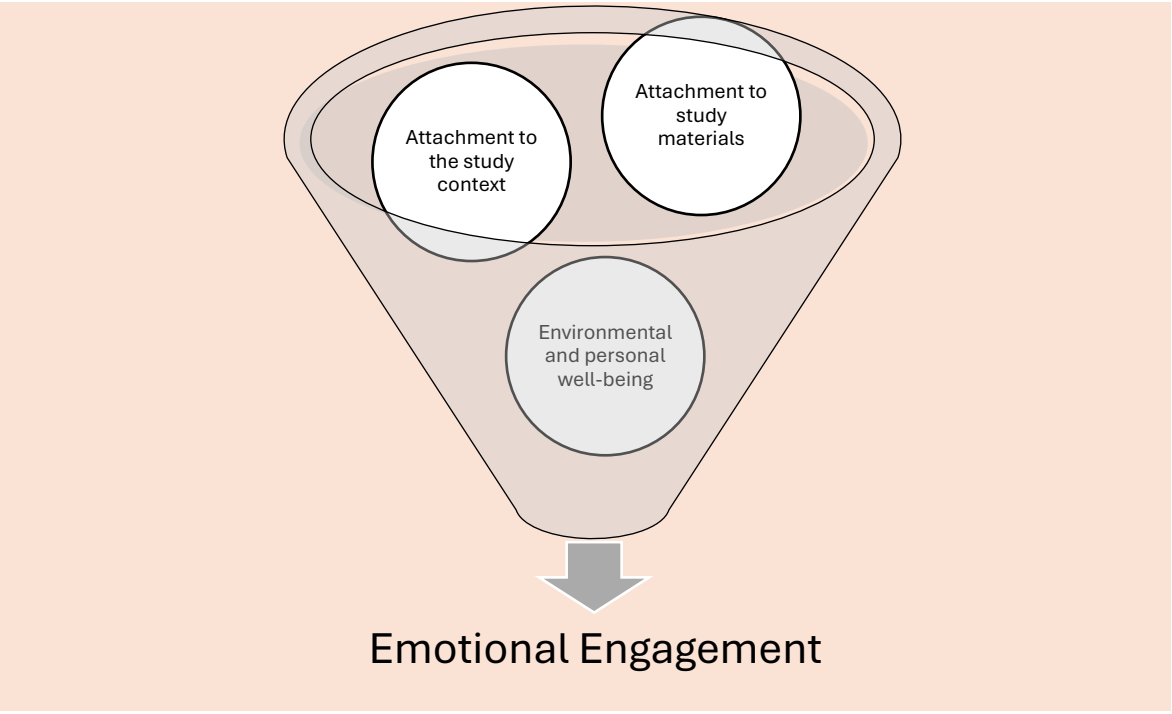

Figure 2.3 Domains of Emotional Engagement

The literature on SE identifies three different domains of emotional engagement, as shown in Figure 2.3 above. The first one is students' emotional attachment to the study materials or course. In academic environments, experiencing a positive emotional state, such as enthusiasm, curiosity, or genuine interest, can significantly enhance students' engagement with the material (Pekrun, 2006). Learners who feel excited about their studies are more likely to participate actively and put effort into their learning. But negative emotions, particularly anxiety or stress, can raise barriers to engagement. These adverse feelings may lead to avoidance behaviours and decreased motivation, thus hindering the overall learning experience (Pekrun, 2006; Skinner et al., 2009). Understanding the impact of emotions on learning can help educators create supportive environments that nurture positive emotional experiences and foster deeper engagement among students.

The second domain of emotional engagement discussed in the literature is students' emotional attachment to educational settings. Studies have found that emotional engagement is not confined to feeling excited about learning and academic activities; students must also feel connected to their fellow students, teachers, and overall HEI to become emotionally engaged (Gijn-Gosvenor & Huisman, 2020; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). Studies have also noted that students who reported more interactions with others, particularly their lecturers, were likely to experience positive emotions (e.g. satisfaction, enjoyment, excitement), possibly resulting from knowledge acquisition and encouragement from their lecturers. However, students who are not adequately engaged tend not to be interested in the subject matter. They are more likely to report negative emotions, such as boredom, disinterest, frustration, and anxiety, possibly resulting in less effort spent on study (Skinner et al., 2009).

The third emotional engagement domain relates to students' environmental and personal well-being. A recent study by Ahn and Davis (2020) expanded the concept of emotional engagement by introducing two often-overlooked areas: "surroundings" and "personal space". They argue that emotional engagement and belonging go beyond academic and social connections on the university campus, thus requiring paying attention to these additional dimensions. Surroundings refer to students' living environment and the cultural and geographical context of their education,

highlighting the influence of factors such as their living space's stability and cultural alignment with their educational setting. For instance, students studying abroad may face cultural challenges that affect their emotional engagement, despite positive academic and social experiences. Personal space encompasses internal factors, such as life satisfaction, attitude, identity, and personal interests. Students who struggle with self-identity or feel disconnected from their interests may find it challenging to invest emotionally in their education, even if they perform well academically. By considering these domains, Ahn and Davis (2020) provide a more holistic understanding of emotional engagement, emphasising that both external conditions and internal well-being are crucial for fostering meaningful connections to learning and belonging.

2.2.4. SE in ECAs

Students' experiences in HEIs are not and should not be confined to their activities inside the classroom. While formal education provides students with foundational knowledge and theoretical frameworks, effective participation in ECAs plays a vital role in developing personal skills, enhancing the practical application of learned concepts, and preparing students for their future professional lives (Corr, 2023; Díaz-Iso et al., 2019; Stuart et al., 2011). These activities, which range from student organisations and clubs to employability-focused initiatives, offer holistic opportunities for student growth by bridging the gap between theory and practice. Numerous studies have investigated the advantages of extracurricular activities, highlighting their impact on academic success (Ginosyan et al., 2020; Seow & Pan, 2014), skills development (Fakhretdinova et al., 2021; Hancock et al., 2012), and employability (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2021; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017).

The importance of ECAs stems from Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), proposed by Kolb (1984). ELT suggests that students learn best through active engagement and experience, instead of passively acquiring knowledge from textbooks or lectures. Experiential learning emphasises a hands-on approach to education, whereby students engage with real-world scenarios and challenges. According to

Kolb, learning is a continuous process grounded in experiences that include four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. ECAs align perfectly with this framework, allowing students to participate actively, reflect on their experiences, and apply theoretical concepts in practical environments.

2.2.4.1. Benefits of ECAs

After reviewing several studies, it has been noted that engaging in ECAs benefits students in three ways, as illustrated in Figure 2.4 below. One benefit usually linked to participation in these activities is the development of personal and social skills. ECAs help students build essential personal and social skills, such as teamwork, leadership, communication, problem-solving, and time management (Corr, 2023; Stuart et al., 2011). Participation in student organisations, sports teams, volunteer work, and cultural clubs allows students to work collaboratively, often in diverse groups, thereby fostering interpersonal skills critical for future employment. These opportunities enable students to assume leadership roles, organise events, and resolve conflicts, all contributing to their personal growth and confidence.

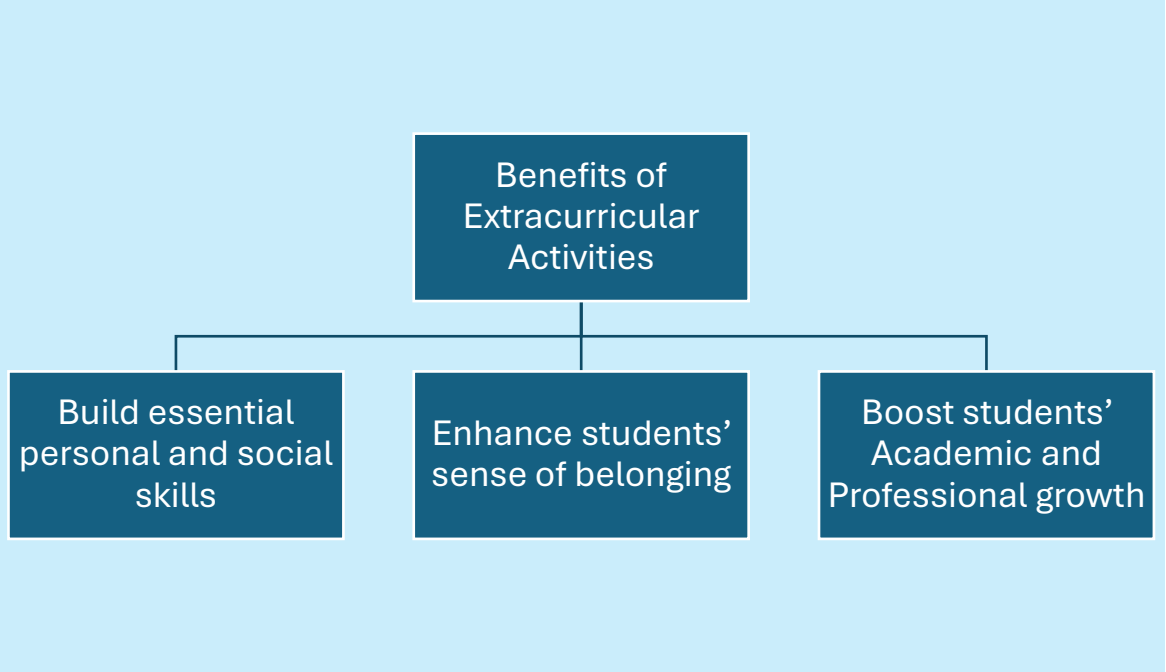

Figure 2.4 Benefits of Extracurricular Activities

Another often discussed advantage of taking part in ECAs is their ability to enhance students' sense of belonging to their academic institutions and community integration (Hoang, 2024). Scholars such as Corr (2023) and Zepke (2015) argue that these activities enhance social integration by creating inclusive spaces where students can connect with peers, faculty, and administrators. A strong sense of community and belonging contributes to students' retention and engagement in HE. For instance, involvement in clubs and organisations where students work alongside their friends mitigates feelings of isolation and exclusion (Stuart et al., 2011; Thomas, 2002). This is particularly crucial for non-traditional student groups struggling to adapt to the HE environment.

The third widely claimed benefit accredited to ECAs by several studies (e.g., Eide & Ronan, 2001; Mishra & Aithal, 2023) is their positive influence on students' academic and professional growth. While some critics say that participation in ECAs may impact negatively on academic performance due to time constraints, existing research contradicts this assumption. Studies (e.g., Corr, 2023; Stuart et al., 2011) demonstrate that academic performance and ECA involvement contribute to students' overall experience and success. Students participating in ECAs often exhibit better time-management skills, resilience, and focus, as they learn more effectively how to balance academic and non-academic commitments. Moreover, these activities provide platforms for students to apply classroom knowledge in real-life contexts, thus reinforcing their learning and fostering critical thinking.

2.2.4.2. Employability-focused Extracurricular Activities

A notable trend in recent years has been the rise of employability-focused ECAs in HE. Armellini et al. (2021) emphasise that these activities are essential for equipping students with the skills and knowledge required to thrive in the workplace. The demand for graduates with academic qualifications and practical experience has made employability a central focus for HEIs worldwide. Employability-focused activities include internships, case studies, simulations, industry-led projects, and work-based learning experiences. These initiatives enhance students' employability and enable them to establish meaningful connections between theory and practice

(Stuart et al., 2011). Employability-focused activities bridge the oft-cited gap between education and employment, providing graduates with the tools to transition successfully into the workforce (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022).

2.2.4.3. Challenges and Misconceptions Surrounding Extracurricular Activities

Despite their numerous benefits, the debate regarding the impact of ECAs on academic performance continues (Hoang, 2024). Critics suggest that excessive involvement may hinder students' academic focus. However, this assumption tends to overlook that effective time management and prioritisation, which students develop through extracurricular participation, mitigate potential drawbacks. Research by Corr (2023) highlights that engaged students participating in structured ECAs often perform better academically than disengaged peers. Furthermore, well-organised activities complement academic learning rather than hinder it, reinforcing skills and knowledge learned in the classroom.

One concern vis-à-vis ECAs is that access to them is not always equitable, despite the value of ECAs being widely recognised. Students from marginalised or low-income backgrounds may face financial, time, or cultural barriers that limit their participation. For instance, students working part-time to support themselves may find engaging in unpaid EACs challenging. Stuart et al. (2011) argue that HEIs can address these inequalities by offering accessible, inclusive opportunities that accommodate diverse student needs. Scholarships, flexible schedules, and support systems can help to ensure that all students benefit from extracurricular involvement.

Furthermore, institutions should actively promote ECAs and highlight their benefits to students. Academic advisors, faculty, and administrators should collaborate to create environments where extracurricular participation is encouraged, valued, and integrated into students' learning journeys. Establishing clear connections between ECAs, academic learning, and career readiness can motivate students to engage meaningfully.

2.2.5. Research Gaps in SE

Despite the numerous studies on SE, some research areas of this concept have still to be fully explored. In reviewing the relationship between SE and curriculum, Ashwin (2014) argues that despite being crucial, how students engage with the curriculum and knowledge presented to them in HE is frequently overlooked. In this study, the impact of curriculum on SE will determine what makes students engage or disengage with the curriculum.

Not many studies have simultaneously examined the dimensions of SE and explained the factors that affect it. According to Kahu (2013), there is a clear reliance on surveys to measure engagement. Building on this gap, this research attempts to simultaneously measure the engagement levels of mature students and explore the influences that contribute to their levels of engagement using qualitative data. This focus on mature students also addresses the issues surrounding this group's behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement, which are usually overlooked by researchers primarily interested in the overall experiences of mature students in HE.

2.3. Factors Impacting on SE

Having explored the concept of SE and its dimensions, this section examines the various factors that shape engagement, viewed through a sociocultural lens. SE does not occur in isolation (Zepke, 2015); it is deeply influenced by the dynamic interplay between individual characteristics and the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which students operate (Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Adopting a sociocultural perspective allows us to examine how factors such as family background, institutional policies, peer interactions, and cultural norms impact on students' connections with their learning environment. By focusing on broader social and cultural forces, this section strives for a comprehensive understanding of the complex and interconnected influences that shape SE in educational settings.

2.3.1. Structural Influences

Kahu & Nelson (2018) explain structural influences as the external, institutional, and contextual factors that shape the environment in which SE occurs. The framework

differentiates between two categories of influences, as shown in Figure 2.5 below. The first relates to the educational setting, including policies, culture, curriculum, and discipline. The second one is related to the student's context, such as their background, life load, family, and support.

Structural influences are not direct, that is, they are distal in nature, and their interplay with psychosocial factors impacts on SE (Kahu, 2013). According to Zepke et al. (2010), these external factors' impact may not be continuous but only exert influence in times of crisis. To illustrate, institutional funding policies determine class sizes, which in turn influence teacher availability and individual attention for students. Similarly, socio-economic differences among students limit access to educational resources such as technology or transportation, thus indirectly shaping students' capacity to engage fully in their studies. These factors set the conditions under which more direct or proximal influences operate, and in doing so, they shape the opportunities and restrictions that affect students' day-to-day engagement.

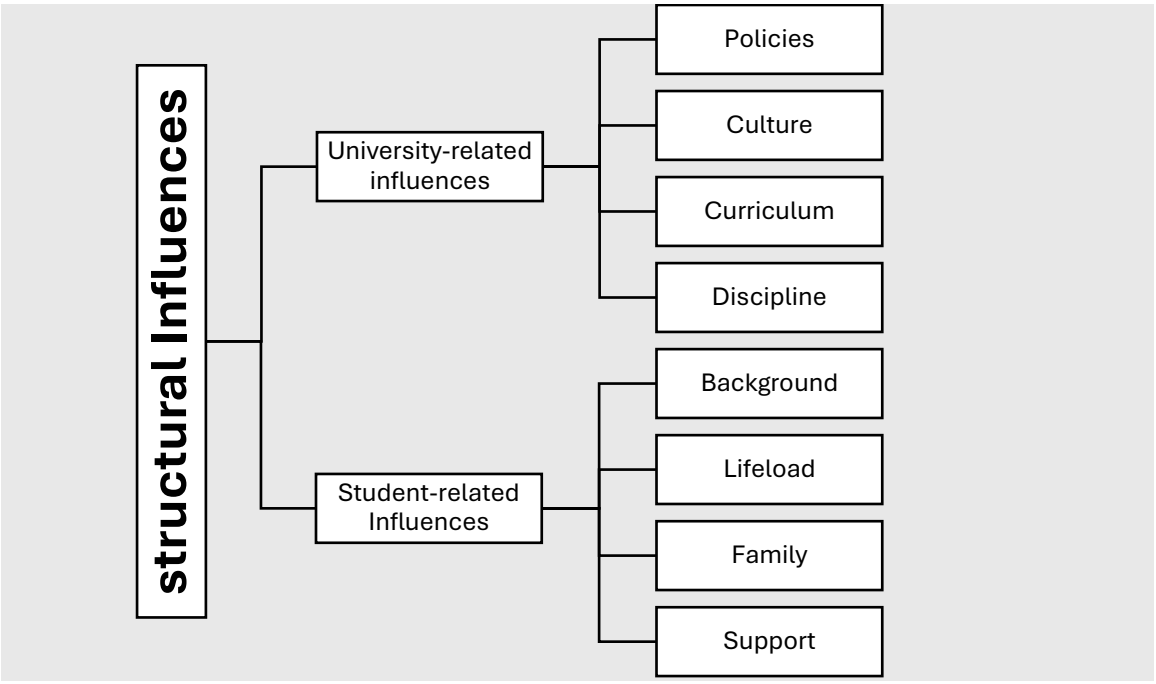

Figure 2.5 Structural Influences of SE (Kahu & Nelson, 2018)

2.3.1.1. University-related Structural Influences

2.3.1.1.1. University policies

According to Porter (2006), research says little about the impact of HEI policies on SE; he attributes this to the heavy dependence of research on surveys to measure SE and their cross-sectional nature. However, studies that focus on universities' policies and how inclusive they are, based on gender, age, and socio-economic status, aim to widen student participation and, therefore, their engagement (Claire, 2011).

The impact of policies such as attendance policies (Büchele, 2021; Macfarlane, 2013; Moores et al., 2019), examination policies (French et al., 2024; Wang, 2010), and admission policies (Greenbank, 2006; Hamilton et al., 2023) have been indirectly linked to students' experience in HE. For instance, Moores et al. (2019) found that students required to attend a certain percentage of classes are more likely to develop disciplined study habits and benefit from a structured learning environment. However, Macfarlane (2013) argues that rigid attendance policies can reduce autonomy, potentially leading to dissatisfaction among mature students, who must balance multiple responsibilities. He argues that "if students are to be able to develop their own capabilities as independent learners and thinkers, they need to be provided with the choices, opportunities, encouragement and conducive environment in which to do so" (p. 26). According to Picton and Kahu (2022), universities that have policies and systems for academic advising, career guidance, and well-being can better foster SE.

2.3.1.1.2. University Culture

Each university develops its own culture to maintain specific shared values, beliefs, and norms. Depending on this, students might be encouraged or discouraged from engaging in their universities' activities. University culture is a very significant component of student academic life as it provides students with opportunities to interact with their peers and teachers (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021) and become part of the academic community. At this stage, the student usually transforms to HE, where they have more autonomy than in their school years; and

being welcomed and supported shapes their experience. A number of studies (e.g., Kelly & Moogan, 2012; Swallow & Tomalin, 2022; Zhou et al., 2008) have highlighted how students might experience a culture shock, which can hinder their engagement if support is not made available to cope with the changes they face.

Universities' cultures and norms, referred to as “Institutional habitus” by Thomas (2002), might be shaped by the most dominant student groups, and thus lead to an inherent social bias and poor retention rates among non-traditional students. Several scholars have echoed this idea (e.g., Fragoso et al., 2013; Mallman & Lee, 2017; Read et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2010), highlighting the struggles of less advantaged students to fit in. These students often feel isolated or marginalised, making integration into the campus community difficult. The discrepancies in experiences between dominant and non-traditional groups can result in a lack of engagement among these students, highlighting the need for universities to adopt more inclusive practices that support a culture that welcomes a more diverse student body.

2.3.1.1.3. Curriculum

Curriculum design and delivery have been shown to impact on SE. In their comprehensive study about the role of curriculums in SE, McGarry et al. (2015) argue that a curriculum fosters positive engagement if it prioritises students' needs and interests, promotes collaboration, has a flexible design, and provides opportunities for interaction with teachers and peers. In addition, how the curriculum is organised, including the sequencing of courses and the integration of interdisciplinary studies, can facilitate or impede engagement (Kahu, 2013). The impact of the curriculum on SE was also recognised by Kassab et al. (2024), who calls for integrating curricula that boost students’ academic self-perceptions to make them feel confident about their academic success and the application of active learning strategies. They argue that this might strengthen cognitive and behavioural engagement, in turn helping students achieve their goals.

Kahu (2013) highlights that the nature of assessments within the curriculum can also influence engagement. Culturally responsive assessments that take into account students’ diverse backgrounds and learning styles (Slee, 2010; Walker et al., 2023),

and formative assessments that provide constructive feedback (Morris et al., 2021), can encourage students to engage more deeply with learning materials (Kahu, 2013; Vaughan, 2014). But high stakes testing that is summative in nature (French et al., 2024) may create anxiety and disengagement (Kahu, 2013). This type of testing often puts significant pressure on students to perform well, potentially overshadowing the learning process itself. As a result, many students may become more focused on the outcome rather than the value of acquiring knowledge, which can impact negatively on their overall motivation and engagement with learning.

2.3.1.1.4. Discipline (Specialisation)

Discipline is another structural influence identified by Kahu and Nelson (2018) in their revised SE framework. Several studies have explored the strong relationship between SE and disciplines (Braxton et al., 1998; Isaeva et al., 2024; Ramsden, 2003). A study by Brint et al. (2008) suggests that students' discipline significantly influences their culture of academic engagement. The study identifies two distinct cultures. The first is humanities/ social sciences (HUMSOC) culture, where students are more likely to engage in discussions, debates, and collaborative learning that fosters critical thinking and creativity. Their engagement is closely related to aspirations for graduate degrees in law and doctoral programmes, as they often seek to explore and apply ideas beyond classroom requirements. The second discipline-related culture of engagement identified by Brint et al. (2008) is natural sciences/ engineering (SCIENG) culture. In this, students taking these majors tend to focus on hard work and technical competence, often with a clear connection to career outcomes, such as graduate business or medical degrees. Their engagement is less about class participation and more about achieving proficiency in demanding fields.

2.3.1.2. Student-related Structural Influences

2.3.1.2.1. Students' Background

Students come from diverse backgrounds, which shape their perspectives and experiences and impact on their engagement. Factors such as socio-economic status (Pike, 1991; Zepke & Leach, 2007), cultural identity (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006), and previous educational experiences (Timmis et al., 2024) can influence how

they engage with the education system. For instance, students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds may face additional challenges that affect their access to resources, support systems, and learning opportunities. Likewise, cultural identity can impact on communication styles, learning preferences, and classroom dynamics, leading to varying levels of comfort and participation in academic settings. Furthermore, students' past education experiences, whether positive or negative, can inform their attitudes towards learning, their expectations of educators, and their willingness to seek help. Understanding these details is essential for creating an inclusive and effective educational environment where all learners feel valued and engaged.

2.3.1.2.2. Family

The support from students' families can significantly affect their engagement levels. Positive family involvement in education, including encouragement and communication about academic progress, can enhance student motivation and participation. Studies have highlighted that families play a more significant role in supporting non-traditional students and argue that students' relationships with their families and friends, also known as “social capital”, are a key factor in their success and engagement with their studies (Daza, 2016; Fuller, 2014; Mishra, 2020). A study from Ghana by Asare et al. (2017) found that although there is a widespread consensus that HE students are responsible for their own learning, families can do much to help them succeed. The study highlights that students usually perform better when their families set high expectations, monitor their academic progress, and support them both emotionally and financially.

2.3.1.2.3. Life Load

Students often juggle multiple responsibilities outside the university, such as part-time jobs, family, and obligations. The demands of their personal lives can impact on their ability to engage fully in their education. The literature discusses the struggle of non-traditional students, particularly concerning their life load. Studies have investigated how single-parent students (Burns et al., 1993; Freeman, 2020), mature students (Heagney & Benson, 2017a; Mercer, 2007), and young students taking care

of siblings or family members (Caplan, 2011; Lun, 2022), thus having other responsibilities while studying, usually risk their academic involvement, as these responsibilities consume their time and energy.

Students' life load can affect their HE experiences positively and negatively. For example, a study by Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan (2020) suggests that single mothers who pursue HE usually become role models for their children, showing more understanding and admiration for them. Another study found that doing a part-time job might enrich students' academic experience as they build up skills and a social network that aids them in their learning. However, it also damages their familial relationships and might deprive them of the emotional support usually provided by families (Wang et al., 2010).

2.3.1.2.4. Support

Although Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework cites support as one of the student-related structural influences, they do not specify what support they mean. The literature usually refers to family support (discussed in subsection 2.3.1.2.2) and academic support (which should be classified as a university-related influence). However, researchers usually overlook support from other social circles, such as friends (outside the educational context) and work. One unique longitudinal study by DeLuca Bishop et al. (2023) confirmed the positive impact of the support received from 'close others', including close friends, on mature students' engagement in their studies and achieving high Grade Point Average (GPAs). Similar findings were obtained by Heagney and Benson (2017) in their study on reasons why mature students succeed in HE in Australia. Another study from Ghana, by Kuuyelleh et al. (2014), looked at study leave and how it impacts on teachers seeking further education. It found that study leave usually has benefits, including paying university fees and purchasing course materials. Another study by Busher and James (2019) reported that some mature students were hesitant to pursue their HE studies for different reasons, among these being the lack of empathy from their employers.

Although limited, these three studies imply that close friends from one's social circle and support from work can significantly facilitate or hinder the learning journey of

students, particularly that of mature students or other non-traditional students who attempt to balance different responsibilities in addition to their studies.

2.3.2. Psychosocial Influences

Based on the original framework developed by Kahu (2013), psychosocial influences refer to the “immediate” factors that affect SE, which encompass both personal and relational aspects. These influences include students’ characteristics (such as their motivations, identities, personality), the relationships they form with peers and faculty, and their academic workload. The psychosocial perspective emphasises that engagement is not just an internal state but is significantly shaped by interactions and relationships within the educational context. Similar to structural influences, psychosocial influences are divided into two main groups: university-related and student-related, as illustrated in Figure 2.6 below.

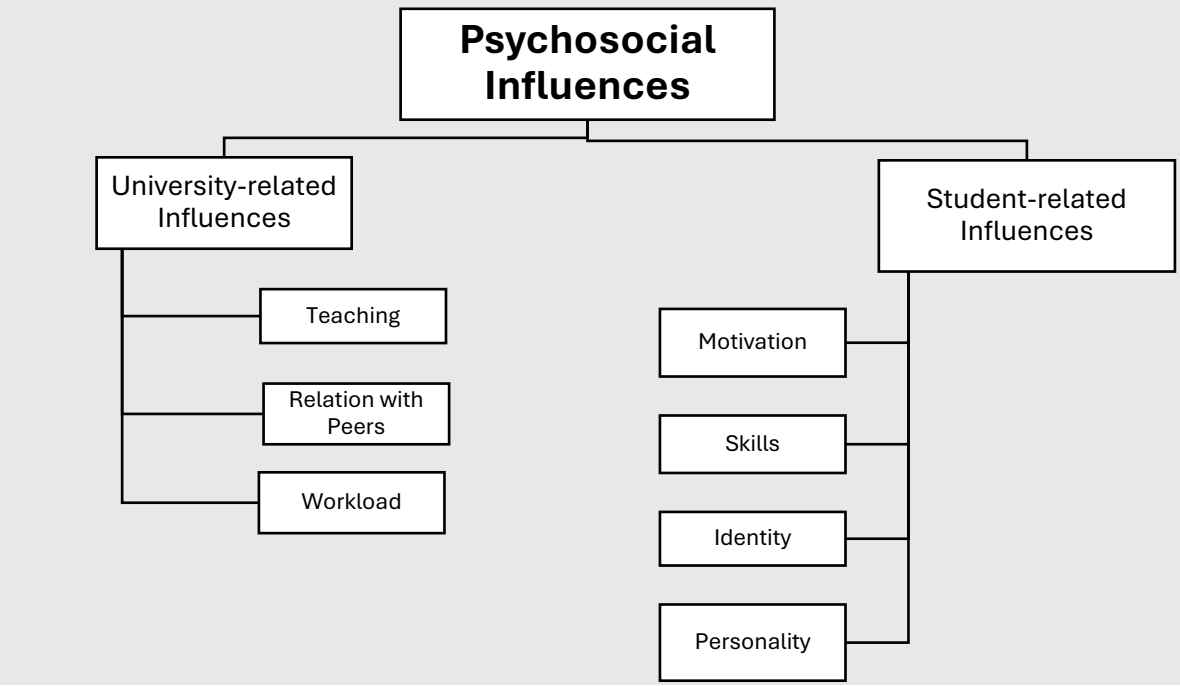

Figure 2.6 Psychosocial Influences on SE (Kahu & Nelson, 2018)

2.3.2.1. University-related Psychosocial influences

2.3.2.1.1. Teaching

The role of teaching in keeping students engaged has been discussed in several studies (Almarghani & Mijatovic, 2017; Kahu & Picton, 2019; Leenknecht et al., 2023). Teaching style and strategies (Pedler et al., 2020), teachers' constructive feedback (Parkin et al., 2012; Zhang, 2022; Zhang & Hyland, 2022) and teachers' empathy (Aldrup et al., 2022; Kianinezhad, 2023) have all been linked to an increase in SE. Research by Fredricks et al. (2004) highlights that engaging teaching involves integrating behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement. This ensures that students are not only participating but are also emotionally invested and cognitively challenged. Teachers who employ strategies such as collaborative learning, problem-based approaches, and active learning techniques foster a sense of involvement and motivation among students, particularly in HE (Prince, 2004).

The role of teachers becomes increasingly significant in fostering engagement among non-traditional students (Van Rhijn et al., 2015), who often face unique challenges and demands compared to traditional learners. These students, who are usually older, employed full-time, or managing family commitments, bring diverse life experiences and perspectives to their studies. However, these students often struggle to balance their multiple roles, making engagement in academic activities more complex. Kasworm (2018) explains that teachers play a crucial role in mitigating these challenges by employing inclusive and flexible teaching approaches tailored to the needs of non-traditional students. For instance, a teacher with mature students can encourage them to share their experiences so as to enrich class discussions and give other younger students an opportunity to see how knowledge presented to them in class is applied in the real world.

2.3.2.1.2. Students

The second university-related psychological influence identified in the framework is students' relations with their peers. Extensive research has examined how students' peer relationships influence their engagement in academic settings. Positive peer interactions can enhance engagement by fostering a sense of belonging, increasing

motivation, and providing academic support (Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Zepke & Leach, 2007). For instance, Shao et al. (2024) found that strong peer relationships positively affect academic achievement through increased learning motivation and engagement. Conversely, negative peer interactions, such as bullying or exclusion, can diminish engagement by causing stress and reducing self-esteem. In particular, non-traditional students, including mature students, might experience exclusion due to their age difference, and other students might show reluctance to collaborate with them in the classroom (Mallman & Lee, 2017; Van Rhijn et al., 2015). This echoes a study by Kahu et al. (2022) that suggested that students at university level usually tend to form relations with their peers based on a ‘people like me’ criterion. Another study by Knifsend et al. (2022) highlighted that not all peer relationships promote academic engagement; some peer groups of disengaged students can have detrimental effects. These show the importance of fostering positive peer dynamics to enhance SE.

2.3.2.1.3. Student Workload

The significance of academic workload that includes homework, assignments, projects, assigned readings, etc. is also recognised by Kahu and Nelson’s (2018) framework of engagement. Studies have extensively explored how students' workload impacts on their wellbeing (Smith, 2019), attitude to learning (Kember, 2004), and interest in their studies (Kyndt et al., 2014) all of which influence how students engage with their studies. These studies have shown that an optimal workload can enhance engagement by promoting effective time management and deep learning. However, excessive academic demands often lead to stress and burnout, thus diminishing engagement and overall well-being. To illustrate, a study by Yangdon et al. (2021) observed that students experiencing high academic workloads reported dissatisfaction with college life and struggled with negative emotions, adversely affecting their well-being. Similarly, Kyndt et al. (2014) highlight that educators should consider time, quality, and students' ability to spark interest in their workload. These findings underscore the importance of balancing academic demands to maintain SE that is highly influenced by their well-being and how they perceive their assigned workload.

2.3.2.2. Student-related Psychosocial influences

2.3.2.2.1. Motivation

Student motivation is at the centre of a large body of research in HE. Its impact on SE is undeniable for all groups of students (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2021; Parks et al., 2013; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012; Skinner et al., 2009; Swain & Hammond, 2011). A popular classification of motivation in education settings is presented by Ryan & Deci (2000) in their popular Self-Determination Theory (SDT). According to this, students are driven by internal factors (intrinsic motivation) with no external pressure and external factors (extrinsic motivation) to achieve external rewards or avoid negative consequences.

Underrepresented groups of students, including mature students, are usually influenced by intrinsic motivation, which shapes their overall engagement with their learning experience. For example, in a study of first-generation college students, Gibbons & Shoffner (2004) found that students' intrinsic motivation to succeed academically was driven by their desire to serve as role models for their communities or families. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this intrinsic drive does not operate in isolation. Institutional support, inclusive teaching practices, and peer relationships also play pivotal roles in sustaining engagement (Lin et al., 2003). Without these supports, even intrinsically motivated students may struggle to maintain engagement when faced with systemic challenges.

2.3.2.2.2. Skills

Students' skills are another significant influencer of engagement among student-related psychosocial influences in Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework of SE in the educational interface. Several scholars have demonstrated their significance for enhancing students' experience and boosting their engagement (Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Trowler et al., 2022; Zepke, 2015).

The literature has argued that students must be equipped with different skills to fully engage in their HE experience. A set of skills advocated to impact on SE positively across various disciplines is self-regulation skills (Banihashem et al., 2022; Sun &

Rueda, 2012; Yang & Zhang, 2023). These skills involve setting goals, monitoring progress, and adjusting behaviours to achieve academic objectives, which are crucial for sustained engagement. Students with strong self-regulatory abilities tend to manage their time efficiently and maintain motivation, leading to deeper involvement in their studies. For instance, a literature review by Trowler (2010) emphasises that individual learning structures and processes, including self-regulation, are integral to SE.

Critical thinking skills also play a pivotal role in fostering engagement. The ability to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise information encourages active participation in learning activities. Students who engage in critical thinking are more likely to involve themselves in discussions, seek more profound understanding, and apply knowledge in practical contexts, all contributing to heightened engagement. A review by Lester (2013) suggests that academic interest and enquiry, closely related to critical thinking, are associated with increased SE.

Collaborative skills, including communication and teamwork, enhance engagement by facilitating meaningful interactions with peers and instructors. Participation in group projects and discussions allows students to share diverse perspectives, build knowledge collectively, and develop a sense of belonging within the academic community. Various studies have highlighted that this sense of belonging is a key engagement component.

It should be noted here that the skills required for students to be engaged in HE keep changing for different reasons, including the rapid progress in science and technology, the overwhelming increase in accessible information, heightened competition, challenges in securing employment, shifts in demographics, emerging types of literacy and illiteracy, new patterns of exclusion, and intensified pressures (Stănescu et al., 2015). This implies that students, including non-traditional students, have to equip themselves with new skills and tools to address these issues (Baptista, 2015).

2.3.2.2.3. Identity

Students' identities, or how they see and act to present themselves in response to societal views and expectations, also influence their engagement in HE (Scanlon et al., 2007). Identity is usually dynamic, shifting, constructed, and reconstructed according to Tomlinson (2010). Students who feel their identities, whether cultural, racial, gender, or socioeconomic, are recognised and valued by their HEIs and tend to demonstrate a strong sense of belonging and, therefore, maximise their emotional engagement.

The subject of identity in HE is particularly significant for non-traditional and mature students. Research has examined the effect of these groups of students, who usually negotiate different identities besides their student identity, such as professional, social, and familial identities (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Howard & Davies, 2013; O'Boyle, 2015). For example, a nurse pursuing her studies and having a family and children may struggle with balancing her work and responsibilities and the demands of her university, leading to tensions between her different roles. At the same time, this nurse might bring rich, real-world perspectives to her academic work and be better at coping with pressure based on her work experience (Baxter & Britton, 2001). Recognising these identities and bridging the gap between them might create a more inclusive educational environment and increase SE.

2.3.2.2.4. Personality

Researchers have long associated student personality with SE (Brandt et al., 2020; Lechner et al., 2017; Meyer et al., 2019; Ramirez-Arellano, 2024). Unlike identity, personality is about how students behave in specific situations. Studies in education have relied on the Big Five Personality Model (see Figure 2.7, below) to describe practical students' traits that help them in their learning experiences (Komarraju et al., 2009, 2011; Patrick, 2011; Vedel, 2016). The model categorises human personality into five broad traits: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (often remembered as OCEAN). These traits describe stable patterns of thought, emotion, and behaviour, with individuals varying along a continuum for each dimension.

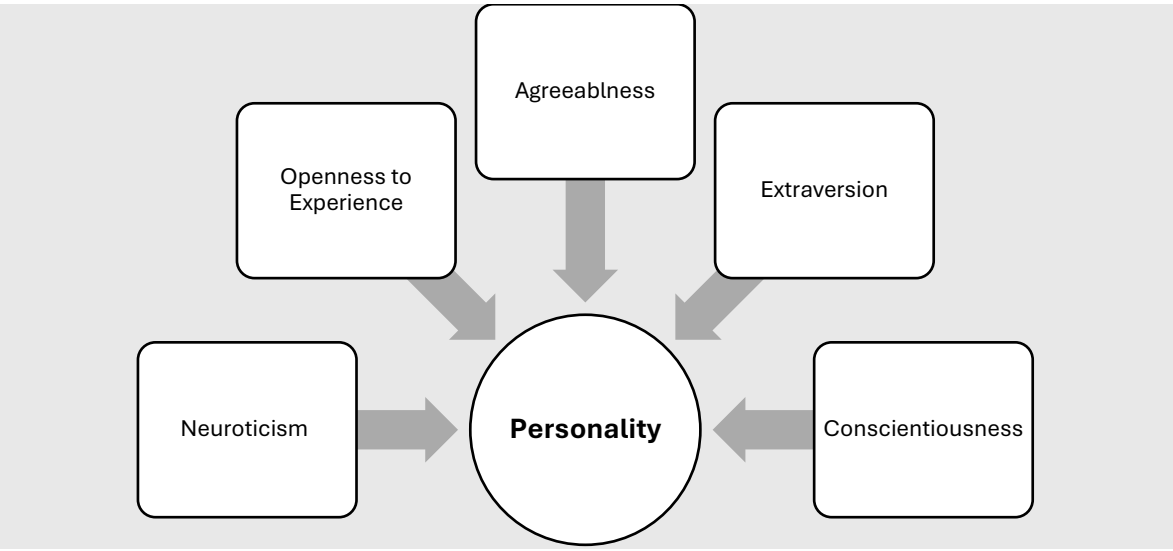

Figure 2.7 Big-five Model of Personality Traits

While positive personality traits are good indicators of academic performance (Brandt et al., 2020; Lechner et al., 2017; Y. Zhang & Wang, 2023), they might not always indicate that a student is fully engaged behaviourally, emotionally, and cognitively. From anecdotal experience, some students who might be shy in class and usually do not like to work in groups might perform better in exams because of their grasp of the content and study skills. This implies that personality alone cannot account for the overall engagement of students, and educators should not predict a 'fixed' relationship between students' personality and their engagement (Meyer et al., 2019).

2.4. Mature Students

Building on the earlier discussion about SE and the factors that influence it, this section focuses on a specific group of learners: mature students. These individuals start HE later in life and bring unique life experiences, roles, and challenges that shape how they engage with their studies.

While the previous sections explained the general ideas of engagement and factors like institutional support, personal motivation, and social interactions, it is important to explore how these factors affect mature students differently. Their engagement is influenced by their multiple responsibilities, such as work, family, and academic

commitments, along with the support or challenges they face in their learning environment.

Since mature students often have non-traditional characteristics, understanding their engagement means looking at their unique perspectives, motivations, and challenges. This section will explore the key traits of mature students and how these traits influence their engagement and interaction with the factors discussed earlier.

2.4.1. Defining Mature Students

The literature on mature students varies in the criteria specified for who should be considered mature depending on the study context. Age is one essential criterion by which many HEIs define mature students. For instance, HE policies consider students to be mature if they are 21 years old or above upon admission to a university or college in the UK (Shanahan, 2000). For instance, in Ireland and Portugal, the age threshold is 23 years and above, while in Australia, it is 25 years and above (Trueman & Hartley, 1996). These variations in age criteria reflect the different social and educational contexts in these countries, and understanding these differences is crucial for a comprehensive definition of mature students in HE (Fragoso et al., 2013; Sibson et al., 2011). Some researchers consider that the age of a mature student should be higher. Sutherland (1998) suggests that students under the age of 30 years and classified as mature might have similar experiences and characteristics to students considered young or traditional students (Howard & Davies, 2013).

Despite the varying age criteria for mature students, studies consistently link this group with unique social, employment, and financial responsibilities and challenges. This understanding can help the audience empathise with the difficulties these students face, fostering a sense of understanding and support (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Fragoso et al., 2013; Phillips, 1986; Trueman & Hartley, 1996). Therefore, it is crucial to define mature students not just based on age but also considering their other identities and unique challenges while studying. A detailed discussion of these issues will be conducted later in Section 2.1.12.

In the context of Oman, a clear and concise classification of whom a mature student is needs to be improved due to the paucity of studies that tackle the issues concerning mature students up until the time of writing this research. Looking at the different admission documents available in some of the HEIs in Oman, students' age upon entry into an undergraduate programme is determinantal for their enrolment (Sultan Qaboos University, 2022; National University of Oman, n.d.). This observation applies to both public and private universities and colleges. A reference is always made to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research guidelines, the regulating governing body in Oman, and overall issues concerning HE in the country. According to this guideline, students must be between 16 and 25 years old when applying to Omani HEIs, and those above 25 should log into the adult learning system (Higher Education Admission Centre, 2020).

Following this discussion, a definition of mature students is developed based on age and social or work commitments to provide a clear and concise understanding tailored to the objectives of this research project. For the purposes of this study, mature students are defined as individuals who are 25 years or older upon entering or returning to HE and who have work and/or social obligations. This definition aligns with several considerations that justify these criteria. It also echoes several studies (Gregersen & Nielsen, 2022; O'Boyle, 2015; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013) that called for a definition of mature students that does not rely on age alone. According to O'Boyle (2015), being a mature student is an identity that students can "inhabit and perform and identify with to a greater or lesser degree on an ongoing basis" (p. 94). The reasons considered when defining mature students for this study are as follows.

First, traditional-entry students typically commence their HE journey immediately after completing secondary school, typically at the age of 18 or 19 years (Trueman & Hartley, 1996). The undergraduate programmes in most HEIs around the world are designed to last for approximately three or four years (Alfonso, 2006). As a result, these students are expected to graduate before reaching the age of 25 years. Defining mature students as those aged 25 and above minimises the likelihood of characteristics overlapping with traditional-entry students. This age threshold is

significant as it represents a stage in life where individuals often possess more extensive life experience, have taken on social responsibilities, or experienced a notable break from formal education—factors that can substantially influence their learning experiences in HE.

Second, students who begin HE at 21 are only marginally older than their traditional classmates, which implies that their perspectives and social responsibilities might not differ significantly. Moreover, traditional-entry students sometimes defer their studies for one or two years, which means they are only slightly older than their peers upon returning. Defining mature students based solely on being two or three years older than traditional students would, therefore, fail to capture the distinct characteristics associated with this group.

Furthermore, students aged 25 years and above typically have more life experience and are likely to have significant commitments, such as family responsibilities or employment (Kasworm, 2003). These factors often distinguish mature students and align with the criteria used in other studies to define this category (Baxter & Britton, 2001). The inclusion of such responsibilities as part of the criteria is crucial as it highlights the unique challenges and perspectives these students bring to HE.

It is also important to consider that research varies in how it determines the age threshold for mature students. Many studies focus specifically on students aged 25 years and above (e.g., Baxter & Britton, 2001; Howard & Davies, 2013), as these students typically exemplify the identities and experiences of mature learners in HE. In the Omani context, where this study is situated, HE bodies generally expect traditional-entry students to be between the ages of 16 and 25 years. Consequently, 25 years and above is the most appropriate age threshold for defining the mature student demographic in this context.

Finally, while age is a key factor, it is essential to acknowledge that some younger students also face substantial social commitments that influence their learning in HE. For instance, research highlights the experiences of students with single-parent responsibilities (Hinton-Smith, 2016) and those who undertake part-time jobs to support their studies (e.g., H. Wang et al., 2010; Y.-C. Wang & Chen, 2017;

Zampetakis, 2022). Therefore, incorporating both age and social or work obligations as criteria allows for a more detailed and focused understanding of mature students as a group with distinct characteristics and challenges. This dual criterion enhances the depth of this research and provides a more comprehensive framework for analysis.

To sum up, defining students in context, including the Omani context, based on an age threshold might be misleading. Studies reporting mature students' experiences in HE have always discussed other characteristics that impact on this group of students more than the age range they represent. Life circumstances, motivations for pursuing studies, learning approaches, and barriers faced are some of the aspects that define this group more than their age.

2.4.2. Mature Students vs Other Groups of Students

To operationalise the term “mature students” and gain a more concrete understanding of whom mature students are, it is reasonable to compare them with other HE student groups frequently mentioned in the literature. These comparisons with traditional and other non-traditional student groups, such as part-time or returning students, help to contextualise mature students’ engagement and the factors that influence their engagement as a distinct group navigating their HE experiences, with their unique characteristics and challenges.

A clear and straightforward comparison between mature and traditional students can be made. According to Kaswon (2003), mature students who are among non-traditional students differ from more traditional students in several ways. First, the two groups have an age difference (Gregersen & Nielsen, 2022), with mature students generally being 25 years old and above and traditional students between 18 and 24 years old. In addition, mature students usually opt for a part-time study mode (Kasworm et al., 2002). This reflects the responsibilities mature students struggle to balance compared to their younger counterparts. Other differences include the reasons for studying, with most mature students motivated to advance in their careers; and the source of funding, with most mature students financially responsible for their studies (Kasworm et al., 2002).

When compared with other non-traditional students, the differences become narrower. To start with, we have returning students who are described as students who attended college, but left college for at least one semester, and decided to return after that to complete their unfinished degree requirements (Kinser & Deitchman, 2007; Mishra & Aithal, 2023; Parks et al., 2013). Some mature and returning students share certain similarities, such as returning to studies after a break and leaving college for personal, social, or financial reasons. However, it should be noted that the two groups are different. One of the key differences is that all returning students have previous academic experience. At the same time, some mature students might have attended college before, and some might be enrolling in HE for the first time. Therefore, returning students have the advantage of being more familiar with the academic system and establishing relationships with professors. Another critical difference is age. As discussed before, many studies state that students who are 21 years old upon entry into college are usually considered mature students. However, the age criterion is not mentioned in the literature regarding returning students whose main criterion is suspending studies temporarily for at least one academic semester. Therefore, we can conclude, with some caution, that some characteristics of returning students overlap with those of mature students, but significant differences distinguish these two groups.

Another term frequently used in the literature is part-time students, which refers to students who pursue their education by taking fewer credit hours in an academic semester due to their employment, social, or personal commitments (Swain & Hammond, 2011). These students are usually older than traditional students; some can be categorised as mature students. Several studies indicate that, typically, it is mature students who opt for part-time study due to their various obligations (Claire, 2011; Swain & Hammond, 2011). This explains the usual strong connection between mature and part-time students when the issues around these two groups are investigated.

Based on two observations, determining the main characteristics and challenges of part-time students as a distinctive group is challenging. First, research does not usually separate part-time students from mature students at the undergraduate level,

as explained above. Moreover, it appears that research conducted at the undergraduate level concentrates on the experiences of students who work part-time while studying full-time (e.g., Callender, 2008; Carney et al., 2005; Hall, 2010; Hovdhaugen, 2013). In contrast, postgraduate research focuses more on students who work full-time while studying part-time. However, reviewing the characteristics of part-time students in the literature available at the first-degree level demonstrates that they face challenges similar to those documented for mature students. These challenges include balancing studies and other responsibilities (Deris et al., 2012), financial issues (Claire, 2011), sustaining motivation (Deris et al., 2012; Swain & Hammond, 2011), and building relationships with other students and teachers.

In contrast to these similarities, mature and part-time students exhibit numerous differences. For one, mature students are usually defined by their age, while part-time students, as stated earlier, are determined by the number of credit hours they study per semester. Therefore, they might be older or younger than mature students. Second, some mature students might take full-time programmes and be granted study leave from their employment (Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Norton et al., 1998; Phillips, 1986). These students are more likely to face fewer challenges in balancing their studies and other commitments. Based on all the above similarities and differences, it can be argued that mature students are not necessarily part-time students, and part-time students are not necessarily mature students. It all depends on how the different contexts define the two groups and how the student's age is considered in these contexts.

Different models have been developed to show what a good student is in HE without referring to a group of students. One of these is the “ideal student in HE”, developed by Wong & Chiu (2020, 2021), which has recently gained popularity in determining the desired characteristics of students in HE. The concept reflects nine factors: diligence and engagement, organisation and discipline, reflection and innovation, a positive and confident outlook, support of others, academic skills, employability skills, intelligence, and a strategic approach.

Wong and Chiu's (2020, 2021) concept of the 'ideal student in HE' explicitly avoids confining its characteristics to traditional-aged students, making it applicable across diverse demographics, including mature learners. This neutrality broadens its relevance, including students who, despite being in differing life stages, can exemplify the desired traits, such as diligence, organisation, and a strategic approach to learning. However, applying this concept to mature students requires carefully considering how their unique experiences and challenges align with or differ from these qualities. For example, mature students often display exceptional diligence and employability skills due to their professional backgrounds (Heagney & Benson, 2017), but may face barriers in academic skills if returning after a long break. Furthermore, while the framework's positive and confident outlook resonates with mature students driven by clear goals, external factors such as balancing work and family responsibilities may impact on their ability to maintain these traits regularly. These observations suggest that while the framework is inclusive in theory, its application in practice should account for the complex ways in which mature students embody and navigate these characteristics, particularly within specific cultural and institutional contexts like Oman.

2.4.3. Reasons for Mature Students to Pursue HE

The educational landscape keeps expanding, and new groups of students keep joining HE, including mature students (Baptista, 2014; Stănescu et al., 2015). Similar to the differences highlighted between mature students and other groups of students, exploring the reasons and what motivates MS to pursue HE helps to provide context for their engagement and the factors influencing their engagement levels. By understanding these reasons, we can understand how their challenges, aspirations, and prior experiences play a role in their HE endeavours.

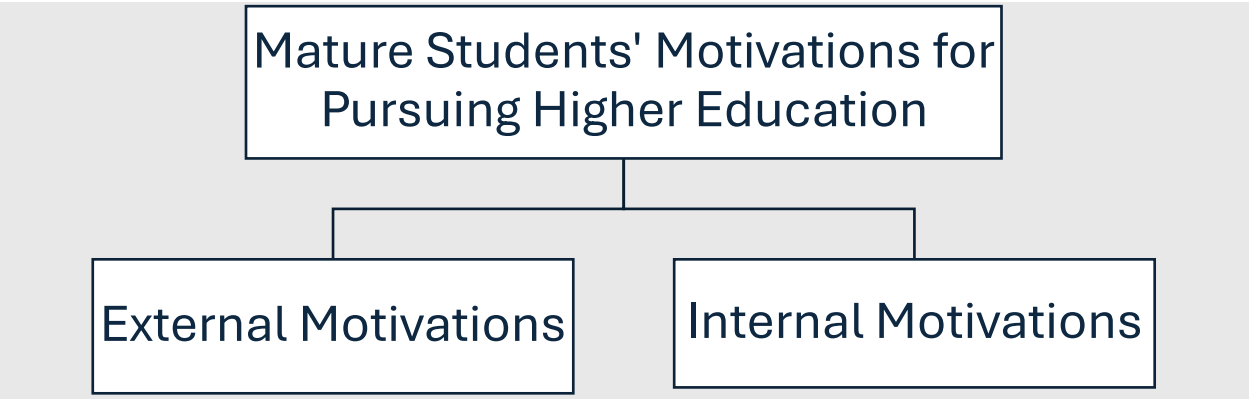

Figure 2.8 Classification of Mature Students' Motivations for Pursuing HE

Studies on mature students in HE reveal different reasons for pursuing HE. In their research on why mature students decide to pursue an education degree, Swain and Hammond (2011) divided these reasons into two main categories: external and internal, as shown in Figure 2.8 above. Looking at external motivations, studies show that many mature students are motivated by clear and practical goals. For example, some want to gain a recognised qualification that demonstrates their skills and helps them feel confident in their professional lives (Cross, 1981). Others see HE as a way to increase their job opportunities or improve their current job. Bean and Metzner (1985) explain that many adults return to study for better job security or to start a new career. Some students want to continue their education to gain advanced qualifications or specific skills needed for their jobs (Kasworm, 2018; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Tight, 2020). Others might even use HE as a chance to move abroad, combining their studies with new life experiences (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

At the same time, other studies have highlighted that many mature students are motivated by personal goals. Some are curious about a subject they love and want to learn more about it for their own satisfaction (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Deci and Ryan (1985) explain that people are often motivated by a desire to feel competent and in control of their own learning. Others see HE as a chance to do something new and break away from their usual routines (Boshier, 1971). Some students want to prove to themselves or others that they can succeed (Bandura, 1997). Many also enjoy stimulating environments where they can think, learn, and grow (Tight, 2019; Illeris, 2003).

Mature students often balance these practical and personal motivations. They aim to improve their lives in meaningful ways, both professionally and personally. Kasworm (2003) argues that understanding these motivations is important for universities to provide the right support. Mature students face challenges that differ from younger students and need help that suits their needs (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

It should be noted also that some of the reasons that motivate mature students should be examined cautiously, because they might be the exact same reasons for these students to drop out of their programmes (Scott et al., 1998). For example, a mature student who decides to study to escape the hardships of a social commitment, such as marriage, might experience more problems due to insufficient family support. These students might aspire to change their lives by doing something new; however, without access to support that would see them through their life transitions, they might only increase their worries and tension. This is not always the case. According to two reviewed studies (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013), mature students might also benefit from their struggles in previous experiences, turning them into motivating power to help them overcome the challenges they face while studying.

In conclusion, mature students have many reasons for returning to HE, including external goals like improving their employability, and internal goals like personal growth. Their determination shows their resilience and dedication. Universities should understand these motivations in order to create a better learning environment that will help them succeed.

2.4.4. Benefits of Having Mature Students in HE

With their wealth of knowledge and experience, mature students bring several benefits to their universities and colleges. Various studies have stressed that their diverse perspectives, shaped by years of professional and personal experiences, contribute to richer classroom discussions and more meaningful learning outcomes for all students (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Gregersen & Nielsen, 2022; Heagney & Benson, 2017a; Mercer, 2007; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Shanahan, 2000). Moreover,

their commitment and focus often serve as a source of inspiration for their peers and even for educators. Understanding these benefits is essential as it highlights mature students' value in academic settings and emphasises the importance of creating supportive and inclusive policies and practices that increase their engagement.

2.4.5. Challenges Experienced by Mature Students

Studies on mature students' experiences have presented fresh perspectives on the challenges faced in their HE journeys. These students, who often balance academic responsibilities alongside work and familial commitments, may encounter unique challenges that can significantly influence their engagement and success. Discussing these challenges is vital to understanding the barriers to mature students' engagement and what actions should be taken to address these challenges.

Negotiating identities is one of the most cited challenges experienced by mature students (Baxter & Britton, 2001). This group always attempt to balance their different roles and might, therefore, experience tensions in different contexts (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Howard & Davies, 2013; O'Boyle, 2015). Wong and Chiuto (2021) argue that mature students may feel pressured to conform to traditional ideals of what it means to be a university student, which often emphasises social engagement and participation in extracurricular activities. The need for mature students to conform and be part of the university community might influence their old identities. For example, an interesting finding in this regard by O'Boyle (2015) suggests that mature students might experience this conflict of identities because of the language of academia they acquire. "Student talk", according to this study, might impact on this group of students while having conversations off-campus with friends and family, who might perceive a change in the language they use and feel they are being "pretentious" or showing off.

Another challenge reported in the literature is mature students' feelings of isolation. While mature students may attempt to integrate into the university community, they might be rejected by their younger peers (Read et al., 2003). Several studies state that age differences and familial commitments make other traditional students feel that mature students are not really "ideal students". These same factors might also

make mature students develop a feeling of being “outsiders” (Read et al., 2003). Some traditional students might view studying as a “prerogative” of young individuals (Romaioli & Contarello, 2021); therefore, they feel mature students are not part of this community. In their study on how isolated mature students feel on university campuses, Mallman and Lee (2016) reported that some mature students felt rejected by traditional-aged students because of their strong motivation to participate and their tendency to ask more questions in class. These mature students thought they were not conforming to the norms of younger students, who tend to be more passive in class.

2.4.6. Mature Students in Oman

Due to the limited research focusing on mature students in Oman, a significant gap exists in understanding their experiences in HE. A literature review has revealed very few studies addressing the progression of mature students. Existing research in English often compares different groups of students concerning specific phenomena without having a substantial focus on mature students as a distinct group. One notable study by Boggu and Sundarsingh (2014) explored the language learning strategies employed by undergraduate students, defining "older adults" as those above the age of 25 years. This study found that the prior work experience of these students positively influenced their effective language-learning strategies, compared to their younger counterparts. Moreover, the study reported that mature students tended to use memory and affective strategies more than younger students. The study explained that this tendency resulted from older learners relying on different cognitive approaches and attributed this to their life experiences and the need to connect new information with prior knowledge. Furthermore, it highlighted that these mature students could utilise these strategies while balancing full-time jobs and having limited study time.

Another study in English that referred in passing to mature students in Oman was carried out to explore the potential of having alternative education systems that address the needs of different groups of students (Al-Ani, 2017). While the study focused on adult learners and other groups of students, it recommended that

teachers in Omani pre-university settings should develop unique programmes for adult learners to prepare them for the transition to HE. This recommendation recognises the unique challenges of these students, who might be admitted to universities and colleges at an older age.

Publications in Arabic addressing issues related to mature students in Oman are also scarce. When searching for relevant papers, two Omani newspapers reported an unpublished study by Al Siyabi (2021) entitled "A Study on the Efficiency of the E-Learning System Implemented in HE Institutions in the Sultanate of Oman during the COVID-19 Pandemic". The study aimed to identify challenges, obstacles, and potential solutions related to the e-learning system implemented in educational institutions in Oman during the COVID-19 pandemic. One main finding of the study was related to mature students who, according to this study, were more effective in e-learning during COVID-19 and showed higher levels of alertness and concentration levels compared to younger students.

The three studies discussed above, which shed light on mature students in Oman, show similar characteristics and themes usually attributed to other mature students in different contexts. First is the value of knowledge and experience of Omani mature students and their contribution to using complex cognitive processes in learning. Second, similar to other mature students, mature students face unique challenges related to balancing their studies and other commitments. Third, mature students in Oman possess a high level of intrinsic motivation.

2.4.7. Gaps in the Existing Literature on Mature Students

The literature review I carried out on mature students seems to have two main gaps. First, there is a methodology gap (Adu & Miles, 2023). Studies have used either qualitative or quantitative data to explore different aspects of mature students' experiences in HE, with more studies using qualitative data to shed light on these students' challenges and experiences (e.g., Jones & McConnell, 2023; Mallman & Lee, 2016, 2017; Saddler & Sundin, 2020). The absence of mixed-methods research in the field limits the ability to triangulate findings and understand the complex, multifaceted nature of mature students' engagement. Therefore, mixed-methods

research like this thesis can help to bridge this gap and explain the reasons behind mature students' engagement levels.

The second gap concerns a population gap (Adu & Miles, 2023), in that studies on mature students focusing on Oman or neighbouring contexts are limited. Most studies tackling issues related to mature students have focused on Western contexts (e.g., Gregersen & Nielsen, 2022; Hayman et al., 2024; Swain & Hammond, 2011), where familial obligations and cultural norms differ from those in Oman. A study focusing on a different region, like Oman, might yield different results and call for various types of interventions and support that can be given to this distinct group of students. This aligns with calls in the existing literature to study non-traditional students in different parts of the globe (Gregersen & Nielsen, 2022; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Understanding what factors influence mature students' engagement in the context of Oman is critical for creating inclusive policies and practices that can support their academic success.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored three key strands that shaped my understanding of student engagement in HE: the concept of engagement, the factors that influence it, and the experiences of mature students. Drawing on Kahu and Nelson's (2018) sociocultural framework, I came to see engagement as a dynamic, multidimensional process shaped by personal, social, and institutional factors. I now realise how critical belonging, confidence, and support are to sustaining engagement. As I focused on mature students, I recognised their resilience and the challenges they face. This review reinforced my decision to adopt a holistic, context-sensitive approach in my research.

Chapter 3: The Conceptual Framework

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will present a detailed overview of the conceptual framework that guided my investigation into the engagement levels of mature undergraduate students in Oman, and the various factors that influence these engagement levels.

First, I will thoroughly explain Kahu and Nelson's (2018) Conceptual Framework of SE in the Educational Interface, which laid the foundation for the framework used for this research. With its unique sociocultural perspective, this framework is a foundational structure for understanding the complexities of mature students' engagement. I will discuss its key components and how they relate to the specific demographics of mature students, including their unique experiences and challenges in an academic environment.

Next, I will elaborate on my reasons for choosing this framework, highlighting its relevance to the context of my research. I will compare this framework with two other frameworks that address SE in HE and demonstrate how it effectively addresses the research questions posed.

Finally, I will present an adapted version of the framework tailored to provide a more explicit focus and scope for my research. This adaptation will help to pinpoint specific areas of interest, thus facilitating a more targeted analysis of the factors impacting on the engagement levels of mature students. By the end of this chapter, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conceptual framework that informs my research, setting the stage for the succeeding Methodology, Findings and Discussion chapters.

3.2. Original Framework

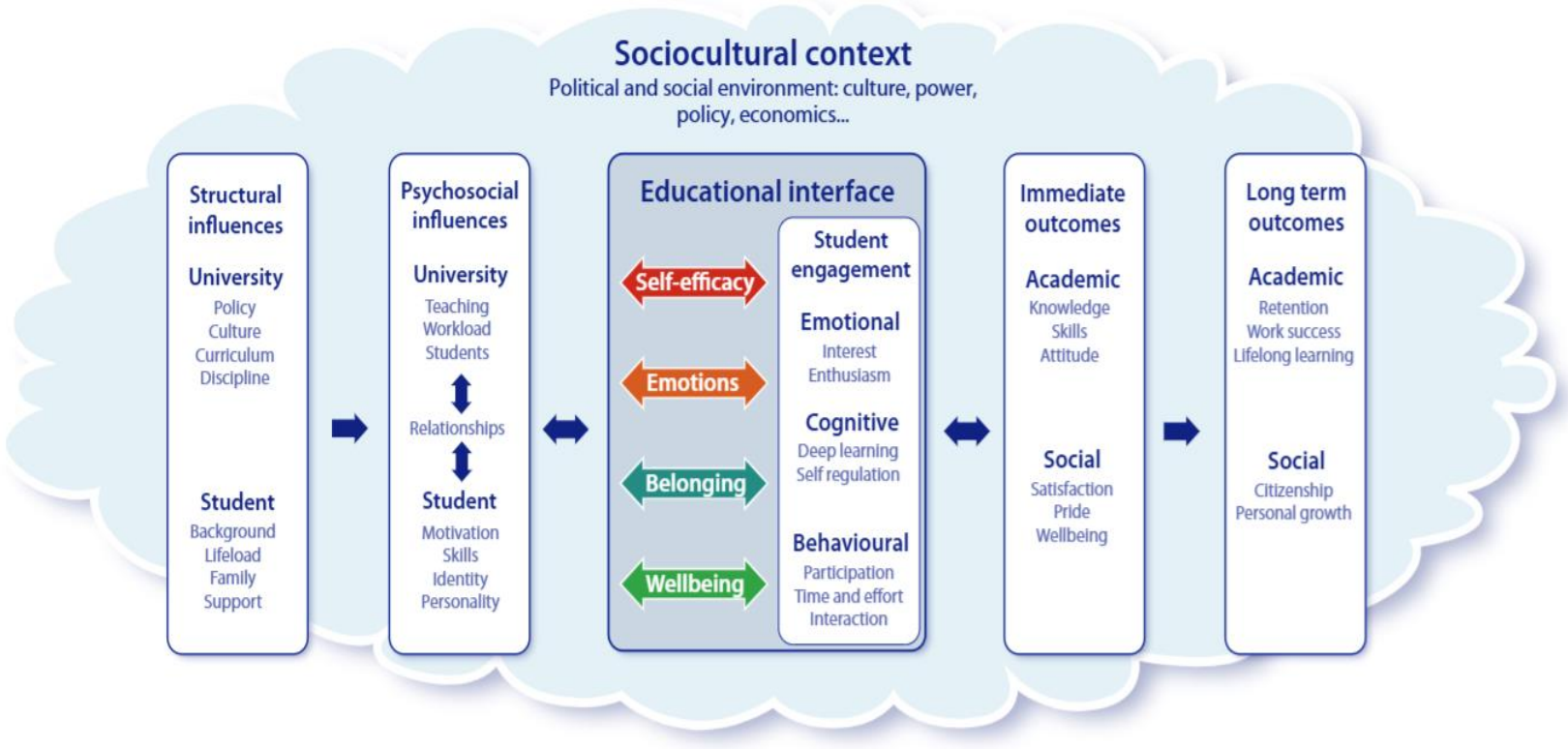

Figure 3.1 The Conceptual Framework of Student Engagement in the Educational Interface (Kahu & Nelson, 2018)

The conceptual framework adopted for this research (illustrated in Figure 3.1 above) was adapted from Kahu and Nelson's (2018) Framework of Student Engagement in the Educational Interface. The framework explores SE from a sociocultural viewpoint, pointing out structural and psychosocial influences and how they interplay to impact on the educational interface through four mechanisms: self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and well-being. In addition, the framework shows outcomes of engagement, which are divided into immediate and long-term consequences.

In my review of the literature in Sections 2.2.3 and 2.3, I explained structural and psychosocial influences and identified three SE dimensions: behavioural, emotional and cognitive. These two themes form the basis of this research, which attempts to explore the engagement levels of mature students and what impact they have. Two other ideas, not examined in the literature review, are the educational interface and engagement outcomes. Kahu and Nelson (2018) revised Kahu's (2013) work to refine the framework further by introducing the educational interface in which psychological mechanisms and the dimensions of engagement interact. In a way, these mechanisms link the influences of engagement in three dimensions. The second idea not explored in the previous chapter is the outcomes of SE. The framework explains that SE yields and is impacted by immediate and long-term outcomes. Both outcome groups are divided further into two domains: academic and social. As shown in the framework (Fig. 3.1), immediate outcomes feed back into engagement and might, therefore, impact on it positively. The framework goes beyond the educational setting by presenting influences and outcomes from a broader social context.

The framework has received criticism from different influential scholars. For example, Trowler et al. (2022) argue that the framework relies on a standard classification of engagement dimensions (behavioural, emotional, cognitive) that does not capture SE in HE. Hence, they propose three other dimensions: critical, political, and sociocultural. In addition, Ashwin and McVitty (2015) noted that the framework does not discuss what students engage with. They explain that what SE means usually changes depending on what students engage with. Although this point was raised in relation to Kahu's (2013) original framework, the refined

framework still does not address this issue. Despite these concerns about the framework, it is still a valuable tool for research that explores engagement factors among students, particularly non-traditional students. These concerns were considered in the adapted framework used by this research, as will be discussed in Section 3.4.

3.3. Justification for Adopting the Original Framework

Before deciding on the conceptual framework, I researched models and frameworks that would sufficiently address the objectives of the current research. I narrowed down my selection to three frameworks: the Conceptual Model of the Four Pillars of SE (Bowden et al., 2021), the Bioecological Model of SE (Bond, 2020), and the Conceptual Framework of SE in the Educational Interface (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). I then compared the three frameworks, as shown in Table 3.1 below, to determine their suitability for research on mature students' engagement levels and the influences driving them. The criteria I used to select the framework were derived from my research questions and objectives. I aimed to employ a framework that captures the dimensions of engagement of mature undergraduate students in Oman and recognises the factors shaping them.

Criterion	**Conceptual Model of the Four Pillars of Student Engagement** (J. L. H. Bowden et al., 2021)	**Bioecological Model of Student Engagement** (Bond, 2020)	**Conceptual Framework of Student Engagement in the Educational Interface** (Kahu & Nelson, 2018)
Representation of Engagement	Detailed categorisation into behavioural, affective, cognitive, and social	Limited detailed representation of engagement dimensions	Detailed categorisation into behavioural, affective, and cognitive
Influences of Engagement	Limits the influences to two constructs:	Detailed influences at different levels, but	Precise categorisation of the influences, which are divided into

	expectations and involvement	categorisation is very broad	structural and psychosocial
Psychological Factors (well-being, belonging, etc.)	Situates psychological factors as the outcome of engagement	Does not capture any psychological factors	Presents psychological factors as mechanisms that link influences to engagement dimensions
Dynamic Relationships	Shows a linear relationship between influences, engagement dimensions and outcomes	Has layers of influences but does not show how these layers interact	Shows a bidirectional & more dynamic relationship between influences, engagement, and outcomes
Clarity	Clear with arrows to show relationships between constructs	Somewhat dense	Clear with arrows to show relationships between constructs
Suitability for research on mature students in Oman	It does not fully explore the factors that might impact on mature students' engagement	Limited applicability, as it lacks detail on contextual, psychosocial, and institutional dynamics specific to adult learner	It is the best among the three to address the influences that impact on mature students.

Table 3.1 Comparison of the three frameworks

Based on Table 3.1, the framework proposed by Kahu and Nelson (2018) is particularly well-suited for studying mature students in Oman due to its unique approach to understanding SE. Unlike the other frameworks, Kahu and Nelson's framework emphasises the educational interface as a dynamic space where these two elements interact. This concept is especially valuable in the context of mature students, as their engagement is shaped by their personal attributes and circumstances and how they interact with institutional policies, teaching practices,

and learning environments. For mature students in Oman, who must often juggle academic responsibilities with family and work commitments, the educational interface provides a lens to analyse these interactions and their impact on engagement.

One of the framework's standout features is its focus on psychosocial constructs, including self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and well-being. These constructs are critical mediating mechanisms influencing engagement, making the framework particularly applicable to mature students. Mature students often face emotional and psychological challenges, such as managing stress, overcoming feelings of isolation, and developing a sense of belonging in an academic environment dominated by younger peers. By explicitly addressing these dimensions, the framework allows a deeper understanding of how psychosocial factors influence mature students' engagement. This focus is often underrepresented in other engagement frameworks, which tend to overlook the emotional and psychological aspects of the student experience.

Furthermore, the framework's recognition of non-traditional students sets it apart. In their review of the framework, Kahu and Nelson (2018) clearly acknowledge non-traditional students' unique challenges, such as balancing work, family, and academic responsibilities. This recognition is crucial for studying mature students in Oman, as many are employed professionals or caregivers who must manage conflicting demands. The framework's ability to explain these complexities ensures that it captures the full range of factors influencing their engagement, from structural issues like institutional support systems to personal factors such as time management and motivation.

The framework also incorporates a sociocultural lens (Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018), making it particularly relevant to the Omani context. It acknowledges that SE is not simply a product of individual and institutional factors but is also shaped by broader social and cultural contexts. This perspective is invaluable in Oman, where strong cultural values such as family obligations and societal expectations significantly shape individuals' lives and beliefs (Wilkinson & Al Hajry, 2007;

Yarahmadi, 2019). The framework's cultural sensitivity enables a more comprehensive understanding of how societal influences, such as gender roles and community support, impact on mature students' ability to engage with their studies.

Moreover, the framework emphasises a partnership between students and institutions. It recognises students as active participants in the educational process. This perspective aligns well with the experiences of mature students, who often bring a wealth of professional and life experiences to their academic pursuits (Fragoso et al., 2013; Heagney & Benson, 2017a; Kasworm, 2003; Mercer, 2007). By portraying engagement as a collaborative effort, the framework encourages institutions to create environments that support mature students and value their contributions, fostering a sense of shared ownership in the learning process.

Finally, Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework views engagement as a dynamic and complex process, evolving over time and influenced by various factors. This dynamic perspective is particularly relevant for mature students, whose levels of engagement may fluctuate due to changing personal or professional circumstances. By capturing this complexity, the framework paints a more accurate and holistic picture of how engagement evolves, offering valuable insights for designing interventions that address the unique and shifting needs of mature students in Oman.

To summarise, Kahu and Nelson's framework's holistic, integrated, and culturally aware approach makes it ideal for this research, which aims to study mature students in Oman. Its emphasis on the educational interface, psychosocial constructs, cultural context, and the dynamic nature of engagement provides a comprehensive lens for understanding and addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by this population. By adopting this framework, researchers and educators can gain actionable insights to foster meaningful engagement and support the success of mature students in HE.

3.4. The Adapted Framework

While the original framework outlines a comprehensive pathway from influences to long-term academic and social outcomes, I have adapted the conceptual framework by Kahu and Nelson (2018) to focus specifically on structural and psychosocial influences and the dimensions of engagement (behavioural, emotional, cognitive).

This decision aligns with the primary aim of my study, which is to explore how these influences shape SE. By narrowing the scope to these elements, I ensure that my research remains focused and manageable, while directly addressing my objectives. The literature also supports this targeted approach, highlighting the critical role of influences and dimensions in understanding and enhancing SE.

I adapted the student engagement framework shown in Figure 3.2, below, to suit my research objectives vis-à-vis mature students in Oman. It uses a sociocultural lens to focus on how different factors affect SE. This framework shows how structural and psychosocial influences (defined and explained in 2.2.1 & 2.2.2, respectively), related to both the university and the students themselves, work together to shape the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement. By focusing only on these areas, the adapted framework makes the research more focused and easier to manage while still addressing the crucial factors influencing the engagement of mature students in Oman.

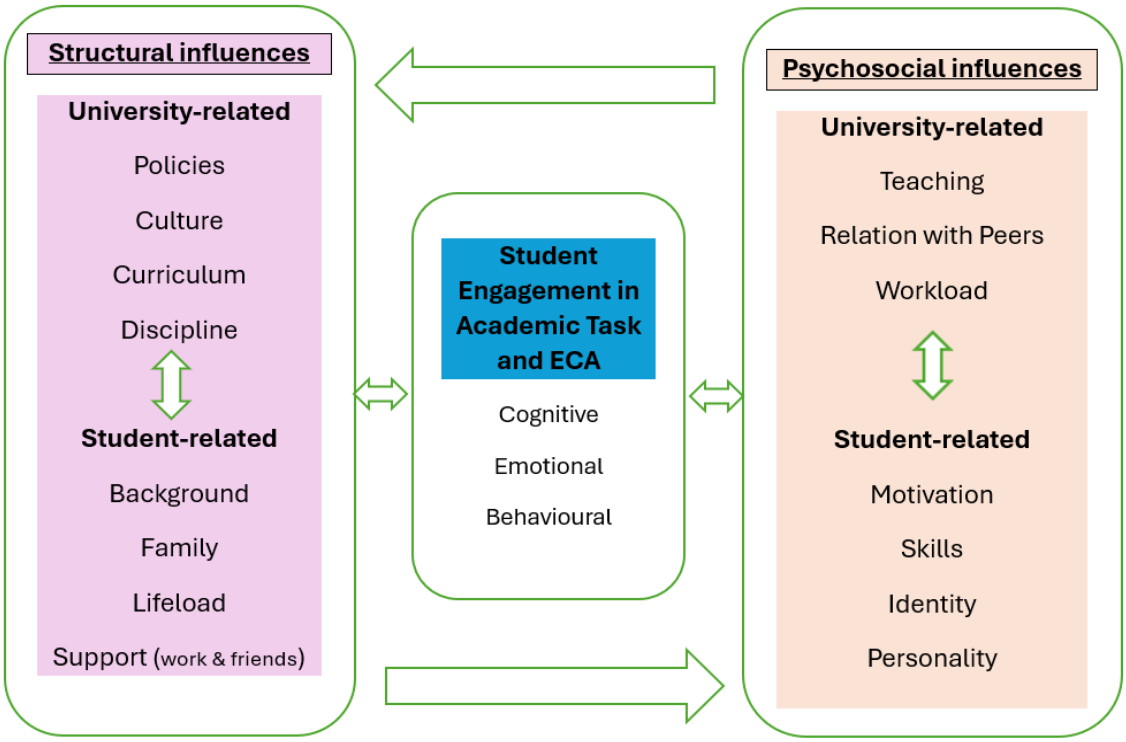

Figure 3.2 Adapted framework of student engagement focusing on influences and engagement dimensions (Kahu & Nelson, 2018)

One of my critical adaptations shows the direct influence of structural and psychosocial factors on mature student engagement. This is in recognition of the impact of structural influences, particularly those related to students, such as their family and life load, on the daily life of a mature student. This is supported by a large body of literature on mature students and their efforts to balance different responsibilities while being committed to their studies (Busher & James, 2019; DeLuca Bishop et al., 2023; Gill et al., 2015; Heagney & Benson, 2017b; Javed et al., 2022; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; Tones et al., 2009; Van Rhijn et al., 2015). These studies and many others stress how these factors are instrumental to mature students' success or failure on their educational journey.

As shown in Figure 3.2, structural influences directly impact on mature students' engagement. University-related structural influences, like institutional policies, cultural norms, curriculum, and academic disciplines (specialisations), define the educational environment where students study. For mature students in Oman, flexible policies or culturally sensitive curricula may help them participate more, while strict rules or a lack of support may create difficulties. At the same time, student-related structural influences, like their background, family responsibilities, life load (balancing studies and personal life), and available support from friends and work, also play a significant role. For example, a mature student with good family support or access to flexible university policies may handle academic pressures better. Yet, others with heavy family or work duties may face more challenges. To recognise the significance of support from work and friends from non-educational settings for mature undergraduate students, I put them between two brackets after the influence of "Support". Most mature students have jobs and have built a network of friends whose impact on their education cannot be overlooked.

The psychosocial influences shown on the right of the framework focus on the emotional and social aspects of the student experience while they are closely engaging in university activities. I have refined the "students" presented in Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework as a psychosocial university factor as "relationships with peers" to clarify this factor further and make it more meaningful. For mature students, factors like the quality of teaching, relationships with peers, and workload can affect

how they feel about their education and how they participate. These factors shape how students view their learning environment and respond to academic challenges. Student-related psychosocial influences, like motivation, personality, skills, and identity, are also significant. In Oman (and usually elsewhere, as discussed in Chapter 2), mature students often have unique motivations, such as wanting to advance in their careers or improve their personal lives. These motivations and skills help us to understand how they manage their studies while dealing with other responsibilities.

This framework's core is SE, divided into three dimensions, as discussed in Section 2.2.3.: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. These three dimensions are applicable to this research on mature students. Behavioural engagement is about students' time and effort on their studies, like attending classes or completing assignments. Emotional engagement involves their interest, enthusiasm, and sense of belonging, which can be difficult for mature students who may feel detached from younger classmates. Cognitive engagement focuses on how students approach learning, using strategies like critical thinking and self-regulation, which are especially important for mature students balancing many responsibilities. The structural and psychosocial factors around these students influence these three dimensions of engagement. I have also specified what students engage with by adding “academic tasks” and “ECAs” to address the concern raised by Ashwin and McVitty (2015), regarding Kahu and Nelson’s (2018) framework’s lack of clarity on what students engage in.

The arrows I have included in the framework are also crucial because they show how the factors and engagement are connected. Structural and psychosocial influences directly impact on engagement dimensions: behaviours, emotions, and cognition. For example, a good teaching style or a supportive curriculum can help students feel more motivated and focused. At the same time, the arrows show feedback loops, where engaged students can give feedback to improve the learning environment, such as changes to teaching or policies. This dynamic relationship benefits how mature students study, as their engagement with their personal and professional lives changes over time.

In conclusion, this adapted framework is conducive to studying mature students in Oman because it focuses on the key factors influencing engagement. The framework makes the research more manageable by narrowing the scope to structural and psychosocial influences and their relationship with engagement. It also clarifies how universities and educators can support mature students and improve their engagement, thus helping them succeed in HE.

3.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the conceptual framework guiding my investigation into mature undergraduate students' engagement in Oman. I adopted Kahu and Nelson's (2018) Conceptual Framework of Student Engagement in the Educational Interface, as its emphasis on sociocultural dynamics aligns well with the experiences of mature students. This framework effectively captures the shared relationship between students and institutions, making it suitable for the Omani context. I justified this choice by comparing it with two other prominent SE models, highlighting how Kahu and Nelson's framework better addresses both structural and psychosocial influences on engagement. I also adapted the original framework to align more closely with my research focus and participant demographics, enabling a more targeted exploration of factors influencing mature students' academic experiences. Overall, this chapter outlines my rationale and process in selecting and refining the framework, laying a strong theoretical foundation for the Methodology, Findings, and Discussion chapters that follow.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1. Introduction

Building on Chapter 2, which identified key themes and gaps in the literature, and Chapter 3, which outlined the conceptual framework, this chapter presents the methodological approach of my study. I begin by explaining my choice of pragmatism as the research paradigm and how it supports integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to address both the "what" and the "why" of mature students' engagement. I then describe the mixed-methods design, including developing, piloting, and distributing a questionnaire to 107 students, and semi-structured interviews with 15 mature students. I also discuss ethical considerations, data analysis procedures, and the steps taken to ensure research rigour. Before detailing these methods, I restate the two research questions to reinforce their central role and clarify how the methodology was designed to address them:

1. To what extent are mature students in Oman engaged in higher education activities? How is this related to their behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement?

2. What are the main factors that mature students in Oman perceive as impacting on their engagement in higher education activities?

4.2. Research Paradigm

To explore the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive levels of mature undergraduate students in Oman and the factors impacting on them, I carefully considered the research paradigms that would best guide me through the different stages of this project. Research paradigms refer to a set of fundamental beliefs or assumptions that guide researchers in their enquiries (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Paradigms help researchers identify what can be considered a legitimate enquiry by defining acceptable parameters within the research process. In addition, these paradigms are human constructions shaped by the responses to three fundamental types of questions: ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions, which influence how researchers approach their work. Essentially, a paradigm acts as a

framework that guides the methodology and understanding of research outcomes (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Considering the importance of research paradigms and their vital role in collecting and analysing data, I adopted pragmatism as the primary research paradigm. This paradigm is heavily influenced by constructivism, reflecting the study's nature.

4.2.1. Pragmatism, the Primary Paradigm

Pragmatism is a common research paradigm that prioritises the outcomes of findings over adherence to a single methodological approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). According to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), pragmatism supports a flexible and problem-centred approach, where research methods are chosen based on their suitability to answer specific research questions and attain objectives. This adaptability makes pragmatism particularly appealing for studies dealing with complex and multifaceted phenomena, such as SE, as it allows for integrating different perspectives and methodological tools. The characteristics of pragmatism align with my personal understanding of the world as a researcher and provide a complementary perspective on how to approach a research problem. For me, problems can be understood with whatever resources and tools are available. I believe that research should be guided by its objectives and questions, and decisions as to what methodology should be adopted should be made after formulating the research questions.

Furthermore, Morgan (2014) suggests that pragmatism enables researchers to consider the historical, cultural, and political contexts that shape their research. This focus on context helps to clarify the reasons behind research choices and their potential impacts. This emphasis on context is critical for this research. In recent decades, Oman has expanded access to education to different student populations, including mature students. However, traditional roles and expectations still shape how they engage with their studies. Furthermore, cultural norms, such as prioritising family responsibilities, can both support and limit their academic involvement, making it essential for institutions to provide support like flexible schedules and childcare. With regard to policies, HEIs should consider how resources are

distributed, which also plays a significant role in shaping these students' access and engagement. By considering these contextual factors, pragmatism helps me, as a researcher, choose methods that reflect the realities of students' lives and address the larger systems affecting them. This approach ensures that the research adds to knowledge and helps to meaningfully improve educational policies and practices.

Pragmatism shapes the interpretation of this study's findings by emphasising actionable and context-sensitive solutions tailored to the real-world challenges faced by mature students in Omani HE. Pragmatism prioritises practical outcomes, guiding this study to go beyond describing engagement levels or identifying influencing factors. Instead, it seeks to translate these insights into recommendations that address the specific needs of mature students within their cultural and institutional context. This pragmatic lens ensures that findings are directly relevant to improving institutional practices, such as implementing flexible scheduling, providing family-friendly support services, or adopting culturally responsive teaching strategies. By aligning research objectives with practical applications, pragmatism ensures that the study does not merely inform but also actively contributes to enhancing the lived experiences of mature students in Omani HE (Hammond, 2013).

4.2.2. Constructivist Elements

As explained above, while pragmatism, the central paradigm guiding this research, offers flexibility in the choice of methodology, constructivism lends to this study some elements that shape its methodology and support the design and adoption of data and analysis methods.

Constructivism is a paradigm known for emphasising understanding individuals' subjective experiences (Cobern, 1993; Fosnot, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It has been beneficial to this research in three different ways:

First, constructivism as a paradigm stresses the significance of context (Fosnot, 2013). It acknowledges the significance of understanding the specific social, cultural, and historical context in which individuals live. This is particularly relevant to the current study on mature undergraduate students in Oman. The Omani context presents a unique context with unique cultural and social dynamics, and

constructivism allows for an in-depth exploration of how structural and psychosocial factors shape mature students' engagement. Moreover, this contextual approach ensures that the findings of this research are relevant to the Omani context and reflect the unique challenges experienced by this group of students.

Second, constructivism emphasises that knowledge is not objective but is shaped by individuals' experiences and interactions with their environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This perspective is critical to my study because it explores the unique experiences of mature students in terms of balancing their familial, professional, and educational roles. A constructivist approach allows me to focus on how these students construct meaning from their lived experiences, providing insights into the challenges faced and strategies adopted in navigating these roles. This principle directly informs my methodology, mainly semi-structured interviews, which enable participants to share their perspectives in their own words. By designing open-ended questions that invite reflection on their realities, I can capture the complex ways in which these students perceive and manage their commitments. Moreover, constructivism emphasises the role of context and interaction in shaping individuals' realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), so my analysis will focus on interpreting how structural and psychosocial factors influence their engagement. This approach ensures that the findings reflect the richness and diversity of participants' experiences, aligning with constructivism's goal of representing the complexity of human perspectives.

In summary, to achieve the objectives of this study, I adopted pragmatism as the primary paradigm guiding the methodology of this research. It offers me flexibility in selecting a research design and data collection methods that align with the nature of the study. In addition, some elements of constructivism inform the methodology adopted by emphasising the role of context and the individual experiences of mature students in shaping their perceptions of their engagement in HE.

4.3. Research Design

Following the adoption of a paradigm, adopting a research design is one of the significant decisions researchers should make. Research design refers to the

comprehensive framework adopted to guide researchers in conducting their studies (Kumar, 2011). It involves making critical decisions regarding collection methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, observations), sampling strategies, and analysis techniques (Bryman, 2012). A research design aims to ensure that the study is methodologically sound and the findings are valid, reliable, and relevant to the research problem. For this study, a mixed-methods research design allowed me to explore the different ways in which I can capture the complexity of mature students' experiences and perceptions of their engagement. It was also significant because it determined how effectively I would address the research questions and ensure the findings were valid, reliable, and meaningful.

Pragmatism, with its focus on practical outcomes and methodological flexibility, naturally leads to the adoption of a mixed-methods research design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morgan, 2014). A mixed-methods approach involves combining elements from quantitative and qualitative methods in one study to arrive at a more complex understanding of the research problem, rather than adopting one approach alone (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012). Integrating these two approaches works well for this research. It attempts to quantify the extent to which mature students are engaged in Omani HE, which requires using quantitative methods. It also explores the structural and psychosocial factors that impact on their engagement, requiring qualitative methods.

My choice to employ a mixed-methods design was also influenced by the complexity of the research problem (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Understanding the engagement of mature undergraduate students in HE in Oman is inherently complex. It involves both measurable behaviours and subjective experiences. Mature undergraduate students in Oman face unique challenges, including balancing academic demands with family responsibilities, cultural expectations, and personal aspirations. These challenges are best understood through a combination of quantitative measures of engagement and qualitative exploration of the factors that influence it. This combination aligns with the pragmatic philosophy of this research, which emphasises using the most effective tools to address the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Different advocates of mixed-methods design in research argue that this approach helps to mitigate some of the limitations associated with using only one approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012). For instance, while quantitative data provide generalisable results, they may need more depth to understand the reasons underlying behind certain behaviours and attitudes. Qualitative data, while rich in detail, may need to be more generalisable to a larger population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). By combining both methods, this study benefits from each method's strengths and limits the impact of their weaknesses, leading to more robust and comprehensive findings. The two methods should work well to answer the two research questions guiding this research.

In this research, a questionnaire provided results that helped to establish patterns and trends across a large sample of mature undergraduate students. It could measure the extent of behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement, and whether it varies among mature students based on age, gender, or marital status. These results offer a broad perspective on engagement levels, making them valuable for identifying areas requiring policy or programmatic intervention. However, the questionnaire could not explain the reasons underlying behind observed trends. For instance, while a survey might reveal low participation in extracurricular activities, it cannot uncover whether time constraints, institutional policies, or personal disinterest drive this behaviour.

To address this limitation and develop a more comprehensive understanding of mature students' engagement, I adopted a concurrent form of mixed-method design where I simultaneously collected and analysed the quantitative data and the qualitative data to integrate the findings (J. Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). The concurrent mixed method offered several advantages. For one, using both methods in parallel to collect data enabled me to explore engagement as both a measurable construct and a lived experience, a strategy endorsed by scholars such as Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007), who argue that complex social phenomena require a layered approach to capture their full richness. In addition, the concurrent form of mixed methods design allowed me

to pay equal value to both quantitative and qualitative data (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012). This gave me a balanced analysis without prioritising one data set over the other (McBride et al., 2019), which aligns with the pragmatism paradigm outlined in the previous section.

4.4. Methods of Data Collection

Following the decision to adopt a mixed-methods research design that reflects the nature of the two research questions leading this study, I decided to use a quantitative data collection method, in the form of a questionnaire, to address RQ1 about the extent to which mature undergraduate students are engaged in HE activities in Oman. Moreover, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews, a qualitative data collection method, with several mature students to explore the factors that impact on their engagement.

4.4.1. Questionnaire

Based on the defined objectives, research questions and research design, I started preparing my quantitative data method of collection: a questionnaire. Bryman (2012) recommends using questionnaires to measure behaviours and attitudes, which corresponds to the nature of this research's first research question: the extent to which mature undergraduate students in Oman are engaged behaviourally, cognitively, and emotionally. I started formulating questionnaire items while reviewing the literature for this study. Several studies have presented indicators of what it means to be engaged behaviourally, cognitively, and emotionally (e.g. Barlow et al., 2020; Bond et al., 2020; Bond & Bedenlier, 2019; Zhao et al., 2023). These studies were the basis for the questionnaire items. I also referred to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a well-established instrument for measuring SE, particularly in HE (Kuh, 2009) .

I divided the questionnaire into three main sections. Section One was dedicated to obtaining demographic information about the participants, including age, gender, nationality, marital status, and the reasons for study. The aim of this section was to understand the participants' characteristics and whether these demographic variables impacted on their engagement. It also aimed to help tailor the

recommendations by understanding the challenges that mature students experience and whether these challenges are age-specific and/or influenced by marital status. The participants were asked to identify different details, such as their age group, marital status, and gender. They were also asked to arrange six goals for pursuing HE based on their importance to them. These six goals were developed from the literature (Murphy & Roopchand, 2003; Parks et al., 2013; Scott et al., 1998; Swain & Hammond, 2011).

Section Two, which had 30 items, focused on academic engagement. In this section, the participants read statements about their cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement and rated, on a Likert scale (rarely to always), how much they agreed with each statement. This section aimed to paint a comprehensive picture of how mature undergraduate students interact with their academic environment, attitudes towards learning, and emotional investment in their studies. The items were developed from existing literature (Barlow et al., 2020b; Bond et al., 2020; Bond & Bedenlier, 2019; Zhao et al., 2023).

The third section of the questionnaire concerned engagement in extracurricular activities. It aimed to measure the participants' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive involvement in these activities based on ten items. In this section, I attempted to obtain an overview of how often the participants take part in these activities, what they feel about them, and how emotionally connected they are to the significance of these activities in their university experience.

I prepared two versions of the questionnaire (see Appendix 3), one in Arabic, the other in English, to ensure accessibility and inclusivity for all participants (Richard & Toffoli, 2009). The research targeted mature undergraduate students in Oman who may feel more comfortable expressing themselves in their native language (Moradi et al., 2010). Providing an Arabic version was important to ensure they could fully understand and respond to the questions (Cormier, 2018). At the same time, the English version was made available for participants who preferred or were more proficient in English, reflecting the bilingual context of HE in Oman. My knowledge

of both languages allowed me to carry out this task. I also consulted a bilingual dictionary for the accuracy of my translation of the questionnaire items.

4.4.1.1. Piloting the Questionnaire

Before administering the questionnaire, I piloted it with 23 traditional students to ensure its clarity and effectiveness (Bell & Waters, 2014; Kumar, 2011). Piloting the questionnaire with mature students and obtaining their instant feedback was challenging due to their various commitments and being in different institutions. Therefore, traditional students from one of my classes were asked to participate and give feedback. The 23 students were in their final year of the advanced diploma programme at the university where I work. The questionnaire was piloted online to resemble the actual online questionnaire. Both versions of the questionnaire were provided to the students, and all of them opted to complete the Arabic version. At the end of the pilot questionnaire, I asked the 23 students to answer seven questions that I adopted from Bell & Waters (2014):

1. How long did it take you to complete it?
2. Were the instructions clear?
3. Were any of the questions unclear or ambiguous? If so, which ones and why?
4. Did you object to answering any of the questions?
5. In your opinion, have any significant topics been omitted?
6. Was the layout of the questionnaire clear/attractive?
7. Any further comments?

The group's feedback helped to refine the questionnaire and gave valuable insights into its length, clarity of instructions, flow, structure, and wording of the items. In addition, their feedback confirmed the quality of the questionnaire's digital format, ease of navigation, loading time, and compatibility with different devices. This feedback was recorded during the discussion. An example of revised survey items is presented in Table 4.1, below.

Item	Initial item	Changed to	Reason
Part II: A-1	Academic tasks are challenging for me	Academic tasks (e.g., assignments, activities, projects) are challenging for me	Feedback received that examples of academic tasks would help better understand the item
Part II: B-20	I apply the skills learned from academic tasks	I apply the skills learned from academic tasks in other contexts	Feedback received that it was not clear where this application of skills is.

Table 4.1 Examples of revised questionnaire items after piloting.

A further revision I made after receiving feedback from piloting was changing the Likert scale responses, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, to never to always. This change was significant because the questionnaire aimed to measure the frequency of statements more than the opinions of the participants about those statements.

After incorporating these changes and refining the final version of the questionnaire, I considered ethical guidelines (discussed in Section 4.5). The questionnaire was then uploaded to Qualtrics, a popular platform for creating, distributing, and analysing questionnaires. (see Appendix 3 for the complete questionnaire).

4.4.1.2. Questionnaire Procedure

In this section, I will outline the procedure used to distribute the questionnaire to the target population. I used two approaches to ensure the questionnaire reached more mature undergraduate students in Oman.

The first approach I took was to contact several HEIs in Oman with a request to distribute the questionnaire among their mature students. I emailed seven colleges for their cooperation and assistance in facilitating my access to their mature student populations. In these emails, I detailed the purpose of the study, the target population, and the expected time commitment for completing the questionnaire. The approval of these colleges varied from smooth to challenging.

The process was easy for one college. After I emailed the dean, he referred me to his assistant, who called to get more details about my target population. Within two

days, the questionnaire link was shared with their students, and I was informed by email. The process was challenging for other colleges, as I had to visit and make several follow-up calls. Only two additional colleges approved my request and shared the online questionnaire with their mature students. The other colleges did not respond to my request, despite assuring me that their response was on the way and that they valued research in different fields. This created significant delays in the data collection process and limited the reach of the study to some extent.

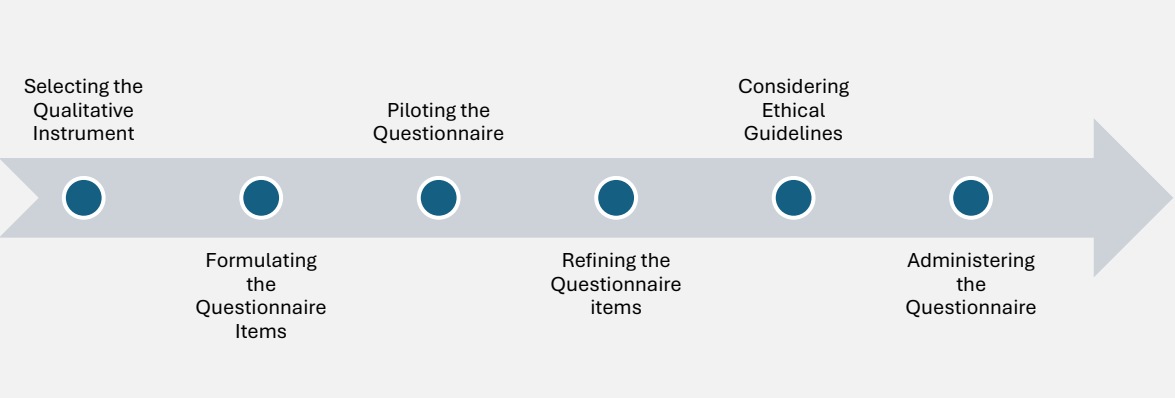

Figure 4.1 Questionnaire process

4.4.2. Semi-structured Interviews

To address RQ2 in-depth, I used semi-structured interviews to explore the structural and psychosocial influences impacting on the participants' engagement in HE in Oman. The choice of semi-structured interviews can be attributed to their flexibility and focused exploration of critical themes, while providing an opportunity for the interviewees to share their insights in-depth (Kallio et al., 2016). Although semi-structured interviews follow pre-determined questions, they allow researchers to ask follow-up questions depending on the participants' responses (Bell & Waters, 2014; Kumar, 2011).

Interview preparation started after defining the research questions and adopting the conceptual framework guiding this study. The conceptual framework identified key themes related to the structural and psychosocial influences impacting on students' engagement. These formed the basis of the interview questions. For example, the framework identified culture as one university-related structural factor, and I

formulated an interview question that prompted the students to express how welcoming their universities are. Overall, I prepared 14 questions, each corresponding to one influence stated in the conceptual framework. In addition, I created one question about the students' daily routines to break the ice before exploring the factors impacting on their engagement.

Similar to the questionnaire, I prepared an Arabic version of the interview questions (see Appendix 5). Since interviews would be more conversational, I needed to switch from standard Arabic to the Omani dialect of Arabic. Standard Arabic is not used for day-to-day communication among Omanis. Therefore, I wanted the participants to feel relaxed and to express their ideas comfortably and authentically by using the local dialect. Using standard Arabic would make the interviews more formal, and the participants would not be as open in expressing their thoughts as they would be with interviews conducted in their dialect.

4.4.2.1. Piloting the interviews

Piloting the interviews was crucial before interviewing participating mature undergraduate students. Like the experience I had with the questionnaire, I decided to test the interview format with five of my traditional students due to the difficulty of reaching out to mature students who were in different geographical locations and had busy schedules. The five pilot interviews were conducted in person on the university campus. They lasted from 40 minutes to around one hour. All students involved in the pilot interviews chose to be asked in Arabic.

The pilot interviews were very significant in providing tips about clarifying and refining the questions (Examples of refined questions are provided in Table 4.2 below). They also improved my interviewing skills and boosted my confidence in carrying out these tasks, which helped me conduct the final interviews (Malmqvist et al., 2019). For example, I noted that some students in the pilot interviews were hesitant or uncertain about how to answer. In this case, I developed the skill of asking follow-up questions and encouraging the interviewees. I also noted that students took longer to respond to the question about the impact of their background on their engagement. One possible reason for this is that the word "background" might have different meanings

in Arabic. Therefore, I considered this for the actual interviews and was ready with some follow-up questions that clarified the meaning of background to them. Moreover, the pilot interviews allowed me to check the reliability of the recording device I used and how clear the recordings were (Nordstrom, 2015).

Item	Question	Possible Follow-up questions
7	Can you describe your background as a person? How does it influence your experience as a student?	- Tell me about your previous education. How does it impact on your current experience? - Tell me about any languages you speak and how they impact on your education. - Tell me about your family. How do they view education?
15	Besides being a student, you are a father/ mother and an employee. How do these different roles that you have interfere with ior complement each other? How do they influence your identity as a student?	- Do you feel there are changes in your behaviour after becoming a student, an employee, and a father/ mother? - Do you feel you are different at home, work, or university?

Table 4.2 Examples of follow-up interview questions prepared after the pilot interviews.

4.4.2.2. Interview Procedure

I conducted my first interview in a public library on 12 November 2023, and the last on 15 January 2024. This three-month period allowed sufficient time to accommodate participants' schedules and ensure the collection of in-depth data about the structural and psychosocial factors influencing their engagement.

To respect participants' availability and preferences, I arranged the interviews at mutually convenient times and locations to ensure comfort and foster open and honest discussion (Herzog, 2005). Several participants preferred neutral, casual environments, and so I interviewed them in coffee shops. One participant requested to be interviewed at her workplace, while another chose a quiet and professional setting in a public library. Two interviews took place on college campuses, offering

participants a familiar and convenient environment. Furthermore, two participants were interviewed virtually via MS Teams, allowing them to participate without disrupting their personal or professional commitments. There were times when I had to reschedule some interviews because of participants' commitments, which caused some delays in the interview process.

The interviews were recorded using a recording device (Al-Yateem, 2012). I tested the efficacy of this device during the pilot interviews, and it proved to be clear and reliable. Immediately after each interview, I uploaded the recording to OneDrive for secure storage and easy access during transcription. I also deleted the recordings from the device to ensure security. Later, I labelled each recording with the participant's pseudonym to ensure proper organisation and tracking. Moreover, I documented the date, time, and location of each interview in a Microsoft Excel file to provide context for the recordings. These measures ensured that I managed those data properly and allowed me to track the interviews. They also facilitated efficient transcription and analysis (Berazneva, 2014; Rutakumwa et al., 2020).

4.5. Recruitment

The participants in this study were mature students pursuing undergraduate degrees at various HEIs in Oman. To select participants, I focused on two main criteria. First, they had to be at least 25 years old when they started their undergraduate studies. This age group was chosen to represent individuals who returned to education later in life, bringing unique life and professional experiences. Second, they needed to be currently enrolled in an undergraduate programme at an Omani institution at the time they participated in the study.

To ensure these criteria were met, I included them in the consent form, which participants reviewed before taking part. They were asked to confirm their eligibility by verifying that they met both requirements. This approach helped to create a sample group that was specifically aligned with the study's focus on mature students' experiences and engagement in HE. The following is a detailed description of the sampling procedure and the sample.

4.5.1. Sampling Procedure

One significant decision I had to make concerned the sampling procedure needed to achieve the objectives of this mixed-methods research and maintain integrity (Abrams, 2010). This was in part due to the adoption of a mixed-methods approach to collecting the necessary data and the nature of each collection method tool utilised. In this section, I will outline the sampling procedure used for a quantitative approach and follow that with a description of the procedure I used to reach the target sample for a qualitative approach.

4.5.1.1. Sampling Procedure for the Questionnaire

For quantitative data collection, I utilised purposive sampling to identify and recruit mature students, the target population for this study. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics that align with the research objectives, ensuring that the sample is relevant to the study (Campbell et al., 2020). In this case, I contacted several universities and colleges in Oman and sought their approval to distribute the questionnaire among their mature students. This approach allowed me to focus on individuals who met the study criteria—students balancing HE with additional roles such as employment or family responsibilities. Purposive sampling was particularly suitable for this research because mature students represent a subgroup within the broader student population and accessing them required targeted efforts that were only possible by collaborating with universities and colleges. In this way, I ensured that the participants represented this general mature student population. It also facilitated the inclusion of mature students from diverse educational and professional backgrounds, adding depth and richness to the data set collected.

Two colleges approved my request to contact their mature students. One college appointed one of their academic staff as a gatekeeper, who later contacted me. I provided him with a link to the survey. He informed me once he had sent an email to all their students. As for the other college, I met the person in charge of scientific research, who requested details by email. I sent him an email with more information and a link to the questionnaire. After a fortnight, he sent me a copy of an email

forwarded to their students. Both these colleges clarified that they did not have a specific list for mature students and so the email would be sent to all their students.

In addition to purposive sampling, I employed snowball sampling to expand the sample size further. Snowball sampling is a technique in which initial participants recruit additional participants by sharing the study with others who meet the criteria (Johnson, 2014; Spreen & Zwaagstra, 1994). I implemented this method by asking mature undergraduate students who agreed to participate in the study to share the questionnaire link with other mature students they studied with or knew, who were studying in different institutions. This approach effectively reached individuals who might not have been accessible through formal institutional channels. Snowball sampling was justified in this research. It benefited from mature student networks, which are often well-connected due to their dual roles as students and employees. It also allowed me to recruit participants more efficiently, particularly in cases where institutional access was limited or formal approval processes were time-consuming, as explained above. I believe this method encouraged mature students to participate more because they were motivated by their peers who saw merit in this study. Combining this method with purposive sampling ensured a more comprehensive and diverse sample and eventually increased the overall representativeness of the study findings.

It is worth acknowledging here that despite my efforts to locate official data, there is currently no publicly available statistic from national bodies such as the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) or the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) specifying the number of mature undergraduate students in Oman. As a result, I was unable to establish a sampling frame or calculate a response rate.

However, the questionnaire yielded 107 valid responses, which I consider adequate and meaningful for an exploratory mixed-methods study in a context where this population is both under-recognised and under-researched. In such cases, sample adequacy is based on data relevance and richness, rather than statistical representativeness (Mason, 2010; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach

aligns with the adopted pragmatic paradigm, which values usefulness and contextual insight over generalisability (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Patton, 2015).

4.5.1.2. Sampling Procedure for Semi-structured Interviews

For the qualitative part of the data collection method, I relied on snowball sampling alone. This decision was influenced by the success I experienced in recruiting mature students for the quantitative part and the challenges of accessing mature students through other methods or their institutions. Before that, I had to make an important decision on how many mature students would be sufficient to obtain the necessary data. An estimated number of participants helps in planning as it determines how long the project will take or what resources will be needed (Guest et al., 2006; Robinson, 2013). Considering the practical aspect of recruiting mature students and their busy schedules, I decided that interviewing 15 mature undergraduate students would be sufficient to capture a general overview of their engagement and the factors that impact on it. This number is consistent with different studies on how many interviews suffice to achieve the objectives of a research project and achieve data saturation (Bekele & Ago, 2022; Burmeister & Aitken, 2012; Creswell, 2007; Guest et al., 2006).

After deciding on the number of participants, the process of recruiting mature students for semi-structured interviews started when a colleague referred the first interviewee to me. This student welcomed the idea and discussed the study's objectives over the phone. This student was very keen to help me find other mature students to participate in the study. She also encouraged one of her acquaintances to share her thoughts about her experience in an interview. The same process was repeated, whether by mature students I knew personally or referred to me by others.

4.6. Sample

This study involved two groups of participants: those who completed a questionnaire and those who participated in a semi-structured interview. Both groups were mature students enrolled in HEIs in Oman, selected to explore their engagement in HE and the factors influencing it. The sample was chosen to ensure a diverse representation

of demographic and educational backgrounds, reflecting the complexity of the target population.

4.6.1. Questionnaire Sample

The questionnaire was completed by 107 mature undergraduate students aged 25 years or above, representing a diverse range of educational institutions across Oman. Of the participants, around 46% were female and a little below 45% male, with varying marital statuses and employment conditions. The other 9% preferred not to disclose their gender. Approximately 60% of the respondents were employed, and 52% were full-time students. This diversity allowed me to explore how factors such as employment, age, and family responsibilities impact on engagement in HE. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, ensuring the inclusion of individuals with varied experiences and perspectives. More details on the demographics of the respondents to the questionnaire are provided in Chapter 4.

4.6.2. Interview Sample

	Name	**Age (years)**	**Gender**	**Employment**	**Mode of Study**	**Sponsor**
1	Ahlam	43	Female	Employed	Part-time	Self-funded
2	Ahmed	38	Male	Employed	Part-time	Self-funded
3	Dalal	37	Female	Employed	Part-time	Self-funded
4	Hamad	37	Male	Employed	On study leave	Work
5	Hanan	34	Female	Employed	Part-time	Self-funded
6	Ibrahim	38	Male	Employed	On study leave	Work
7	Khadeeja	38	Female	Employed	Part-time	Self-funded
8	Khalid	26	male	Unemployed	Part-time	Self-funded
9	Khamis	26	Male	Employed	Part-time	Self-funded
10	Majid	30	Male	Employed	Part-time	Self-funded
11	Munthir	27	Male	Employed	Part-time	Self-funded
12	Saida	35	Female	Employed	On study leave	Self-funded
13	Salama	37	Female	Employed	On study leave	50% self-funded
14	Shaheera	41	Female	Employed	Part-time	Work
15	Siham	35	Female	Employed	On study leave	Self-funded

Table 4.3 Details of interviewed mature students

Following qualitative research guidelines that prioritise data saturation and depth of enquiry (Creswell, 2007; Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010), I interviewed 15 mature undergraduate students. This sample size proved adequate for capturing diverse perspectives, while allowing for in-depth analysis. These individuals, aged 26 to 43 years, represented a broad spectrum of life circumstances, academic pursuits, and professional commitments. With eight females and seven males, the gender distribution was balanced, ensuring a range of voices to explore mature undergraduate students in HE.

A significant proportion of the participants were married (10 out of 15), and most had children, reflecting the dual roles they navigated as students and caregivers. These responsibilities often added complexity to their academic journeys, particularly for those balancing family life and employment. Interestingly, the sample also included a divorced participant who had recently graduated after returning to studies during a transitional phase. In contrast, two participants were single without children, offering insights into students' experiences without familial obligations.

The group majored in three main specialisations: Business, Nursing, and Engineering, with Business being the most common field (9 participants). One reason for this similarity in specialisation is that they were recruited through snowball sampling. Three were pursuing a first degree, while the remaining 12 were returning students, individuals with prior academic exposure, such as diploma-holders or those resuming unfinished degrees. Some participants had shifted to entirely different programmes, demonstrating mature students' varied pathways to re-enter HE.

Employment was a key feature of their profiles, with all but one participant holding a job alongside their studies. Most were employed part-time, while a few had opted for study leave to focus on their education. Funding for their studies was primarily self-sourced, with only one participant receiving partial support. These patterns underscore the financial and professional commitments that often intersect with academic responsibilities.

Individual stories within the sample added depth to the research. For example, one participant resumed studies after a significant transition in her life. Another juggled academic demands while managing a family farm, highlighting the intricate balance between personal and professional roles. One student exemplified resilience by returning to her programme just two weeks after giving birth to twins. Furthermore, a few participants described the challenges of transferring between institutions or shifting to different programmes. This illustrates the flexibility and adaptability of mature students in navigating educational systems.

4.7. Ethical Considerations

Conducting research with human participants involves several ethical considerations to protect their identities and maintain integrity throughout the research. These ethical considerations are essential to the research to protect the participants' rights, privacy, and welfare. I received ethical approval from Lancaster University Department of Education Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. All procedures complied with the university's guidelines (See Appendix 1). To achieve the objectives of this research, there were several ethical considerations.

4.7.1. Informed Consent

Obtaining the participants' consent was a critical requirement of this study. Each participant was informed about the purpose of the study, its objectives, and the nature of their involvement. Before participation, a detailed information sheet was provided to every respondent, outlining the study's purpose, their role, and the expected time commitment (Klykken, 2022; Ogloff & Otto, 1991). The consent form emphasised that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw without consequences at any point.

To obtain the participants' consent, the online questionnaire started with a mandatory consent page, where participants had to explicitly confirm their agreement to take part in the study by selecting an "I agree" option before proceeding to the questionnaire items (Varnhagen et al., 2005). This ensured that participants understood the research's purpose, their role in the study, and their right to withdraw without consequences before continuing to the next section. After giving consent,

they were directed to subsequent pages containing the questionnaire items. According to Holtz et al. (2024), this process followed ethical guidelines for obtaining informed consent in online research, ensuring that participants' participation was both voluntary and informed.

As for the interviews, I asked the participants to sign a written consent form (see Appendix 4) before the interviews, confirming their understanding of the research purpose, procedure, and their rights as participants. Furthermore, verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview to reaffirm their willingness to participate and ensure they were comfortable with proceeding. This step was taken to ensure ethical transparency and provide participants with another opportunity to ask questions or express concerns before the interview began. This dual consent process adhered to ethical standards, reinforcing voluntary participation and informed consent (Klykken, 2022).

4.7.2. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Another ethical issue I observed throughout this study was maintaining confidentiality and protecting the anonymity of participants. According to Novak (2014), the anonymity of research subjects can be maintained by hiding several pieces of “identity knowledge”, including subjects’ legal names and traceable details about their locations or pseudonyms that can be linked to a person or a specific place. Confidentiality, on the other hand, refers to ensuring that the information shared by the research subjects is used only for the purpose to which the participants consented (Wiles et al., 2008).

In following these guidelines, I took strict measures to ensure that participants' identities were protected at all stages of the research. Any identifying information that might reveal participants' information was kept confidential while collecting and analysing the data and when presenting the findings. I also used pseudonyms to refer to the participants in my presentation of the findings.

4.7.3. Cultural Sensitivity

Researchers need to consider the values, traditions, beliefs, and norms of their target population when designing and conducting their research (Lie-A-Ling et al., 2023). In this study, I have observed cultural sensitivity by adapting the research design and data collection methods. In particular, I considered the participants' gender, age, and work experience in a conservative society like Oman. Being an Omani helped me approach the participants in a way that did not create any cultural gaps between me as a researcher and the research subjects.

In addition, the research location and interview mode were chosen according to cultural norms. Participants were allowed to select where they felt most comfortable. For example, most mature female students preferred meeting at their educational institution during work hours. In contrast, mature male students were more comfortable being interviewed off-campus at different times of day. This flexibility in the data collection method allowed these students to participate in the study without experiencing any undue pressure or discomfort related to gender or cultural norms. Moreover, the wish of two female students to have their interviews online was respected as they explained that they would feel more comfortable speaking to me virtually.

4.7.4. Data Protection and Data Collection Approval

The quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the participants were protected according to the University of Lancaster's guidelines. I used OneDrive to save all documents and files related to this study. Participants were informed prior to participation how their data would be handled and were assured that no third parties would have access to their information or their statements except me (the researcher).

In addition, the National Centre for Statistics and Information in Oman approved my distribution of the questionnaire to mature students at the request of some universities (see Appendix 6). The centre's approval added further strength to this research: they scrutinised the study's research plan, including its methods for obtaining consent, ensuring confidentiality, and mitigating potential harm. This

approval encouraged some universities to help me by sending the questionnaire to the target population, as they trusted that the Centre's approval meant the research was valid and would avoid any controversies.

4.8. My Positionality

In qualitative research, particularly when exploring participants' experiences and perspectives, it is essential to acknowledge the researcher's positionality. Positionality refers to the researcher's identity, background, and relationship to the research context and participants, as well as how these factors influence the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Berger, 2015; Darwin Holmes, 2020). Given that this study adopts a mixed-methods design, the importance of positionality is particularly relevant to the qualitative phase, where my role as the researcher was more directly involved in interacting with the participants and interpreting their accounts.

As an Omani academic and doctoral student myself, I occupy a dual role in this research: both insider and researcher. My professional background in HE, coupled with my personal experiences as a mature student balancing work, family responsibilities, and academic commitments, naturally shaped my understanding of the topic under investigation. This insider positionality offered several advantages. For instance, it allowed me to establish an immediate rapport with the participants, as they recognised that I shared many of their challenges and could relate to their struggles and aspirations. This sense of a shared understanding fostered open communication, encouraging participants to speak openly about sensitive topics, including the cultural and familial pressures they experienced.

At the same time, this insider position carried certain risks. As someone embedded in the same cultural and professional environment, I was aware of the potential for my own experiences and assumptions influencing my interpretation of participants' responses. To mitigate this risk, I employed several reflexive strategies throughout the research process (Gabriel, 2015; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). I maintained a reflexive journal after each interview, documenting my thoughts, observations, and any assumptions I may have made. This allowed me to remain critically aware of my

influence and ensured that the data analysis was grounded in the participants' narratives rather than my own preconceptions that I formed during my experience teaching mature undergraduate students.

Moreover, my position as a faculty member in an Omani institution may have influenced how some participants responded to my questions. While I clarified at the outset that my role in this study was purely that of a researcher, some participants may have perceived me as representing the HE sector, which could have subtly shaped their responses, particularly in discussions related to institutional policies. To counter this, I consistently emphasised that my goal was to understand their personal experiences and views rather than evaluate their institutions. To gain their trust, I told them prior to recording the interviews that they could avoid explicitly saying the names of their institutions, because this was not the focus of my research.

In summary, acknowledging and critically reflecting on my positionality not only enhances the transparency of this study but also strengthens its credibility and trustworthiness (Gabriel, 2015). By recognising the benefits and potential limitations associated with my positionality, I ensure that the research process remains as balanced and participant-driven as possible (Berger, 2015). This reflexive approach allows me to use my insider knowledge to enhance a contextual understanding while maintaining the analytical distance necessary for rigorous academic research (Darwin Holmes, 2020).

4.9. Methods of Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, this research utilised both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect the necessary data. Quantitative data were collected via a questionnaire completed by 107 participants. Once this data collection was complete, I used SPSS to analyse the responses to the questionnaire descriptively. This analysis focused on measuring the extent to which mature undergraduate students in Oman are engaged cognitively, behaviourally, and emotionally in their academic and extracurricular activities.

Qualitative data were gathered through 15 interviews. I employed abductive thematic analysis to analyse these data (Thompson, 2022; van Hulst & Visser, 2024),

combining inductive and deductive reasoning. This approach allowed for both the emergence of themes directly from the data and the application of pre-existing theoretical frameworks to interpret those themes. In the following subsections, I will provide an overview of these methods, the rationale behind their selection, and the steps taken in each process.

4.9.1. Questionnaire Analysis

Analysis of the questionnaire responses involved two primary stages: data preparation and statistical analysis using SPSS, as illustrated in Figure 4.2 below. In the data preparation stage, I focused on organising the raw data, addressing inconsistencies, coding responses, and defining variables to ensure a structured and accurate dataset. Once the data were prepared, I conducted a statistical analysis using SPSS to reveal response patterns and trends. This stage involved applying descriptive statistics to summarise key findings and interpret the engagement levels of 107 participants. The following sections outline the steps I took in each stage to ensure accurate and reliable analysis.

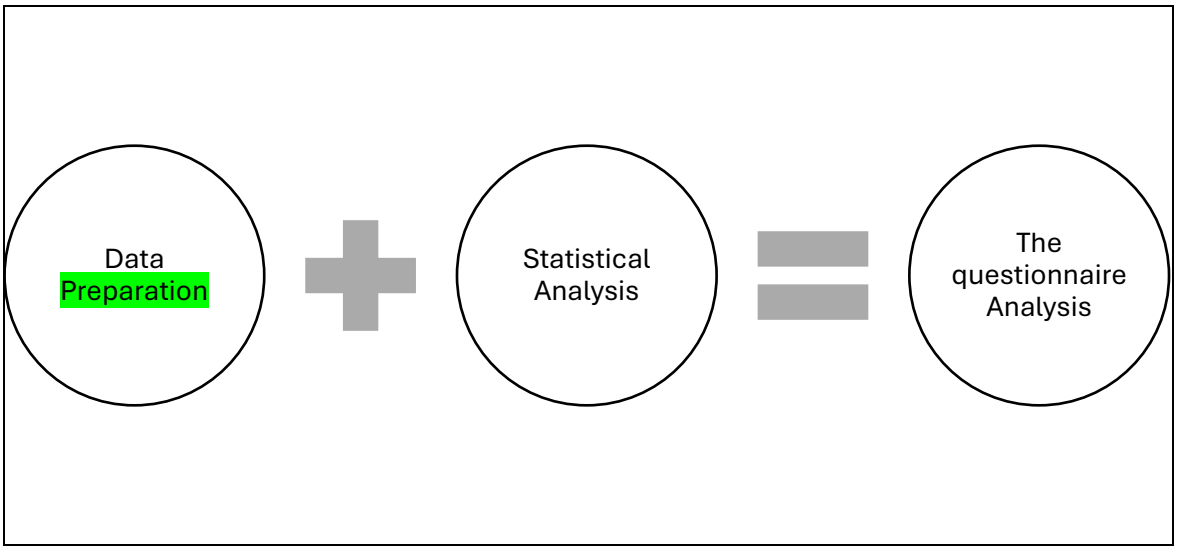

Figure 4. 2 Stages of Questionnaire Analysis

4.9.1.1. Data Preparation

Before importing quantitative data into SPSS, it was essential to prepare them carefully. This included making decisions about incomplete responses. Qualtrics

showed that 161 respondents attempted to complete the questionnaire in both Arabic and English and about one-third of the responses were incomplete.

The challenges of incomplete responses to questionnaires have long been discussed in the literature, and different solutions have been offered to address this issue (Berchtold, 2019). Reporting how incomplete responses are handled is significant to avoid bias and maintain integrity (Gorard, 2020). After carefully examining incomplete responses, it was clear that they followed different patterns and that several participants did not complete some sections. It was also evident that the last section of the questionnaire was the most incomplete in many of these responses. Having received more than 100 complete responses, which exceeded the initial target sample size, I decided to delete incomplete responses using listwise deletion (Twala, 2009). This technique refers to the omission of incomplete responses and performing analysis on the remaining complete responses.

After conducting listwise deletion, complete responses from the Arabic and English versions of the questionnaire were merged into one Excel file. After that, I coded the responses to facilitate statistical computation (Harpe, 2015). I assigned numerical values for each questionnaire item based on a 5-point Likert scale. For instance, responses such as "Never", "Rarely", "Sometimes", "Often", and "Always" were coded as 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively. This coding system simplified the data and enabled the use of advanced statistical techniques in SPSS. By doing this, it was possible to calculate means, standard deviations, and other statistical measures. I reviewed the coding process carefully to ensure consistency and accuracy across all questionnaire items and to reduce the risk of errors during analysis.

4.9.1.2. Statistical Techniques

Once the data were ready, I ran descriptive analysis (Kemp et al., 2018; Sidel et al., 2018) to provide an overview of the target population characteristics and the distribution of engagement levels. I then generated the mean and standard deviation to summarise how the participants engaged behaviourally, emotionally, and cognitively in their HEIs' academic and extracurricular activities. These descriptive

statistics helped to establish a baseline understanding of SE across different dimensions.

Ensuring validity and reliability of the questionnaire data was crucial. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess the internal consistency of the scales measuring behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Vaske et al., 2017). Following several studies' suggestions, an alpha value of 0.70 or higher was considered acceptable (Taber, 2018; Ursachi et al., 2015). The quantitative data met this criterion and indicated a high level of reliability, as shown in Table 4.4, below.

Dimension	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha
Cognitive engagement	10	0.808
Behavioural Engagement	10	0.851
Emotional Engagement	10	0.907
Engagement in extracurricular activities	10	0.941

Table 4.4 Cronbach's alpha for quantitative data

Another test I carried out using SPSS was a MANOVA test (Multivariate Analysis of Variance), which tests whether groups differ across multiple dependent variables (see Appendix 7). I used this test to determine whether the participating mature students differed in their behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement based on several variables, including age, gender, prior educational experience, marital status, and employment status. The results of this test are reported later in Section 5.2.4.

4.9.2. Semi-structured Interview Analysis

To analyse the interviews, I used predefined themes based on the conceptual framework (deductive analysis), highlighted subthemes that emerged from reading, and reviewed the interviews (inductive analysis). This section clearly outlines the careful steps I followed at every stage to guarantee a thorough and trustworthy analysis.

4.9.2.1. Data Preparation

The first step in preparing the data was transcribing the interviews, which involved converting the audio recordings into written text (Wellard & McKenna, 2001). This was a thorough process, as I needed to capture every word, pause, and note exactly as the participants expressed them. To ensure accuracy, I listened to each recording multiple times, pausing frequently to transcribe complex sentences and emotions carefully (Poland, 2003).

Since the interviews were in Arabic, I paid special attention to dialectal differences, as words or phrases can have varied meanings depending on the context or region. For example, some male students use the Arabic word "البيت", which literally means “the house”. However, they were referring to their families. This was considered in other similar instances when the interviewees used a word with a different literal meaning than the intended one. Being familiar with the culture and the dialect helped me observe these differences. I noted when participants used colloquial expressions to preserve their cultural significance and meaning. There were moments when overlapping speech or unclear parts required closer attention, and I flagged these for clarification later, where possible. This level of care was vital to ensure that the transcripts reflected the participants’ voices authentically.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I started translating those parts of the interviews that I could potentially use to support my findings from Arabic into English. While doing this, I focused on converting words from Arabic into English and carrying over the depth of meaning, cultural context, and emotional tones that the participants attempted to convey in Arabic (Filep, 2009; Inhetveen, 2012).

I started with an initial translation, working line by line to provide an accurate and faithful rendition of the text. It was important to keep the translation as close to the original as possible without losing the essence of what the participants intended to say.

This two-step process allowed me to maintain the authenticity of the participants’ voices (Filep, 2009; Inhetveen, 2012), while adapting their narratives to a new linguistic framework. The goal was to ensure that their ideas were heard just as they

had shared them, regardless of the language they used and the language in which these ideas were written in this study.

4.9.2.2. Abductive Thematic Analysis

To analyse the 15 interviews with mature students exploring the structural and psychosocial influences impacting on their engagement, I adopted abductive thematic analysis, drawing on the frameworks proposed by Thompson (2022) and van Hulst and Visser (2024). This hybrid approach began with deductive analysis, guided by predefined themes from my conceptual framework, followed by inductive analysis to allow new patterns to emerge from the data. This combination ensured that the analysis remained grounded in existing theoretical constructs, while remaining open to new insights revealed by the interviews. The following explains the steps (see Figure 4.3 below) I took in analysing the semi-structured interviews, they are adapted from Thompson (2022):

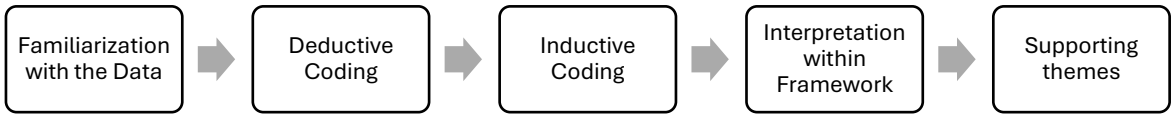

Figure 4. 3 Process of Abductive Thematic Analysis

Step 1: Familiarisation with the Data

The first step involved immersing myself in the interview transcripts to understand the participants' perspectives thoroughly. I carefully read and re-read the transcripts while taking notes on recurring phrases, concepts, and ideas aligned with the study's focus on engagement. This step also allowed me to identify initial impressions that might not directly relate to the predefined themes but seemed significant for further exploration.

Step 2: Deductive Coding

Using the conceptual framework as a guide, I developed a set of predefined themes to structure the initial analysis. These themes included:

- **Structural Influences:** University-related influences (policies, curriculums, culture, specialisations) and student-related influences (background, family, life load, support)
- **Psychosocial Influences:** University-related influences (teachers, students, workload) and student-related influences (motivation, skills, personality, identity)

Each transcript was systematically reviewed, and relevant data segments were coded into these predefined categories. This process ensured that the analysis remained anchored in the study's theoretical constructs. For example, comments about the impact of policies were coded under "university-related structural influences". In contrast, discussions about emotional support from family were coded under "student-related structural influences".

Step 3: Inductive Coding

Once deductive coding was complete, I conducted a second round of coding to identify patterns or sub-themes not specified by predefined categories. This inductive analysis allowed the data to guide the identification of new codes, such as "admission policies" or "exam policies". Examples of the development of these themes are provided in Table 4.5 below. By comparing these emergent codes across participants, I could identify specific influences that were not explicitly addressed in the conceptual framework.

Main Influence	**Predefined themes (deductive analysis)**	**Identification of sub-themes (inductive analysis)**
University-Related Structural Influences	Policies	• Admission Policies • Exam policies • Attendance Policies
	Culture	• Students • Teachers
	Curriculums	• Specialisation courses • General Courses • Work-related courses

Table 4. 5 Example of theme identification using abductive thematic analysis

Step 4: Interpretation within the Conceptual Framework

Finally, the themes were interpreted in light of the study's conceptual framework. Deductive insights provided a structured understanding of predefined influences, while inductive findings enriched the analysis by highlighting additional factors impacting on engagement. For instance, the interplay between structural constraints and psychosocial resilience revealed how institutional barriers could be mitigated through strong family support networks and adaptive strategies.

Stage 5: Supporting Themes

At this stage, I extracted relevant quotations from the texts to support each theme and provide evidence of its existence. These quotations were carefully selected to provide direct evidence of the themes and ensure they were firmly grounded in the participants' narratives. This process involved revisiting coded segments within each theme and identifying statements that clearly illustrated the participants' experiences, perspectives, and emotions. I attempted to support each theme with different views from the participants to capture their diversity.

In summary, adopting an abductive thematic analysis approach allowed me to better understand the factors influencing the engagement of mature students. I bridged theoretical constructs with empirical observations, while remaining open to the complexity and richness of the participants' experiences.

4.10. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained the methodology used in my study, starting with the rationale for adopting pragmatism and constructivism, which align with my goal to explore both the quantitative 'what' and the qualitative 'why' of mature students' engagement. I outlined the mixed-methods approach, combining questionnaire data with semi-structured interviews to provide both breadth and depth. I detailed the sampling strategy to ensure diverse representation and addressed ethical considerations such as consent and confidentiality. I also explained the data analysis methods and reflected on limitations, concluding that this approach effectively answered my research questions.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1. Introduction

Building on the previous chapter, which detailed the study's methodology, this chapter presents the quantitative and qualitative data findings. The study addresses two main questions:

1. **To what extent are mature students in Oman engaged in higher education activities? How is this related to their behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement?**
2. **What are the main factors that mature students in Oman perceive as impacting on their engagement in higher education activities?**

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first presents questionnaire findings from 107 mature students, highlighting levels of academic and extracurricular engagement. The second presents interview findings, exploring structural and psychosocial influences using the adapted framework discussed in Chapter 3.

5.2. Quantitative analysis

I will start this chapter by introducing the demographics of the participants. Then, I will present descriptive statistics on mature students' engagement in academic activities, divided into three dimensions: cognitive, behavioural, and emotional. Moving on, I will present a descriptive analysis of the results obtained from the responses of = participating mature students on their engagement in extracurricular activities.

5.2.1. Demographic Information

Due to the uniqueness of the current study on mature students in the context of Oman and the scarcity of information available on their characteristics, the questionnaire attempted to collect demographic information to assess their impact on different aspects of engagement. Based on this demographic information, future studies can use the data obtained from this study.

Examining the demographics of 107 participants reveals that more than half are female students, and just under 45% are male students. Ten per cent of the participants preferred not to specify their gender, which might indicate that some wanted more anonymity. All 107 participants indicated that they were citizens of Oman.

Regarding age, the mature student participants in this questionnaire were distributed across four age categories. Fifty-one participants fall within the age group of 25 to 30 years, accounting for nearly 48% of total participants. Mature students aged 31 to 35 years constituted almost 19%, and those aged 36–40 years represented nearly 22% of the total. The smallest age group that completed the quantitative part of the study was those over 40 years, with only 12 participants constituting 11% of the study sample.

Looking at the marital status of the mature students contributing to the study, 64 specified that they were in a marital relationship, while those who indicated that they did not have a marital commitment numbered 43. Of the 64 married participants, 58 had children, and six said they were not parents yet. Three of those not in a marital relationship specified that they had children under their care. This brings the number of participants with children to 61, and the number of participants without children to 46.

Regarding the respondents' employment, Table 5.1 below shows that 56 mature students indicated they were committed to a full-time job, while 43 (65% of them were female), stated they were seeking new professional opportunities. In addition, four mature students said that they had a part-time work commitment, and a similar number specified that they were managing self-established businesses.

	Full-time Job	Part-time job	Self-employed	Unemployed	Total
Male	33	2	2	11	48
Female	19	2	0	28	49
Undisclosed	4	0	2	4	10
Total	56	4	4	43	107

Table 5. 1 Employment status of mature students by gender

Most respondents (almost 61%) said they used their own budgets to finance their studies. Other respondents specified that they were funded by family and/or work, accounting for 16% and 13%, respectively. An additional 10% of the respondents stated that their education fees were paid by other means.

Students pursuing their studies on a part-time basis represented around 48%, while those enrolled in full-time education comprised 52%, as indicated in Table 5.2. A statistically significant relationship was found between work status and mode of study, as confirmed by a Fisher's Exact Test ($p = 0.003$). The results indicate that nearly two-thirds of participants in full-time employment opted for a part-time studies route, while most unemployed participants chose full-time education. This suggests that employment status plays a critical role in determining students' choices regarding their mode of study.

	Part-time students	Full-time students	Total
Employed	34	22	56
Unemployed	12	31	43
Part-time employed	3	1	4
Self-employed	2	2	4
Total	51	56	107

Table 5. 2 Mode of studies distribution based on employment status

More than half of the mature students who completed the survey indicated that they had experienced HE before their current enrolment, and over 40% revealed that they had no prior experience in HE. As for the reasons for pursuing their studies at 25 years and above, around 36% of the students clarified that they aimed to get a degree in a different specialisation than the one they studied before. Moreover, 35% of the students explained that they were pursuing their first degree in HE. In comparison, the remaining 29% reported that their reason for returning to college was to complete a degree they had previously started, but they had dropped out of college for different reasons.

To understand the factors motivating the target students in their pursuit of HE, the participants were asked to arrange six personal goals they aimed to achieve by the end of their studies (see Figure 5.1). The six goals under consideration were to advance in their current career, change their existing career, a new achievement, return to a deferred dream, make their family happy, and update their skills and knowledge. The data analysis revealed intriguing patterns in their prioritisation. Notably, a significant plurality of respondents, constituting 27%, emphasised their desire to return to a deferred dream as the most critical factor influencing their decision to pursue their studies. Following closely, the goals of a new achievement and updating skills and knowledge shared second position, with each goal garnering 18% of respondents' prioritisation. The goal of making their family happy emerged as the least chosen factor, with only 6% of participants indicating it as their primary consideration. Advancing and changing careers, while a priority for 17% and 15% of respondents, respectively, were placed in the middle tier of priorities.

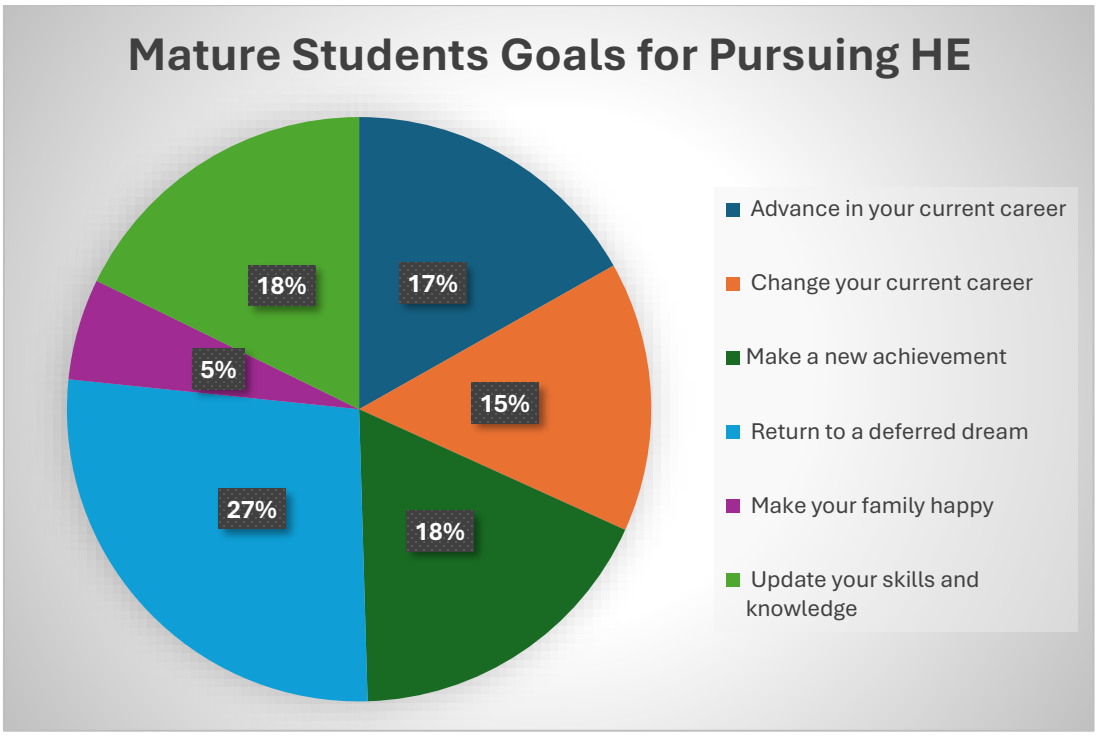

Figure 5.1 Personal Goals of participating mature students for pursuing their undergraduate studies

5.2.2. Engagement in Academic Activities

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the participating mature students were asked to evaluate their academic engagement using 30 items developed from relevant literature. The evaluation used a Likert scale ranging from “Never” to “Always.” The Likert scale was transformed to numerical data for easy analysis through SPSS. This section of the questionnaire focused on the three dimensions of engagement: cognitive, behavioural, and emotional. The following is a descriptive analysis of each dimension of engagement.

5.2.2.1. Cognitive Engagement

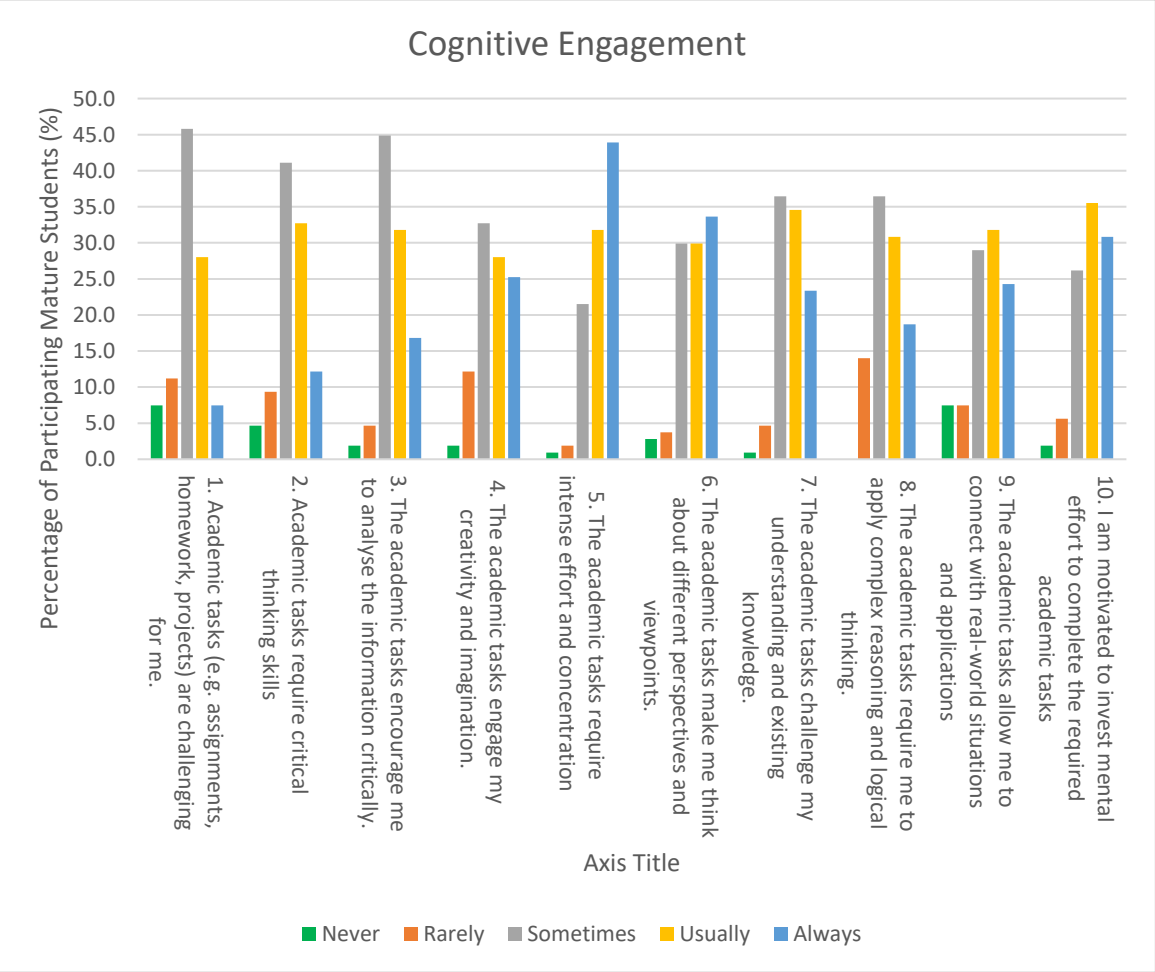

Figure 5.2 Extent to which mature students cognitively engage in academic activities

The results obtained for cognitive engagement, as illustrated in Figure 5.2, show that participants exhibited high levels of cognitive involvement in their academic tasks, particularly in areas requiring effort, critical thinking, and real-world application. Notably, 43.9% of students reported that academic tasks "Always" require intense effort and concentration (Item 5), with an additional 31.8% selecting "Usually". Similarly, 33.6% of students indicated that academic tasks "Always" make them think about different perspectives and viewpoints (Item 6), reflecting the depth of their engagement with academic material.

Tasks that challenge students' understanding and existing knowledge also show consistent engagement, with 34.6% choosing "Usually" and 23.4% selecting

"Always" for Item 7. However, tasks that involve creativity and imagination (Item 4) show more mixed responses, with 25.2% of students selecting "Always" and 28.0% selecting "Usually", indicating that while students may engage creatively, this is not as frequent as other forms of cognitive engagement.

Students are also motivated to invest mental effort in completing academic tasks (Item 10), with 30.8% selecting "Always" and 35.5% selecting "Usually", showing a strong intrinsic motivation to succeed. However, engagement in critical analysis (Item 3) and logical thinking (Item 8) is slightly less consistent, with 16.8% and 18.7% selecting "Always", respectively.

Overall, the quantitative data for cognitive engagement show that the respondents are generally engaged in tasks requiring effort, critical thinking, and real-world application. However, there is some variability in tasks that require sustained creativity and complex reasoning, suggesting potential areas for improvement in fostering consistent cognitive engagement across all tasks.

5.2.2.2. Behavioural Engagement

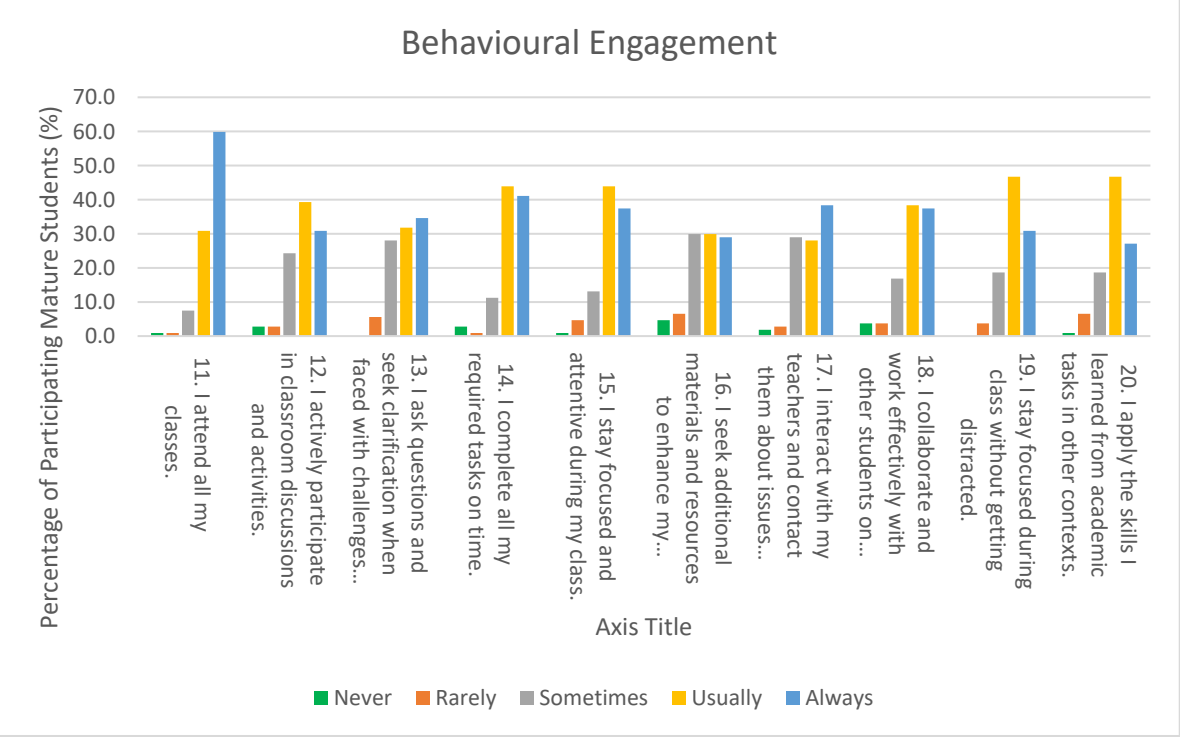

Figure 5.3 Extent to which mature students engage in academic activities behaviourally

The analysis of behavioural engagement, as shown in Figure 5.3, above, reveals that the participating mature undergraduate students demonstrate strong commitment and active participation in their studies. The most notable finding is their solid class attendance, with 59.8% of students reporting that they "Always" attend classes and 30.8% indicating they "Usually" attend. This shows that most students prioritise being present in class, a critical component of behavioural engagement.

In addition to attendance, students show a high level of timely task completion, with 41.1% selecting "Always" and 43.9% choosing "Usually" for completing all required tasks on time (Item 14). This suggests that students are highly responsible and manage their time effectively to meet academic deadlines.

Another key finding is students' proactive approach to seeking clarification when faced with challenges. For the item "I ask questions and seek clarification during academic tasks" (Item 13), 34.6% of students responded "Always", while 31.8% selected "Usually". This indicates that many students take the initiative to resolve academic difficulties by actively engaging with their instructors and peers.

However, seeking additional resources to enhance understanding (Item 16) showed more balanced responses, with around 29.9% selecting both "Always" and "Usually", while 29.9% chose "Sometimes". This suggests that while many students demonstrate self-directed learning behaviours, there is still room for improvement in consistently accessing additional materials to deepen their understanding.

In summary, the key findings highlight that mature students are highly engaged in behaviours that directly contribute to their academic success, such as class attendance, timely task completion, and seeking clarification. However, their use of additional resources varies, suggesting opportunities to further enhance self-directed learning practices.

5.2.2.3. Emotional Engagement

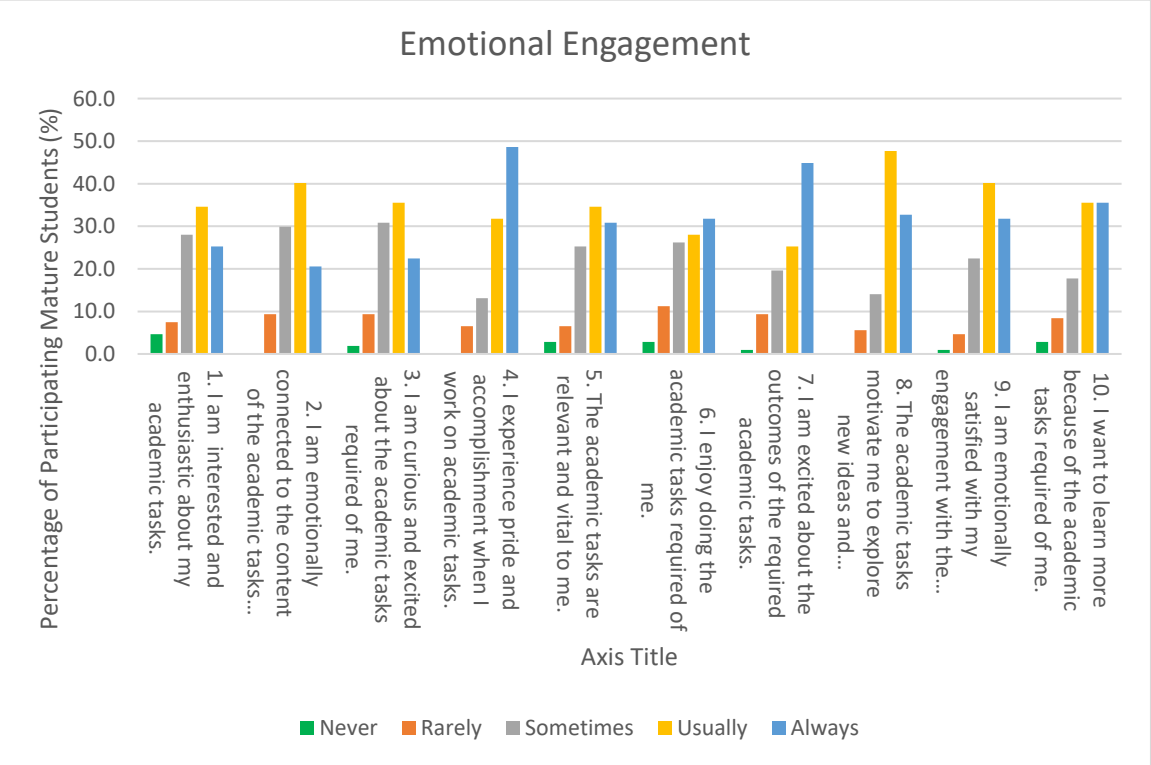

Figure 5.4 Extent to which mature students engage in academic activities emotionally

Figure 5.4, on emotional engagement, highlights the extent to which mature undergraduate students feel emotionally connected and motivated by their academic tasks. The key findings indicate a generally positive emotional response to scholarly work, with notable trends in pride, accomplishment, and curiosity.

One of the most significant findings is that 48.6% of students reported "Always" experiencing pride and accomplishment when working on academic tasks (Item 4), and another 31.8% indicating "Usually". This shows that academic tasks provide a strong sense of achievement, which is crucial for sustaining motivation and engagement.

Another key result is that academic tasks motivate students to explore new ideas and perspectives (Item 8), with 32.7% of students selecting "Always" and 47.7%

choosing "Usually". This indicates that academic tasks are seen as opportunities to expand knowledge and think creatively.

Students also feel emotionally satisfied with their engagement in academic tasks (Item 9), with 31.8% choosing "Always" and 40.2% selecting "Usually". This suggests that their academic work aligns with their personal interests and goals, thus fostering deeper emotional connection. The figure also reveals a strong emotional connection to learning outcomes, as 44.9% of students are "Always" excited about the outcomes of required academic tasks (Item 7), showing that achieving academic milestones is an essential motivator for mature students.

Lastly, curiosity and enthusiasm are evident in their responses. For instance, 35.5% of students reported "Always" wanting to learn more because of their academic tasks (Item 10), and another 35.5% indicating "Usually". Similarly, 35.5% of students "Usually" feel curious and excited about their academic tasks (Item 3), while 22.4% selected "Always".

In summary, the key findings reveal that mature students derive a strong sense of pride, accomplishment, and curiosity from their academic tasks, and these tasks motivate them to explore new ideas and achieve their educational goals. However, while most students feel emotionally connected to their scholarly work, there is still some variability in how consistently they experience enthusiasm and emotional satisfaction. Overall, the high percentages in the "Usually" and "Always" categories reflect a positive emotional engagement with academic tasks.

5.2.3. Engagement in Extracurricular Activities

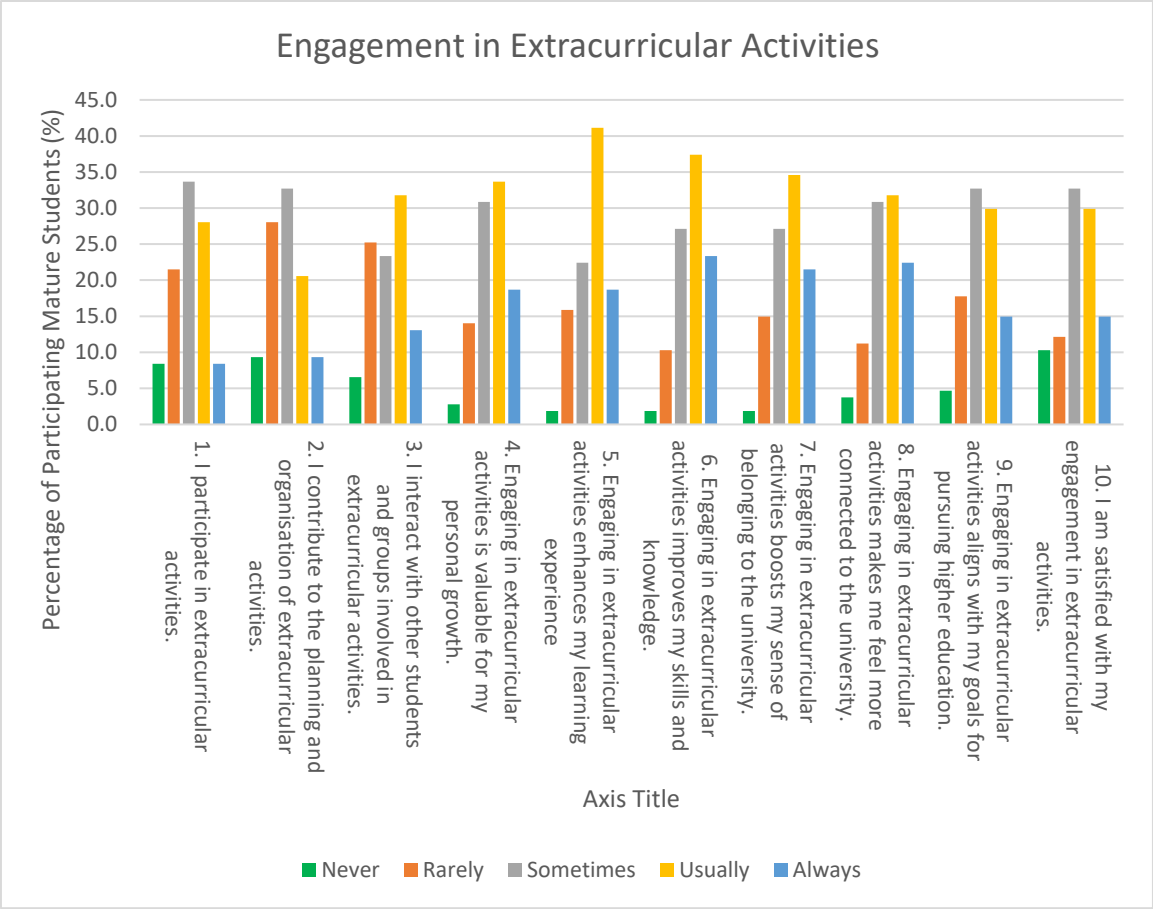

Figure 5.5 Extent to which mature students engage in extracurricular activities

Figure 5.5 shows the findings for extracurricular activity engagement, which highlight key insights into how mature undergraduate students perceive and participate in activities outside their academic curriculum. The most notable finding is that students generally view extracurricular engagement as valuable for their personal growth and learning experience.

Among the students, 41.1% reported that ECAs enhance their learning experience (Item 5), 37.4% indicated that these activities improve their skills and knowledge (Item 6), and an additional 23.4% selected "Always". This suggests that students recognise the significant educational benefits of participating in extracurricular activities, seeing them as opportunities to build practical skills.

Students also feel that these activities boost their sense of belonging and connection to the university. For example, 34.6% of students reported "Usually" feeling that engaging in ECAs boosts their sense of belonging to the university (Item 7), with 21.5% selecting "Always". Similarly, 31.8% of students selected "Usually", and 22.4% chose "Always" for the item about feeling more connected to the university through extracurricular engagement (Item 8). These findings suggest that participating in ECAs fosters a sense of community and attachment to their institution.

However, participation in planning and organising these activities (Item 2) is lower, with only 9.3% of students selecting "Always" and 20.6% choosing "Usually". This suggests that while students benefit from participation, fewer are involved in leadership or organisational roles. Similarly, participation rates in ECAs overall (Item 1) are moderate, with 33.6% selecting "Sometimes" and 28.0% choosing "Usually". This indicates that not all students are regularly engaged in extracurricular activities.

Overall, the key findings highlight that mature students perceive ECAs as valuable for personal growth, skills development, and fostering a sense of belonging. However, their participation focuses more on benefiting from these activities rather than organising or leading them. To further enhance engagement, institutions could encourage more leadership opportunities and highlight the value of active participation in planning extracurricular events.

5.2.4. Effects of Background Variables on Student Engagement Dimensions

This section presents the results of a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) conducted to examine the effects of five background characteristics: age, gender, work status, marital status, and prior study experience, on four dimensions of student engagement: cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and extra-curricular engagement.

In line with established practice in social science research, a p-value below .05 was considered statistically significant (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012). P-values between .05 and .10 were interpreted as marginally significant, indicating a potential trend worth interpreting with caution (Wasserstein & Lazar, 2016). The significance values

obtained for each background variable across the four engagement dimensions are summarised in Table 5.3.

Variable	Cognitive (p)	Behavioural (p)	Emotional (p)	ECAs (p)
Age	.568	.989	.989	.098
Gender	.090	.606	.606	.261
Work Status	.053	.763	.763	.189
Marital Status	.579	.726	.726	.844
Prior Study Experience	.001	.281	.281	.052

Table 5. 3 Summary of MANOVA Significance Values for Engagement Dimensions

Age

As shown in Table 5.3, age was not significantly associated with any of the engagement outcomes. The p-values for cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement were well above the significance threshold. A marginal trend was observed for extra-curricular engagement (p = .098), suggesting a possible weak association between age and students' involvement in non-academic university activities.

Gender

Gender did not have a statistically significant effect on any engagement dimension. The effect on cognitive engagement approached marginal significance (p = .090), as shown in Table 5.3. This may indicate a subtle gender-related variation in cognitive engagement. Behavioural, emotional, and extra-curricular engagement were not significantly associated with gender.

Work Status

Work status showed a marginally significant effect on cognitive engagement (p = .053). This implies that students’ employment responsibilities may influence their cognitive involvement in learning. Other dimensions of engagement were not significantly related to work status, as indicated by the respective p-values in Table 5.3.

Marital Status

No statistically significant effects of marital status were observed across the four engagement dimensions. All p-values exceeded the .05 threshold, suggesting that marital status was not a differentiating factor in students' engagement levels.

Prior Study Experience

Prior study experience emerged as the most influential background variable. As reported in Table 5.3, it had a statistically significant effect on cognitive engagement ($p = .001$), indicating that students with previous academic experience were more cognitively engaged in their current studies. A marginal effect was also observed for extra-curricular engagement ($p = .052$), suggesting that such students might also be more active in university life beyond the classroom. No significant relationships were found for behavioural or emotional engagement.

Model Fit

The model's explanatory power was further assessed using R^2 and adjusted R^2 values (see Appendix 5):

- Cognitive engagement: $R^2 = .570$; Adjusted $R^2 = .228$
- Behavioural engagement: $R^2 = .432$; Adjusted $R^2 = –.021$
- Emotional engagement: $R^2 = .518$; Adjusted $R^2 = .133$
- Extra-curricular engagement: $R^2 = .518$; Adjusted $R^2 = .133$

These values indicate that the model explains a moderate proportion of the variance in cognitive and emotional engagement. In contrast, the included variables poorly explain behavioural engagement, as evidenced by the negative adjusted R^2.

5.2.5. Summary of Quantitative Findings

The overall engagement findings from the four tables reveal that mature undergraduate students display high levels of engagement across cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and extracurricular domains. They are generally motivated, committed, and actively involved in their academic experiences, although the degree of engagement varies depending on the nature of the tasks and activities. Students

demonstrate strong cognitive engagement, particularly in tasks requiring critical thinking, logical reasoning, and applying knowledge to real-world situations. However, their engagement is less consistent regarding tasks involving creativity and sustained mental effort, suggesting that more opportunities to promote open-ended, innovative thinking could be beneficial.

The respondents to the questionnaire indicated a strong behavioural engagement. Most of them reported attending classes regularly, completing tasks on time, and seeking clarification when needed. They also suggested that they are taking the initiative in their learning, often collaborating with peers and interacting with teachers. However, there is some variability in their use of additional resources for independent learning. Encouraging more self-directed learning could further enhance this dimension of engagement. Emotionally, students report feeling pride, accomplishment, and excitement from their academic tasks, and many find these tasks relevant and meaningful. This emotional connection motivates them to explore new ideas and continue learning. However, some students show less emotional connection to the academic content itself, indicating room for improvement in fostering deeper emotional engagement.

Moving to engagement in ECAs, the participants engage moderately in these activities, with students recognising the value of these activities for personal growth, skills development, and building a sense of belonging to the university. Many students feel that participating in ECAs enhances their learning experience and strengthens their connection to the institution. However, fewer students are involved in the planning and organisation of these activities, suggesting that participation is focused more on benefiting from these activities rather than taking on leadership roles. Encouraging greater involvement in organising these activities could enhance students' engagement further.

The MANOVA results in Table 5.3 indicate that prior study experience significantly predicts cognitive engagement, with a marginal effect on extra-curricular engagement. Additionally, work status and gender exhibited marginal associations with cognitive engagement, while age displayed a marginal trend regarding extra-

curricular engagement. No statistically significant effects were noted for marital status across any engagement type. These findings underscore the importance of students' academic and professional backgrounds in shaping their engagement in higher education.

In short, the findings obtained from the questionnaire analysis suggest that mature students are highly engaged in their academic experiences, particularly in areas involving practical application, critical thinking, and proactive behaviour. They are motivated by a sense of achievement and belonging and are committed to their studies. However, opportunities do exist to boost engagement by fostering creativity, promoting self-directed learning, and encouraging leadership in extracurricular activities. This would help to create a more holistic academic experience and further support mature undergraduate students.

5.3. Qualitative Analysis

After presenting the findings obtained from quantitative analysis, I will reveal the results of the qualitative data analysis in this section. As explained in Chapter 4, I used semi-structured interviews to examine how structural and psychosocial factors shape the engagement of a sample of mature undergraduate students in Oman. Presentation of the following themes in this section of the findings is based on the adapted framework. Under each theme, sub-themes are provided to highlight specific themes the participants shared and how they influenced their engagement.

5.3.1. University-related Structural Influences

The first group of influences discussed with participating mature students was structural influences that impact on their engagement in their HEIs' activities. As per the conceptual framework adopted for this study, the interviewees commented on four main influences, as shown in Figure 5.6.

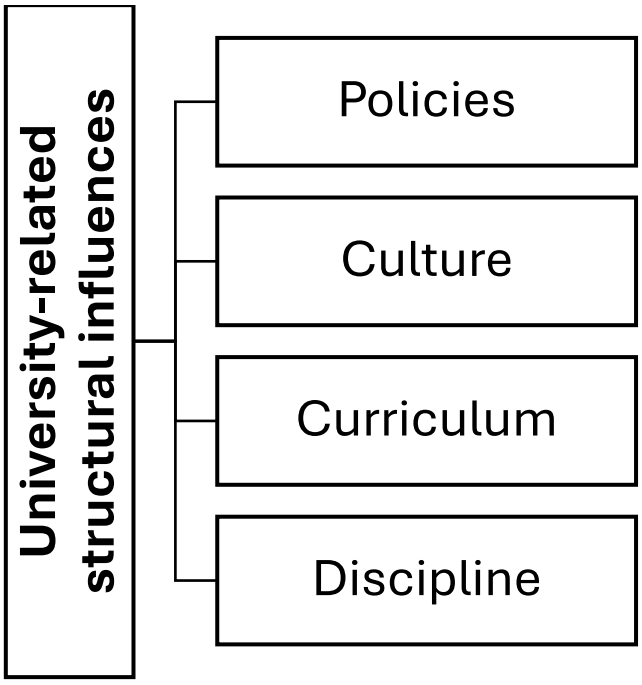

Figure 5.6 University-related Structural Influences

5.3.1.1. Policy

The participants reported different feelings about some of the policies implemented in their universities and how they help them persist in their studies. It is worth noting that while some of these policies might not directly impact on their day-to-day engagement in the classroom, they might increase their level of engagement.

5.3.1.1.1. Examination Policies

One of the policies frequently discussed by most of the mature students in this study was examination policies and their effect on the flow of their studies. Examination policies can be challenging for some mature students returning to complete an undergraduate degree. They do not consider the time gap between their first education experience and their current one. Dalal and Shaheera, for instance, despite their professional experience, felt that mature nursing students need some self-study programmes to review what they studied in their first undergraduate

experience. According to the students, examination policies ignore the time interval, and mature students must do the same exams as traditional students.

Khamis, another returning student, has an opinion on examination policies that differs from Dalal and Shaheera. He explained that taking exams at his current college is more manageable than at his previous one.

> *They are excellent. Compared to the examination policies I experienced in my previous college, exams now help me get more marks. For example, they give me a choice to answer any two questions out of three.*

5.3.1.1.2. Admission and Registration Policies

In addition to examination policies, some students commented on admission and registration policies. Mature students such as Ahlam believe that, as a mature student, she did not encounter any issues when applying to start her HE studies. Majid echoed a similar experience with the admission process and clarified that it was easier because he had previously studied at the same institution.

Although the students interviewed for this study described the process of admission and registration in HEIs in Oman as straightforward, some expressed that their main concern was the reason behind requesting mature students to bring a no-objection letter from their workplace. This letter is required by HEIs in Oman from mature students' employers to confirm their support for the student's decision to pursue further studies and that it will not conflict with their work duties. Ahmed shed light on this experience:

> *Admission policies there are somewhat complex, as the university requires certain documents from you, such as a no-objection letter from your employer, and this letter must be well-written. For example, it should not be mentioned that you can only attend in the evening. I encountered an issue when I submitted a no-objection letter, and it took two more weeks for my workplace to fix the letter.*

Other students, such as Ibrahim, Dalal, and Shaheera, reported that they started or returned to complete their undergraduate degrees because of their work. However, they were ready to work and study simultaneously. In addition, they were the ones paying the tuition fees. Ahmed explained that this was a frustrating experience and asked the following:

Why should we be treated like new students? We are mature enough and can take full responsibility for our decisions. We understand and know the requirements of studying, so they [universities] should not require us to provide some documents that might hinder our admission.

5.3.1.1.3. Attendance Policies

Some participants also discussed attendance policies and how they impact on their engagement in the classroom. Most participants expressed satisfaction with the consideration mature students receive regarding attendance. Majid reported the following about his late attendance:

I usually come late to some classes due to work. When I explain this to my teachers, they always show understanding and empathy.

Hanan made a similar remark and explained that teachers have always tolerated her late attendance. She described this as “respect” for her different personal and professional commitments as a mature student. It should be noted here that it is unclear whether this tolerance with mature students' attendance is a policy implemented by their respective universities and colleges, or if it is left to teachers’ discretion. However, those mature students who raised attendance as a policy that impacts on their engagement found this easiness helpful and a sign of empathy that they appreciated.

5.3.1.2. Culture

A section of the interviews was dedicated to exploring the extent to which mature students feel welcomed by HEIs in Oman. The participants explored this topic through attitudes of when and how their teachers and classmates treat them. In particular, the interviews attempted to shed light on how these mature students perceive the support, respect and inclusiveness they receive from their faculty members and fellow students.

Regarding academic faculty, most respondents expressed gratitude for how their teachers support and respect them. Ahlam, for example, clarified that having teachers who helped her with her unique challenges as a mature student contributed to her feeling valued at the university in which she is pursuing her studies:

> *We could always turn to our professors for help whenever we faced difficulties. One particular professor was very supportive; if you had any issues, you could go to her, and she would tell you what to do. They were very helpful once they knew we were also working. There are services available to us.*

Concerning how welcomed mature students are by their peers, the participants' responses clearly showed that there were contrasting differences in their experiences, particularly from younger traditional students. These experiences vary depending on how common mature students are at a particular institution and whether mature students are grouped together or mixed in with younger students in the classroom. Building relationships with all students, including younger students, was significant for a group of interviewed mature students. Ahmed, for instance, noticed from the beginning that younger students tended to distance themselves from him. He explained:

> *Since they are younger than me, I try to build relationships with them because they naturally don't take the initiative to get to know someone older. I make friendships with them and try to be on their level so that there is understanding between us, and they include me just like they include their other classmates.*

Ibrahim had a similar positive approach towards his younger classmates. He suggested it was a challenge for him but, later, he learned to be like them, despite their different ways of thinking. Similarly, Hana stated that her younger peers showed great respect towards her and felt they valued her because of her professional experience.

In contrast to the above, some of the mature students interviewed expressed some concerns regarding how other, more traditional, students viewed them. Siham, for example, commented on some of the younger students' perception of her as one of the few mature students in her institution.

> *Although there were students who showed me support, there were students who bullied me. They referred to me as "the old one". I heard them often say, "The old one came, the old one left." I think they lacked understanding.*

Dalal, Salma and Shaheera, who are doing nursing programmes with other traditional students, reported that they are officially known as "bridging students".

The term is not discriminatory, and nursing students interviewed used it to refer to themselves. However, from the interviews, younger students seemed to associate it with being “old”. The three nursing students explained that most female “regular students” distance themselves from them and they do not understand why. Dala stated the following, regarding her experience:

> *The regular students were somewhat distant from us. They made us feel we were older than them and did not mix with us much. However, a small group of them considered us to be a reference and a role model. They would consult us for explanations and examples of some topics.*

Interestingly, despite experiencing exclusion from other students, Siham reported that she had never taken this seriously and attempts to understand and get closer to more traditional young students. She commented that this helps her as a mother:

> *It never affected me. My desire to interact with students is my need to understand their generation and their needs. As a mother with children, including a daughter in ninth grade, I anticipate that she will be close to university age in a year or two. By interacting with university students and understanding their mindset, I gain insights into how to help my daughter navigate the university environment when the time comes.*

Another way of understanding to what extent HEIs in Oman have a welcoming culture towards mature students is through the participation of these students in ECAs that foster students' sense of belonging. Strikingly, most of the mature students interviewed showed a positive attitude towards these activities and their significance to their personal HE experience. Some explained that they are regularly invited to participate in these activities but, for various reasons, they do not. More about these reasons and more details about mature students’ participation in extra-curricular activities will be discussed later, in Section 5.2.5.

5.3.1.3. Curriculum

The third university-related structural influence discussed with the mature students interviewed was the impact of the curriculum on their engagement with their studies. The analysis shows that mature students have more focused goals and tend to study courses that align directly with their specialisation and work.

One theme that arises from the interviews is the relevance of the curriculum to mature students' professional work. The analysis shows that the more that courses are relevant to the students' work, the more their engagement in those courses. Dalal, for instance, emphasised that she engaged with 90 per cent of the courses because they were relevant to her job. Both Munthir and Ahlam shared this attitude and suggested that courses aligning with their professional work increased their perceived value of pursuing HE while still working.

A second theme interpreted from the interviews concerning the impact of the curriculum on the engagement of mature students is the value of taking general university courses. Students who shared their thoughts on these courses expressed some discontent about taking courses not relevant to their professional work. Ibrahim, for instance, talked about the difficulties he experienced when taking such mandatory university courses. He explained that he disengaged from their content and had no option but to do his best. Saida voiced a similar concern and noted:

> *As employees with 15 years of experience of dealing with people in the hospital, we shouldn't have to take specific courses. For example, communication courses are essential for regular students starting their studies. But we have already dealt with patients and gained a lot of experience, so I feel we don't need a communication course, yet it is mandatory. Similarly, we have to do a sociology course; we work in a hospital and already understand the background and culture of people, so why take this course?*

A third theme revealed by the interviews about the impact of the curriculum on mature students is the language of the curriculum. One mature student, Majid, suggested that his engagement with the curriculum was negatively impacted by English and believed that if Arabic were used, it would be much easier for him to grasp the content of courses and enhance his learning experience. Ibrahim shared this sentiment and added:

> *There was a big challenge with English. Arabic is my mother language, and I use it daily outside the university. I use English only in my studies, but I overcame this challenge by trying to focus more in the classroom.*

In contrast to Majid and Ibrahim, other students found that using English was appropriate to their level. Khadeeja commented that using English was OK with her

as she knows the language well. She uses it daily at work and has mastered it during her studies abroad. Saida supported this view and added that the mandatory Arabic course they are studying adds no value to her professional work, because all her communication is in English in the workplace. This shows that mature students vary in their attitude towards the English-medium curriculum in Omani HEIs. This mainly hinges on their use of English in their workplaces and their mastery of the language.

5.3.1.4. Discipline (Academic Specialisation)

The sample of mature students also shared their thoughts on how their specialisation impacts on their engagement with their studies. Generally, mature students engage more with their studies if their specialisation is designed to match their work experience, match their interests, or meet their future expectations about what it might offer.

Many of the interviewed students said they engaged in their studies because their specialisation is tied to their current jobs. One of these students, Hana, clarified that her specialisation aligns with what she does at work, making it relevant to her, and so she benefits from it. Similarly, Khadeeja is studying Human Resources while working in Human Resources (HR) in her company. According to her, this has increased her engagement. She noted:

> *Yes, I have benefited from this specialisation. I saw how human resources work with other departments and found it helpful. I gained an understanding of accounting, increased my knowledge of IT, and learned about their procedures. Human Resources interact with all departments, and to succeed and provide good service to the company, we must understand other jobs.*

Another theme emerging from the interviews about the impact of specialisation on mature students' engagement is the relation between specialisation and students' interests. Some students explained that their interest in the field of their study comes from both their professional experience and their interest in the field. For example, Shaheera suggested that her engagement with her studies is fuelled by her love for medicine and her professional work. She never thought of taking any administrative position or changing her field.

Other students expressed that their positive engagement with their studies is related only to their passion for the field and that their specialisation is unrelated to their work. Majid's words confirm this about the reasons for choosing the specialisation he is studying:

> *I chose the specialisation because I love it. There is no connection between my job and the specialisation I am in.*

Other students echoed similar feelings, such as Siham, who changed her specialisation at the beginning of her return to studies after completing a course in economics.

> *I finished my diploma in Information Technology years ago. When I started studying again, I enjoyed the economics courses, so I chose a specialisation I loved. Because I loved the specialisation and enjoyed learning about economics, I decided to pursue it and get a bachelor's degree.*

The themes above highlight the need to align mature students' fields of study with their professions or interests to maximise their engagement. Missing the opportunity to do so might raise some challenges that vary in the extent of their impact on engagement. Salma, for instance, reported issues with recalling what she studied in her diploma years, unlike her peers, because she has assumed an administrative role for the past four years, which kept her away from day-to-day practical nursing. She explained that this added extra pressure on her, unlike Dalal, who is doing the same programme but had been practising nursing until she was granted study leave.

Another specialisation-related challenge revealed by the interviews was students' disinterest in the specialisation and their profession. Saida expressed this opinion clearly, explaining that she is pursuing her HE studies because it is the only way to get promoted.

> *I don't like this specialisation, which affects my engagement. If I could go back in time, I would change it and my profession. I currently work shifts, which affects me, and I hope to advance professionally through these studies.*

Hamad also shed light on another challenge he has experienced: the skills expected in some specialisation. He explained that as a Human Resources student, he is expected to be a good speaker, which is a skill he lacks.

5.3.2. Student-related Structural Influences

The second section of the interviews with mature students focused on student-related structural influences, shown in Figure 5.7 below. Following the conceptual framework adopted for this study, interview questions targeted four main factors: students' backgrounds, students' families, students' life loads, and support given to students.

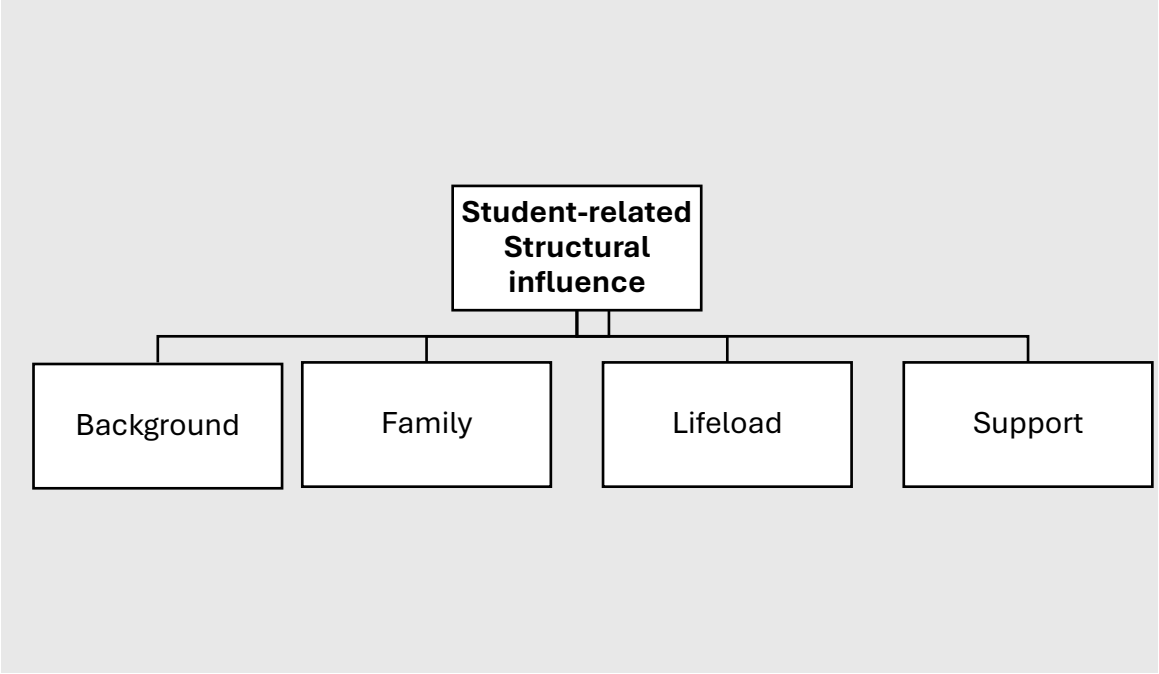

Figure 5.7 Student-related Structural Influences

5.3.2.1. Background

The interviews reveal that mature students' extensive backgrounds significantly enrich their educational experience. The analysis of the findings focuses on two main backgrounds: professional and educational.

First, the analysis clearly shows that mature students' professional backgrounds positively impact on their engagement. Students whose work resembles their fields of study are better prepared and more open to advancement. Ibrahim, for instance, who has no previous experience in education and started his studies at the age of 38, explained that the connection between his professional background and his

studies had helped him a lot in overcoming the challenges he encountered. This professional background also gave him insights into the value of education, which he might not have gained at an early age.

> *I started working straight after school. After years of work, I discovered that education is a fundamental pillar for advancing knowledge in every person and progressing in both one's professional and social life. Therefore, I decided to continue my studies, despite the challenges I faced. No education exists without challenges and difficulties, but a person overcomes them to achieve a desired goal.*

Similarly, Dalal suggested that her work has kept her updated in her field of study and that when she returned to complete her undergraduate degree, she noticed the difference this made.

> *I excelled in them because my work experience covered them. I would revisit these subjects, and my work experience helped me immensely. Even among my peers in the bridging programme, I generally surpassed them because of my work experience.*

In addition to the above, the analysis indicates that mature students with previous experience in HE are more prepared to overcome the challenges they face during their current undergraduate studies. Some of these students noted increasing levels of engagement because of the skills and knowledge they acquired in their previous undergraduate studies. Khalid, for example, made the following remarks:

> *Perhaps I am more engaged today because I have vast knowledge and have become more mature. I now have information that allows me to overcome many barriers I couldn't overcome before. Previously, we were in the same age group, but today, the age group is somewhat different. I feel that I need to distinguish myself from them, and this is what drives me to engage more with them.*

Khalid's words also underscore the significance of previous education experience in building mature students' knowledge of overcoming challenges they have failed to address appropriately. Hamad, who regarded his first experiences as a failure, shared this perspective, and he is now determined to change his attitude towards the value of studying and persist in getting his first-ever undergraduate degree.

5.3.2.2. Family

The topic of family and how it impacts on the mature students interviewed is one of the topics that the students talked about extensively. A critical takeaway from the interview analysis is that their families' support heavily influences mature students' engagement.

Most respondents highlighted the importance of the psychological and emotional support they receive from their families. Khamis explained that his family are very supportive, and they are one of the reasons behind his decision to return to his studies. Equally, Salama also reported how happy her husband was when she told him that she was returning to HE studies.

In addition to emotional support, the students interviewed stressed the support they receive from their families in accomplishing their responsibilities. Childcare was one of the responsibilities that most female married mature students discussed. Ahlam and Saida explained how indebted they are to their mothers for caring for their children while they are at work or college. Khadeeja also clarified how she got help from other family members when her children miss her.

> *I got support from my sister and brother, who would come to teach my children when I wasn't there. When I feel that my children need me more, I call their aunt or uncle, and they spend time with them, which somewhat alleviates the burden.*

Moreover, the interviews reveal that the educational background of the mature students' family members and how they perceive education can influence their aspirations and commitment. Coming from a family where education is valued and where family members have attained educational degrees might fuel mature students' motivation to pursue their studies at a later age, and with different commitments. Siham valued this about her family.

> *My mother encouraged me and my other siblings to pursue our studies. I have an older sister who is doing her postgraduate studies despite her different responsibilities. Everyone in my family encouraged me and promised to help me financially if necessary. This is all because they value education.*

For Hamad, it is the other way round. He explained that none of his siblings had any educational degrees, which made them support him in returning to HE studies. He said his decision to return to studies made everyone in his family proud.

5.3.2.3. Life Load

The pressure of the different commitments of the participants was another theme discussed in the interviews. The interviewees, as will be addressed in Section 4.3.3., assume various roles in their everyday lives, making it challenging to balance their different responsibilities without feeling that they are negligent in one responsibility at the expense of another. Saida, for instance, thinks that the pressure of her studies has made her less committed to her children, which makes her feel uncomfortable.

> *After I started studying, I had to focus on my courses. Sometimes, I had to focus on myself more than on my studies. I sometimes don't see my children for three days when I have exams.*

Contrary to Saida, Hamad expressed his discomfort about not being able to study at home because of his other responsibilities. He explained that the courses he is taking need to be reviewed constantly, and he is unable to do that, which makes him worry about his academic performance. Saida's and Hamad's feelings highlight the emotional struggles these mature students continuously undergo and the sense of guilt they sometimes feel because of their inability to balance their various responsibilities.

Other participants, including Khalid, Dalal, Siham, and Hanan, shared these sentiments. However, most of the participants who expressed how overwhelmed they were with the pressure of their responsibilities also expressed their gratitude for the support they receive at different levels, as discussed in previous points, and will be further discussed in the following point.

5.3.2.4. Support

As the support from interviewed mature students' families has been thoroughly discussed in the previous points, this point will be limited to the support they receive from their friends and work, which helps them engage more in their undergraduate studies.

Similar to family members, mature students' friends can provide valuable emotional and psychological support. Munthir, for example, appreciates the support he receives from his friends and points out that their encouragement has always inspired him.

> *When I talk to my friends from the previous educational institution where I studied, they say it's excellent. They make me feel the value of the steps I have taken, showing that they are important both on a personal level and for my future benefit.*

Siham echoed the same feeling about the support she received from one of her friends. She explained:

> *I was scared because when I went to enrol, I was pregnant, and I told her [my friend] how I would do it when I had a child. She told me, "This fear is in your mind, and as the child ages, they need you more. When they are younger, you can manage." She was a strong support, encouraging me from the very beginning and then informing me about the university system. When a problem arose, I would go to her.*

In addition, friends can also support mature students by understanding their commitments as students and refraining from putting any undue pressure on them. Dalal pointed out that her friends recognise her responsibilities and always show understanding if she cannot answer their calls or go out with them. She also clarified that she consults some friends working in the same field to share their knowledge and expertise on her studies.

Another type of support that mature students receive comes from work. As 14 out of the 15 mature students interviewed were employed, their employers' perspectives and attitudes about their studies might facilitate or impede their persistence and engagement.

One form of support provided by work to the mature students interviewed is study leave. Five of the respondents were on study leave at the time of the interviews. Dalal explained that it would be impossible for her to continue studying while working. She added that she was under immense pressure because of her studies, even though she was granted study leave.

Another form of support that comes from work is granting mature students days off to focus on their studies. This shows that employers appreciate mature students' efforts at critical times, such as when sitting exams, in their educational experiences. One of the respondents, Ahlam, shared this experience with her line manager and attributed the success of her studies to the help provided by this manager.

> *My manager encouraged me a lot after I informed her [about my studying]. She has helped me a lot since then, and when I have exams, she grants me leave.*

Hanan shared a similar experience with her manager, who allowed her to skip work on exam days. Employers' flexibility increases towards mature students, increases students' engagement in their studies, and fosters a sense of belonging to the institutions they work for.

5.3.3. University-related Psychosocial Influences

The third section of the interviews with mature students focused on university-related psychosocial influences. Following the conceptual framework adopted for this study, interview questions targeted three main factors: teaching, students, and university workload, as shown in Figure 5.8 below.

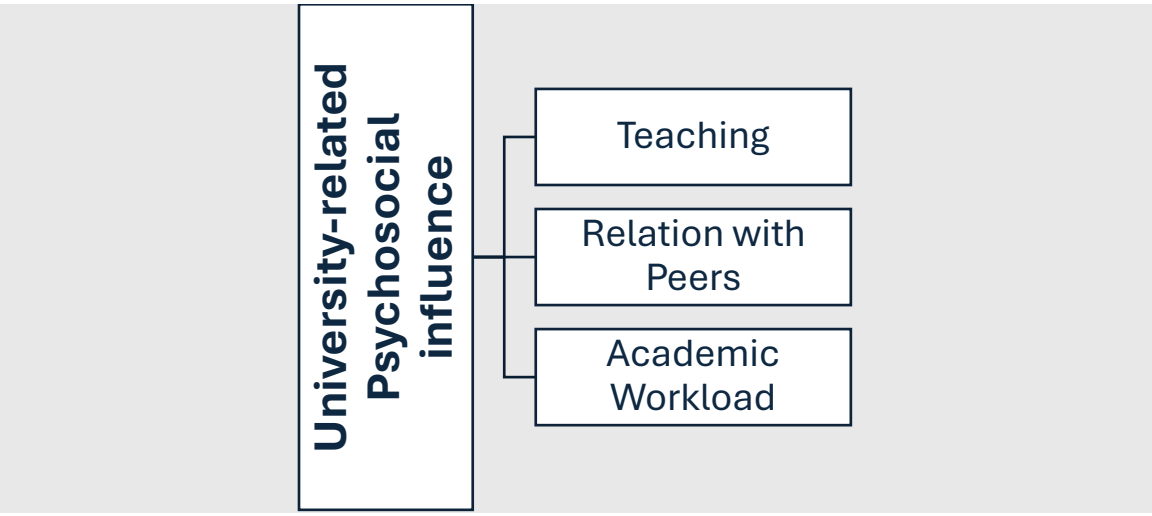

Figure 5. 8 University-related Psychosocial Influences

5.3.3.1. Teaching

Teaching was one of the significant factors that the respondents believed impacted on their engagement during their studies. The interviews revealed several themes related to teaching and how it impacts on mature students' engagement.

For some mature students, a supportive teaching environment is crucial for engagement in their studies. This environment builds mature students' confidence in themselves and their abilities, considering their age and other commitments. This was true for Siham, who explained that returning to her studies after 15 years was very difficult, but one of her teachers encouraged her considerably and led her to get high grades. She recalled:

> *The first course I took was English, which was probably the most difficult for me, because I didn't know how to speak it well. I felt self-conscious and thought [other students] talked about me because I was older. However, the professor who taught me encouraged and helped me, and it was the only subject I got a B+ in, and I managed to overcome it.*

The supportive teaching environment described by some mature students included encouraging them to participate more in class. Majid, for instance, confirmed that he is regularly encouraged to participate in different class activities, even though most of his classmates are younger. In addition, Hanan pointed out that teachers call on them regularly to share their thoughts and ideas based on their professional experiences. She said:

> *As employees, they [teachers] always want our suggestions because we have some background. Due to our work experience, they often ask us about the things, ideas, and expertise we've encountered when discussing a particular topic.*

On the other hand, some participants reflected on how teaching styles and teachers' attitudes negatively impacted on their engagement in their courses. For example, Majid explained that he failed one of the maths courses because the teacher was unaware that, unlike more traditional students, he needed more explanation as he did not take any prerequisites for the course. Hamad also explained that some teachers asked him to allow his classmates to participate more because he had enough experience in the field. In addition, Dalal and Shaheera commented how

some of their teachers focus more on traditional students and refer to courses they never took. They also expressed some embarrassment because some teachers keep comparing their performance with the performance of regular students. As Shaheera clarified:

> *Sometimes, they [teachers] tell us heavy things, and I feel disappointed. They don't know how it feels. They shouldn't compare us [bridging students] to regular students. They shouldn't say these are old and these are young.*

5.3.3.2. Relation with Peers

Several ideas emerged from the interviews regarding how other students help the interviewees engage in their studies. These ideas varied in terms of how interactions with other students shaped mature undergraduate students' participation and engagement.

Some participants clarified that sharing experiences between students was one factor that increased their engagement. As discussed in Section 4.2.1.2., some participants were encouraged to be active in the classroom when other students often referred to them and their work experience. The feeling of being valued by their peers increased their level of belonging and, therefore, their level of engagement. For Shaheera, for instance, some regular students shared with her their experience as they took prerequisite courses that she did not take. In return, Shaheera shares her practical experience with them and how it relates to their course.

Another aspect of how the participating mature students' engagement with their peers impacts on their engagement is collaboration and assistance. Ahmed, for example, expressed his gratitude to his younger classmates for engaging in several assignments because they could explain what was required. This was echoed by Dalal, who expressed her comfort with the positive impact of her classmates on her studies. As she explained:

> *Thank God that the bridging students have a group where we share helpful things related to the course. We share previous exams, previous assignments, and the way the professor wants the assignment to be done. Anyone who gets information about the course shares it with the group.*

In contrast to the above, several students, including Dalal, Saida, and Salma, expressed some discontent with their interactions with other students, mainly traditional younger students, and how this negatively impacts on their engagement. As Salma said:

> *Before exams, they always cause stress and confusion because they have concerns over minor details. I prefer to study only with bridging students. We look at things differently [than regular students].*

Other interviewees, including Ahlam and Khadeejah, also shared the idea of having classes exclusively for mature students. Ahlam, who only studies with mature students, was asked if having younger students in her class would be better for her. She answered:

> *I don't feel that it would be better. Regular students don't have much experience. You, as a mature student, have gone through life experiences and have gained expertise, so I can't engage in the same way.*

5.3.3.3. Workload

The mature students interviewed varied in their attitudes towards their university workload and how it keeps them engaged in their studies. Some described it as burdensome, while others found it manageable.

Saida compared her past educational experience with her current one and pointed out how challenging every day is.

> *At this university, I feel that I have to prepare for every class and then pay full attention to the teacher in the classroom. After class, I need to revise it, or I will lose it.*

Similarly, Ahlam talked about the many assignments she had to do and how irrelevant some of them were to her studies. She explained that the pressure of meeting deadlines forced her to seek help from her sister to complete some assignments. Hamad shared these feelings and suggested that the main reason behind his struggles is the many responsibilities he has in addition to his studies.

Some students highlighted strategies to lighten the pressure and time constraints of their university workload, maximising their engagement in assignments and lessening their burden. Khadeejah illustrated this by explaining that she could fully

engage in all assignments by being familiar with them in advance and working on them early. She also explained that, to meet deadlines, she usually takes days off to focus on these assignments.

5.3.4. Student-related Psychosocial Influences

The fourth section of the interviews with mature students focused on university-related psychosocial influences. Following the conceptual framework adopted for this study, interview questions targeted four main factors: motivation, skills, identity, and personality, as shown in Figure 5.9.

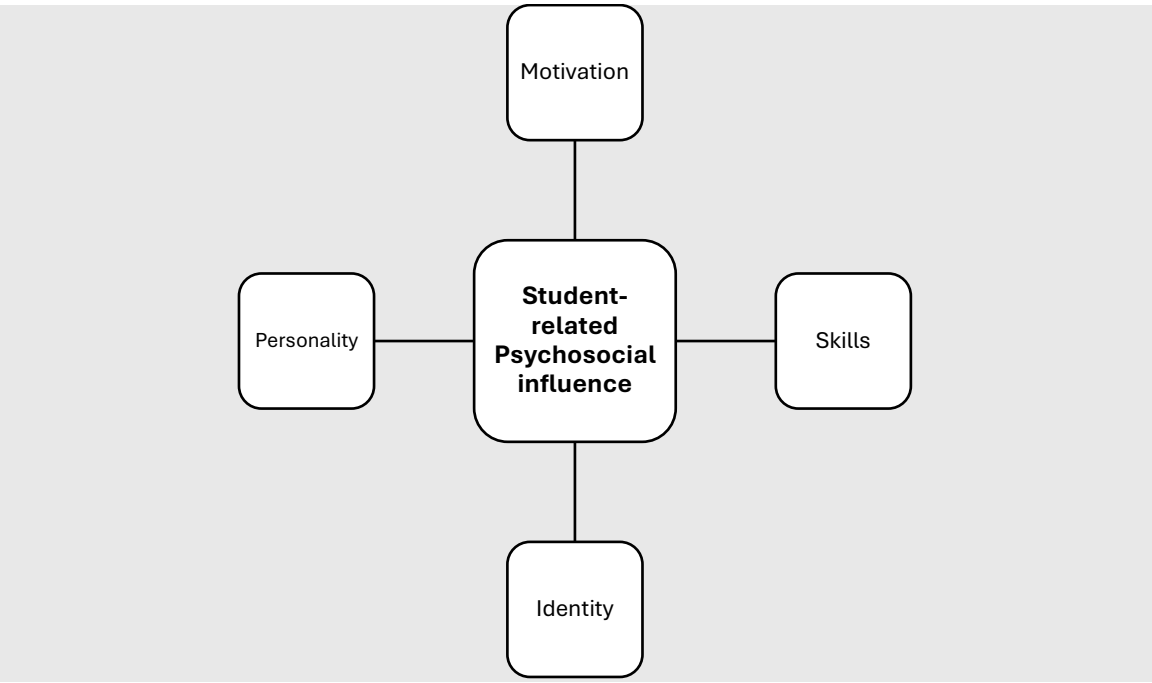

Figure 5.9 Student-related Psychosocial Influences

5.3.4.1. Motivation

One of the themes discussed in detail was the participants' motivation to persist and engage in their studies and how to deal with a lack of motivation. Although there was a particular question about motivation during their studies, the participants' responses to other interview questions included different details about how they approached their studies with determination to complete them. This demonstrates

motivation's significant and positive impact on these mature students' engagement in HE.

A. Intrinsic Motivation

The interviews highlighted a profound connection between mature students' intrinsic motivation and their engagement in their studies. The participants consistently expressed how personal factors, often unrelated to materialistic rewards, serve as their primary motivation. This profound personal aspect of their motivation, as exemplified by Ahmed, fosters a sense of empathy and understanding about their unique journeys, making their experiences deeply relatable to all.

> *My goal is to get the degree. Whether it will help me at work is not my priority. If it does, then why not? However, it is not my goal. I made this decision to study, and I am determined to complete my studies, or it will be a failure for me.*

Munthir made a similar observation about his motivation, which is purely personal. He explained that it was easier to quit studying, like many mature students he met, but his motivation underpinned his persistence.

> *After completing one semester, I felt I had accomplished something. Some [mature students] drop out after one month or two. I had this feeling at the beginning because nothing materialistic kept me going. However, after one semester, I overcame this feeling because I wanted to complete this degree.*

B. Extrinsic motivation

The interviews also revealed that there is a strong relationship between the interviewed mature students' engagement and external factors that motivate them to pursue their studies. These external factors, such as career advancement, play a crucial role in their motivation, highlighting the diverse sources of inspiration for participating mature students. For example, Saida explained this complexity thus:

> *I was informed [by my manager] that I would not get promotion [at work] without a bachelor's degree.*

For Khalid, who is not employed, pursuing a higher undergraduate degree meant more opportunities to find a job that he aspires to. This is a significant observation,

since mature students who return to studying after a break find an educational degree more relevant and helpful in starting or pursuing a career.

> *I had tried to continue my studies but didn't have the required IELTS score, so I withdrew from college at the advanced diploma level. After two years, I observed the external situation, and most jobs required a bachelor's degree level. This dream had always been with me, and the right time came to continue my studies after two years, because I couldn't find a job with the advanced diploma level, or the jobs I found with the advanced diploma level did not suit me.*

In addition to career-related factors, some mature students are motivated to pursue their studies because they have long-term academic goals. These plans impact on their academic engagement to get higher grades in their courses that will qualify them to do postgraduate degrees. It is worth noting that some mature students started considering pursuing post-baccalaureate degrees after observing their capabilities in their current undergraduate degree programmes. Siham described this change in her desire to further her studies thus:

> *Honestly, [my motivation] changed for the better. Psychologically, I have developed a passion to continue my studies and pursue a master's degree, because I have become aware of the importance of education. I feel that I am capable. I started with a GPA of 3.65, and now it has reached 3.93. I aspire to achieve 4.0. While GPA is not the only measure for me, considering the pressures I face, I believe it is a measure of my progress.*

C. Coping with changes in motivation

The participating mature students indicated that they had sometimes experienced a drop in motivation due to different factors. For example, Khamis explained that he felt fatigued at some point due to travelling to work and then to university every day and thus considered withdrawal. Others, such as Shaheera and Siham, considered withdrawing from their universities because they could not manage their different commitments to their families and studies. Scoring low grades was another factor that demotivated some participating mature students. Hanan also highlighted how frustrated she was because some distant family members constantly questioned her decision to start studying while having various family and work obligations.

However, what most of these students shared was their ability to overcome these demotivating factors and re-ignite their passion to persist on their educational journey. The participants highlighted different strategies that they use when feeling discouraged or disengaged.

For some participants, using imagination and positive self-talk about their end goals was one effective strategy. These strategies were articulated by Ahlam, Khadeejah, and Ibrahim. Ahlam described how she dealt with her demotivation thus:

> *When I walk through the university gate, it feels as if I'm already there at the graduation ceremony, wearing a cap and gown. Every time I enter, this image comes to mind—as if I am raising the cap each day. Honestly, I often imagined myself walking through the gate in this fantasy, and I would smile at the thought. I would laugh at my own expressions, and if I worked on my imagination, it was as if I merged it with the moment of graduation. That graduation moment truly added a lot, and I enjoyed those moments when I felt like I was surrendering. I truly feel like I've made it through.*

Other participants renewed their motivation by talking to friends who specialised in dealing with motivation issues. Salma, for example, explained that she spoke to her friend when she felt that her husband did not understand the problems she was going through:

> *I told my husband about my inability to continue studying, but he didn't offer solutions. Then, I talked to a close friend involved in self-development and personal growth. After our conversation, I felt motivated again.*

5.3.4.2. Skills

A second student-related psychosocial influence the participating mature students considered was their skills and how much they affect their engagement in their further education.

One of the skills that some participants discussed in their interviews was their English linguistic skills. The importance of linguistics skills can be concluded from the first experiences of some participants in HE. One participant, Hamad, explained that one of the main reasons for dropping out of his earlier experience was his level of English. In addition, Khalid also clarified that he could not complete his bachelor's degree earlier because of his low scores in English and that he had to get a high score in IELTS to be allowed to start studying again as a mature student.

Ahmed and Ahlam discussed the presentation skills they developed because of their work and how they used them efficiently to complete some assignments and give required presentations.

> *For sure. They [presentation skills] are helping me a lot now. My work sends me to different workshops at the end of which I must present. So, it became easy for me.*

Time management skills also emerged as one critical skill that the participants developed to withstand the pressure of their different roles and cope with the demands of their studies. Students attributed their success in navigating their educational journeys while working and caring for their families to their ability to devise effective time schedules. Hanan, for instance, stressed the significance of planning. As she explained:

> *There should be some preplanning. I dedicate some time to my work, my studies, and my family. In this way, I can withstand the pressure of being a mother, an employee, and a student.*

5.3.4.3. Identity

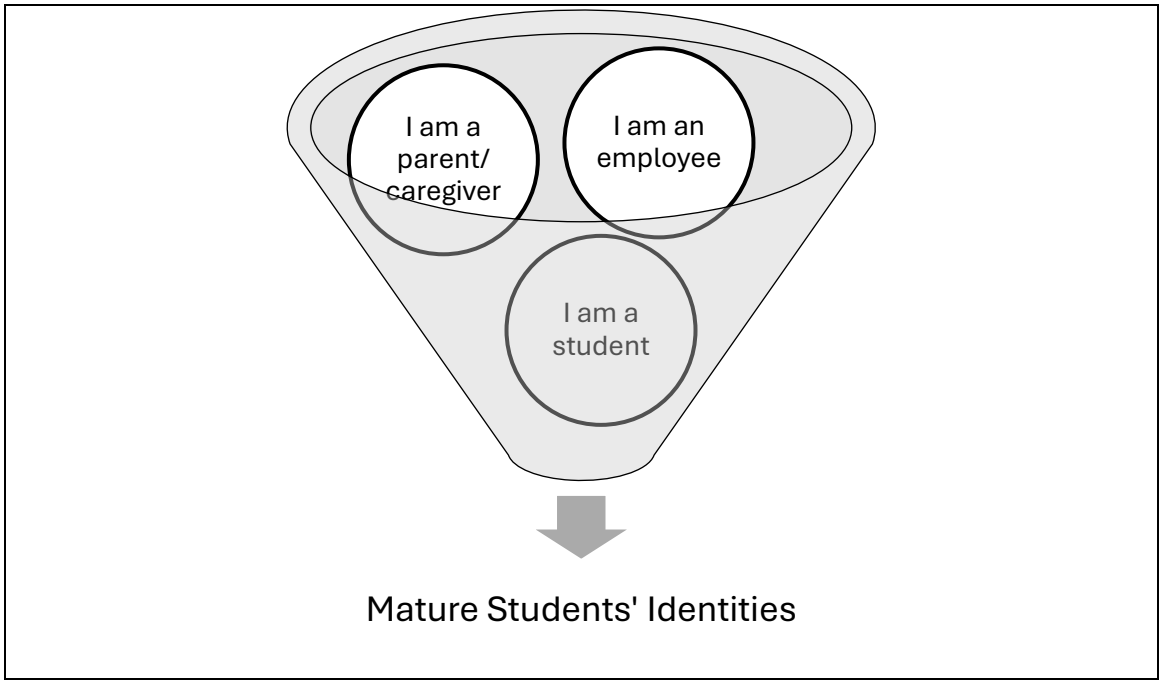

Figure 5. 10 Mature students' identities (themes derived from the interviews)

The third student-related psychosocial influence discussed with the participants was the role of their identities in determining the extent to which they engage in their HEIs. As shown in Figure 5.10, the interviews revealed that the participants have three to four identities that interplay to define their educational experience and impact on their engagement. Although each identity requires different obligations, an interesting observation can be made about how the sample of mature students view each identity and how each identity complements other identities. One participant, Hanan, summed up this view in her reply to the question about whether she felt her identity as a mature student conflicted with her other roles:

> *I am the same person. I show the same respect at home, at work, and at university. As a mother, I have to be a leading woman at home. I also have to be a leader at work and in my studies.*

This shows that mature students who can approach their studies with the same perspective they approach their other identities might be able to persist and engage more in their studies. It also stresses the significance of integrating the personal and professional experiences of students with multiple identities with their educational endeavours to find meaningful relevance in their studies.

4.3.4.3.1. Professional identity

As Table A shows, 13 of the participants are working in different jobs. Most of these participants explain how their identity as working individuals promotes their motivation to finish their undergraduate degrees and, therefore, engage more in their studies, despite their busy schedules.

Moreover, most participants have professional identities that equip them with the experience and knowledge necessary to endure the pressure of studying. For them, studying a specialisation that matches what they do in their jobs makes it easier to cope with the demands of educational programmes. This practical relevance of their studies to their professional identities enhances their engagement and underscores the importance of aligning education with real-world applications.

> *My job has been very beneficial for me. I have been employed in a position that aligns with my field of study. It has helped me immensely because, at work, you see things in practice, unlike in studies, where you see concepts*

on paper. For example, in accounting, you learn what a trial balance and annual budgeting are, but at work, you see them applied.

This implies that mature students' professional identity and the knowledge it grants them reinforce their understanding of complex concepts in their studies and increase their interest and engagement because of their relevance to their work. In a way, it connects the theoretical aspects of their studies to their professional practices.

4.3.4.3.2. Parent identity/ Family member

One striking theme that emerged from the interviews was how being a student helped some participants become better parents. Some participants explained that being a student meant being a role model for their children studying in school. For example, Khadeeja said:

I remember doing an assignment last semester, and they were sitting with me at the table. We were all studying together, I saw their look, and their way of acceptance. Before [starting my studies], I had to chase my daughter to study, but when she saw me studying, she sat beside me to do the same. I felt it was a positive thing.

In addition to being role models, some participants felt a positive change in their responsibilities as parents. This was expressed clearly by Hamad, who explained that because he started dealing with teachers and students from different backgrounds, he gained new skills that changed his perspective on parenting:

I definitely experienced some changes as a father. I learned new things because I had to deal with people with different attitudes and experiences, like professors and teachers.

Ahlam, who decided to pursue her undergraduate degree after a divorce, also shared a similar attitude about how education transformed her as a mother.

When you do something that others may deem useless, but you believe in your ability to accomplish it, this gives you more strength and generosity towards your children, because you have confidence. You feel an inner satisfaction with yourself, without any internal conflicts. You impart to your children a reverence for education and make them feel deep inner fulfilment. Your mind develops, and your interactions with your children change. I don't know how I used to deal with my children before; once I started studying, it was as if I reconciled with something within myself.

4.3.4.3.3. Mature student identity

A mature student identity also characterised the participating mature students. They expressed this identity through understanding that they are older than other students, and because of their life experiences. For Ibrahim, for example, being a mature student meant more discipline and focus on his studies:

> *I have a different attitude towards my time at the university than the younger students. Initially, I had difficulty integrating with them, but later, I started advising them about the significance of studying hard and that they should take me as an example of someone who regretted not doing a degree at a young age.*

Ibrahim's words also highlight the feeling that mature students have, because of their age and experience, to play the role of mentors to other younger traditional students. Hamad shared a similar thought, explaining that he and other mature students are living examples of individuals who missed many opportunities because they lacked advice and support before they dropped out of their first university experience.

Mature students returning to complete a degree they did not finish in their previous education experience explained that they are now more focused and goal-oriented. Hamad, for example, expressed these differences in these words:

> *In my previous experience, I was not interested in studying because I was young. I didn't care to review or study, so I faced difficulties. But, thank God, now I understand the value of education and the value of having a job.*

4.3.4.4. Personality

The fourth student-related psychological influence explored with the mature students interviewed for this study was their personality and how it impacts on their engagement. Overall, analysis of the responses shows that students possessing positive personality traits makes them more engaged.

Extroversion is one of the personality traits most respondents stressed as significant to their engagement in different class activities. Some participants, such as Ahmed and Ibrahim, clarified that studying the same courses with younger students required them to build friendships with younger students to cope with the challenges they might experience and feel a sense of belonging in the classroom.

In support of the significance of being an extrovert for mature students, considering they are sometimes studying with students from a younger generation, Majid explained that feeling shy is one trait he dislikes.

> *I feel shy sometimes, which makes me nervous when giving presentations. My classmates are used to giving presentations, but I am not, because I have never given one at work.*

In addition to extroversion, the interviews reveal that several mature students show resilience and persistence as two significant personality characteristics that keep them engaged in their studies. Siham showed these traits through her insistence on pursuing her studies, despite hearing negative comments from her in-laws, who kept telling her that she is a mother and that studies would affect her commitments. Despite all this, Siham attended class on her first day at university when her newborn baby was only 50 days old. Similarly, Ibrahim clarified that he is continuing his educational experience despite consistently being demotivated by his co-workers who had the chance to study but quit. He explained:

> *My only thought was to win the battle and take on the challenge … despite people always saying, "Why do you want to study? It's difficult and there's no future in it, and you already have a job. You might not even get a promotion." It was a big challenge, I didn't receive any encouragement to pursue my studies. I thought, it's just an experience and another turning point in my life, so why not try it? I had nothing to lose.*

5.3.5. Engagement in Extracurricular Activities

The interviews explored the respondents' engagement in extracurricular activities, which, as discussed in the literature review, are a significant part of students' experiences in HE. The interviews revealed several themes concerning how mature students perceive these activities, the reasons for their participation or not, and their suggestions for making these activities more inclusive.

The findings show that mature students' overall attitude toward ECAs is predominantly positive. The majority express a strong interest, while a small minority show indifference or a lack of enthusiasm. For instance, Siham talked enthusiastically about her interest in taking part in the ECAs held at her university and attributed this interest to her being a “hyperactive person”. Similarly, Ibrahim,

who showed no interest at the beginning in these activities, now believes they are useful tools for integrating into the university and developing new skills.

> *I had no interest in these activities in the past because of academic pressure. This semester, I started to develop an interest in photography and would like to join the photography club at the university. I think I will learn something new, and I will be part of the campus. I now run after my colleagues to add my name to the list of members.*

In contrast to the predominant positive attitude about extracurricular activities, Khamis communicated his disinterest in them and viewed them as unimportant. He described them as “mood enhancers”.

The mature students who engage in ECAs highlighted the reasons that motivate them to do so. One of these reasons was suggested by Munthir, who believes they help him discover more about himself and develop talents outside his field of study or work. Majid also shared his eagerness to develop new skills as a reason for participating. Dalal, for her part, had an interesting reason to participate in these activities. She said:

> *I participated in some activities out of love for the university. There were many activities that I wanted to take part in, but I couldn’t because of the other courses I am taking.*

Despite the generally positive attitude shown by the respondents towards engaging in ECAs, and the benefits they bring to mature students, many respondents clarified that they never or rarely take part in these activities. Time constraints was cited as the main reason by several of them. Ahmed, Hamad, Hanan, Khadeeja, Khalid, and Saida all agreed that they lacked sufficient spare time to participate in these activities due to their different professional, academic, and familial responsibilities.

Siham articulated another reason for not participating in extracurricular activities, pointing out that most activities stipulate that students are under 25 years old at her university. She also recalled that some students excluded her from one national competition because of her age without informing her. Siham’s experience highlights the impact of age-related policies and social exclusion on mature students' participation in extracurricular activities.

Students who were interested in participating in these activities but could not do so because of the reasons mentioned above recommended several initiatives to encourage mature students to participate more. One recommendation came from both Hanan and Khadeeja, who pointed out that they would be willing to participate more if these activities fitted within their academic schedules. They clarified that part-time students go to their university or college for three to four hours to attend classes without having any time in-between for other activities. In addition, Ibrahim suggested that using the experience of mature students in activities that benefit other traditional students might encourage him to participate more and make these activities more relevant.

5.3.6. Summary of Qualitative Findings

Based on the qualitative analysis of the findings discussed in section 5.3, above, the semi-structured interviews revealed significant insights into how structural and psychosocial factors shape mature students' engagement in HE in Oman. The themes identified include university-related structural influences such as examination and admission policies, attendance flexibility, curriculum relevance, and the role of specialisation, all of which significantly impact on mature students' ability to engage with their academic environment. They also include student-related influences, including support from family, friends, and workplaces, with family and professional backgrounds playing a critical role in students' motivation and persistence. Moreover, mature students' ability to balance multiple roles, such as parents, professionals, and students, was a recurrent theme, affecting their engagement levels differently.

Furthermore, students expressed that a supportive teaching environment, peer collaboration, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were essential to their sustained academic engagement. Challenges such as workload, language barriers, and age differences with traditional students emerged as crucial factors impacting on engagement. In contrast, positive personality traits, such as resilience and extroversion, helped students overcome these difficulties. Finally, while the overall

attitude towards ECAs was positive, time constraints and age-related exclusions were noted as barriers to participation.

5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the findings from both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of mature undergraduate students' engagement in HE in Oman. The quantitative results show high cognitive, behavioural, and emotional engagement levels, with moderate involvement in extracurricular activities. The qualitative data offer more profound insights into structural and psychosocial factors shaping engagement, including institutional policies, curriculum flexibility, family support, and personal motivation. These findings highlight the complexity of mature students' experiences and the need for more supportive learning environments. The next chapter will discuss these results in relation to the literature and the conceptual framework.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I reflect on the key findings from Chapter 5 and discuss their significance in the light of existing literature and the conceptual framework guiding my research. This discussion addresses the two main research questions and offers a deeper understanding of mature students' engagement in HE in Oman. Drawing on the adapted version of Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework, I examine how structural and psychosocial factors influence engagement. I focus on the recurring challenge of balancing academic, personal, and professional roles and explore how these experiences align with or differ from previous studies. This chapter sets the stage for the conclusions and recommendations.

6.2. Engagement Patterns of Mature Students in HE

In this section, I will address the first research question:

To what extent are mature students in Oman engaged in higher education activities? How is this related to their behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement?

I will begin by discussing the key findings from the questionnaire presented in Section 5.2. The results revealed that mature students generally exhibit high levels of engagement across behavioural, emotional, and cognitive domains, although engagement in ECAs was more moderate. I will critically analyse these findings in light of the existing literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of mature students' engagement patterns in Oman.

6.2.1. Behavioural Engagement

The findings indicate that behavioural engagement is particularly strong among mature students, with high percentages of students reporting that they regularly attend classes, complete academic tasks on time, and seek clarification when needed. This shows that mature students take their academic responsibilities seriously and are committed to regular attendance. These high attendance rates

align with findings from previous research, which suggests that mature students are often more motivated and disciplined compared to traditional students, largely due to their life experiences and sense of responsibility (Javed et al., 2022). On the other hand, a study by Paisey & Paisey (2004) about the reasons for non-attendance and the effect on academic performance at a Scottish University reported that mature students had some difficulties with attendance without giving many details about the case. The study explained that it was not ‘meaningful’ to report issues experienced by mature students because of their small number.

The findings of my research contribute significantly to the ongoing discussion surrounding behavioural engagement in HE. They show that the attendance of mature undergraduate students is frequently influenced by a complex, three-way negotiation process involving the student, their family, and their employer. This dynamic interplay suggests that students must navigate their academic commitments alongside familial expectations and workplace responsibilities, which can either facilitate or hinder their ability to attend classes regularly. By examining these interrelated factors, my research highlights the importance of understanding how external influences shape educational engagement among mature learners.

In addition to attending classes, mature students demonstrated strong engagement with task completion. This reflects a sense of responsibility and time management skills, which are essential for Omani mature undergraduate students who often must balance multiple roles as students, employees, and family members. This explanation concurs with the findings of several studies (Broadhead, 2018; Pearce, 2017; Trueman & Hartley, 1996) that concluded that mature students' time management skills are often more developed compared to younger students due to their professional and personal commitments.

Furthermore, mature students in Oman showed a proactive approach to their learning. This finding is consistent with literature that highlights the importance of active learning behaviours in adult learners, who often prefer to take ownership of their learning process (Knowle et al., 2005). However, while students demonstrated high engagement in these core behavioural tasks, there was more variability in their

use of additional resources. Therefore, the findings of this research add depth to the existing literature in this regard, indicating that not all mature students consistently engage in self-directed learning outside of their required academic work. Encouraging more self-directed learning through access to digital resources, libraries, and online platforms could further enhance their behavioural engagement.

6.2.2. Emotional Engagement

The findings also reveal high levels of emotional engagement among mature students. Many students reported feelings of pride, accomplishment, and excitement in their academic tasks, suggesting that their studies are personally meaningful. This high level of emotional engagement indicates that mature students derive considerable satisfaction and a sense of achievement from their academic efforts. A recent study by Jerez (2024) suggested similar high levels of emotional engagement among mature students. The study explained that, unlike younger students, mature students are more emotionally engaged, irrespective of their grades.

Students also reported feeling curiosity and excitement about their academic tasks. This aligns with Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which emphasises that intrinsic motivation is crucial for long-term engagement, especially for adult learners who seek personal growth and fulfilment through education.

However, there were some areas where emotional engagement was less consistent. This suggests that while mature students are generally motivated and engaged, they may not always feel a strong emotional connection to academic content. This may be due to a lack of culturally relevant or context-specific curricula, which could help mature students relate more strongly to the material. This finding confirms what Hayden et al. (2016) suggested in their literature review about older nursing students being more engaged in their studies when the content is clearly relevant to their personal and professional lives.

Based on the above, the findings of this research make a novel contribution to the existing literature by highlighting the ongoing tension between mature students' personal resistance and curriculum relevance, particularly in mandatory courses where students do not feel a connection to their goals.

6.2.3. Cognitive Engagement

The findings also indicate strong cognitive engagement among mature students, particularly in tasks that require critical thinking, logical reasoning, and applying knowledge to real-world situations. These findings align with Jerez's (2024) study results, which highlighted that mature students are more focused on maximising their learning experiences rather than solely on social integration, which can enhance their cognitive engagement. Their prior experiences in HE also contribute to their familiarity with academic expectations, enabling them to better adapt to the learning environment and engage cognitively with their studies.

Students also reported high engagement in tasks requiring problem-solving and logical thinking. However, there was less consistent engagement in tasks that require creativity and sustained mental effort. This suggests that while mature students excel in structured problem-solving tasks, they may need more encouragement and opportunities to engage in open-ended, creative activities that require innovative thinking. The observation confirms the findings of a study in Australia by Heagney and Benson (2017), i.e. that mature students benefit from active learning strategies, such as role-playing and group work, which facilitate deeper cognitive engagement. The findings add to the literature that these strategies allow them to apply their knowledge in practical contexts and interact with peers, further enriching their learning experience.

The literature suggests that mature students' preference for structured, practical tasks is linked to their real-world experiences and professional backgrounds. According to Kasworm (2010), mature students are often more comfortable with tasks that are clearly defined and have immediate, practical applications. My findings contribute to the literature by suggesting that HEIs could consider integrating more creative, open-ended assignments into the curriculum to further enhance cognitive engagement. For example, project-based learning or case studies that require students to think creatively and apply their knowledge in new ways could encourage more consistent engagement in this area.

6.2.4. Engagement in Extracurricular Activities

In addition to academic engagement, the findings reveal moderate engagement in ECAs. Many students recognised the value of ECAs for personal growth and skills development. However, participation in the planning and organisation of ECAs was lower. This suggests that while mature students may have vast professional experience, they are less likely to take on leadership roles in organising ECAs. Several studies (King et al., 2021; Mallman & Lee, 2017; Riddell et al., 2024) have reached similar conclusions about the lower participation of mature students in ECAs due to different factors, including their rejection by younger students and mature students' usual commutes.

Time constraints may also explain their moderate engagement in extracurricular activities. Many mature students balance their studies with work and family responsibilities, leaving them with less time to participate in non-academic activities. As noted by Gregersen and Nielsen (2022), mature students often prioritise academic and professional responsibilities over social engagement. To enhance extracurricular engagement, institutions could consider creating more flexible and inclusive activities that accommodate the schedules and interests of mature students.

My findings add to the literature on ECAs that mature students in Oman are eager to participate in these ECAs and find them valuable to their overall HE experience. However, due to the factors discussed in Section 5.3.5, they may find it more challenging to manage their time. While previous research implies that these students are less interested in these activities (Gregersen & Nielsen, 2022), my research findings reached the conclusion that it is time, not interest, that hinders mature students from participating in ECAs. Therefore, I can argue, based on these findings, that these students are structurally constrained rather than voluntarily excluding themselves from these activities.

Another noteworthy contribution of this research is the age-based exclusion reported by some participants. This institutional ageism in extracurricular programming is rarely highlighted in engagement literature, which tends to focus on traditional

undergraduates. By documenting this exclusion, the study contributes an important insight into how institutional cultures in Oman implicitly prioritise younger students' engagement opportunities, further marginalising mature students.

6.3. Factors Influencing Mature Students' Engagement in HE

Building on the findings discussed in Section 5.3, this part of the discussion addresses the second research question:

What are the main factors that mature students in Oman perceive as impacting on their engagement in higher education activities?

When analysing semi-structured interview transcripts, it became evident that a range of structural and psychosocial factors influence mature students' engagement. These influences can either enhance or hinder engagement, depending on how students navigate them. In this section, I will critically examine these factors and discuss how they shape mature students' academic experiences, making connections to the adopted framework presented in Chapter 3, which highlights the interplay between institutional structures and student characteristics within the educational interface.

I will begin the discussion of these factors with structural influences and then move on to psychosocial factors. Together, these factors create a complex landscape that mature students must navigate, balancing their academic, personal, and professional commitments.

6.3.1. Structural Influences

As discussed in Section 2.3.1, structural influences are divided into two categories: university-related influences, such as policies, culture, curriculum, and specialisation; and student-related influences, such as background, family, life load, and support. In this section, I will discuss the key themes that appeared in Chapter 5 and how they relate to the existing literature.

The findings in Section 5.3.1. revealed that structural influences within universities and colleges play a significant role in shaping the engagement of mature students. Many students highlighted that institutional policies and practices, such as

examination regulations, attendance policies, and curriculum design, had a direct impact on their ability to engage meaningfully with their studies. For instance, several students expressed their satisfaction with lenient attendance policies, which they find take into account their work and family commitments. This aligns with previous research that suggests flexible attendance policies are essential for supporting mature students, who often must balance multiple responsibilities (Kasworm, 2018).

Other participants felt that examination policies should consider mature students' gaps in education and family commitments and the need for different approaches to assessing mature students. This observation echoes the findings of Stone and O'Shea (2019), who found that some mature female students in Australia find it difficult to balance their family responsibilities due to examination policies that require them to sit exams on public holidays. My findings expand on the need for institutions to consider mature students' commitments when designing assessments, by highlighting the significance of taking into account the educational gap that some mature students might experience due to their years away from university.

One distinctive contribution my research makes about admission policies is that in Oman, working mature students have to obtain formal consent from their employers to pursue their studies. HE authorities stipulate receiving a no-objection letter from employers, regardless of mature students' academic skills and enthusiasm. The impact of this procedure is not documented in the literature and adds another burden onto employees willing to return to their studies.

Furthermore, students emphasised the importance of curriculum relevance in maintaining their engagement. They reported feeling more motivated and invested in their studies when they could see a clear connection between academic content and their professional or personal goals. This finding reflects Shanahan's (2000) argument that mature students are more confident and engaged when the curriculum matches their needs and aspirations.

In addition to university-related structural factors, the findings presented in Section 5.3.2. showed that structural influences related to mature students play a significant role in shaping their engagement. In relation to these influences, the role of family

support emerged as one of the most important influences. Many students reported that supportive family environments were essential to their ability to remain engaged in their studies. For instance, students mentioned that parents and spousal support, including helping with childcare or household responsibilities, made it possible for them to allocate more time to their academic tasks. In contrast, students who lacked family support often reported higher levels of stress and disengagement, or feeling guilty. This finding aligns with the work of several researchers (Gill et al., 2015; Heagney & Benson, 2017; Tones et al., 2009) who emphasise that family support is a critical factor in mature students' academic success, particularly for female students, who often bear the bulk of family responsibilities.

Similarly, workplace support was highlighted as a key factor. Some students, such as Hanan and Khadeeja, shared that their employers allow flexible working hours or adjusting their schedules to accommodate their studies and prepare for their exams. Others, like Ibrahim, Dalal, and Siham, were granted study leave that significantly helped them commit to and engage with their studies. These findings concur with the findings of Kuuyelleh et al. (2014), i.e. that mature students benefit considerably from study leave granted by employers. They also confirm Busher and James's (2019) finding that employers' lack of empathy might hinder mature students' persistence in completing their education programmes. All this highlights that HEIs' partnerships with employers can help to reduce the burden on working mature students and allow them to engage more with their studies.

In addition to employers' support, the interview findings indicate that mature undergraduate students in Oman generally receive significant support from their friends, which positively impacts on their academic engagement. The findings confirm previous research finding that social support networks play a crucial role in students' persistence and success (e.g., Bolam & Dodgson, 2003; DeLuca Bishop et al., 2023). However, this study highlights that, going beyond family support, friendships provide essential emotional, psychological, and practical assistance, which enhances mature students' ability to meet the demands of HE.

In summary, the findings suggest that mature students' engagement in Oman is significantly impacted by factors that influence the same group in different contexts. The level of this impact might vary, particularly when looking at student-related structural factors. This variance is as a result of the differences in social expectations of mature students and the volume of their familial responsibilities. These factors can enhance engagement, but they can also present barriers if institutions fail to account for the unique challenges faced by mature students. Therefore, HEIs must adopt more flexible and inclusive policies that understand their unique challenges so as to better support this student population.

6.3.2. Psychosocial Influences

In addition to structural factors, the psychosocial influences identified from the interview findings, explored in Sections 5.3.3. and 5.3.4., play a crucial role in shaping mature students' engagement. These influences include university-related factors (teaching, relation with peers, workload) and student-related factors (motivation, skills, identity, personality). The findings show that these influences significantly impact on students' academic persistence and engagement levels. In this section, I will relate the most significant findings regarding psychosocial influences to the existing literature.

As discussed in Section 5.3.3 about university-related psychosocial influences, some participants, such as Hanan and Khadeeja, valued being appreciated for their experience by their teachers, who asked them for their opinions on different topics related to courses. This shows that inclusive teaching practices and recognising mature students' strengths can add value to the classroom and increase this group's engagement. The finding matches the conclusions of previous studies (e.g., Kasworm, 2018; Van Rhijn et al., 2015), which suggested that including mature students' experiences and knowledge can boost their confidence and integration and, therefore, their engagement in the classroom.

Another factor that can improve mature students' engagement is how their relations with their peers improve their engagement in the classroom. The findings show that the participants have different feelings about this relationship. While most

participants expressed a positive attitude towards working with other mature students, some felt rejected or isolated by other traditional young students because of their age or their presumption that mature students know more. This impacted on participants' willingness to participate in class. A study by Mallman & Lee (2016) explored similar experiences encountered by mature students at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. It reported that younger students had negative feelings towards their older classmates because they tended to ask many questions and dominate class discussions. In addition, it noted that traditional students viewed mature students' familiarity with lessons' content as an unfair advantage gained because of their work experience.

My findings contribute significantly to this discussion by implying that this tension is present more among female students; and in particular specialisations, such as nursing, in the context of Oman. Mature male students tend to be open to working with their younger counterparts. The mentoring role assumed by mature male students towards younger peers is a novel finding not discussed in the literature.

Moving to the student-related psychosocial influences discussed in Section 5.3.4, the findings show that motivation was another psychosocial influence that impacted on engagement. They suggest that mature students are primarily driven by intrinsic motivation, with many wanting to achieve personal growth and boost their career prospects. This was apparent in several participants' attitudes. Khamis, for example, drives more than 100 km each day to attend college after work, and drives more than 200 km back home after college. This is a clear example of how this group of students will do whatever it takes to achieve their goals. This intrinsic motivation often helped students overcome barriers, such as workload and language challenges. Murphy and Roopchand (2003) obtained similar results in their quantitative study of mature students in a post-1992 university in northern England. They suggested that being older and having explicit purposes for pursuing HE are behind this high intrinsic motivation among their mature student participants.

Lastly, mature students' skills, identities, and personalities are all critical factors affecting the engagement of participating mature students. Several students shared

stories of overcoming significant challenges, such as managing multiple roles as parents, professionals, and students, using their time management and organisational skills. These students often demonstrated resilience and a growth mindset, which helped them navigate difficult periods on their academic journeys. The existing literature supports the findings of this research on the roles of skills (Stănescu et al., 2015) and identity (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Kasworm, 2010; Scanlon et al., 2007; Tomlinson, 2010) in shaping the engagement of non-traditional students, including mature learners. These studies underline that engagement is not solely driven by academic achievement but is deeply influenced by how students perceive their evolving identities within educational contexts and how they apply their accumulated skills to navigate academic, professional, and personal spheres.

The significant contribution of this research in relation to identity is that the identity conflict experienced by mature students in Oman is gendered. Participating female students have to constantly negotiate their identities as mothers, wives, and students, and have to put up with outside pressure that views their decisions to pursue their studies, while having families, as a deviation from their traditional roles.

Another major contribution of this research to the discussion of mature students' identities is that some mature students' multiple identities in Oman reinforce rather than conflict with each other, offering a more optimistic narrative than some prior studies, which emphasised identity conflicts (Baxter & Britton, 2001). The transformation experienced by mature students after pursuing their studies in their parental identities is a novel contribution. This intergenerational educational aspiration, where mothers' engagement inspires children, adds a familial dimension rarely documented in mature student literature.

It should be noted here that the findings also revealed that not all mature students possess these skills, motivation and personality to the same extent, and those who struggle with confidence or self-doubt are more likely to disengage. This suggests that universities could offer more targeted psychological support services, such as mentoring programmes or counselling services, to help students build resilience and confidence.

To summarise, the findings of this research with regard to the psychosocial influences that impact on mature undergraduate students in Oman are related to what other mature students experience in different contexts, as reported by the literature. Similar to the discussion on structural influences in Section 6.3.1, the difference lies in the specific cultural, social, and institutional factors unique to the Omani context, which shape how these influences manifest. For instance, while balancing multiple roles such as work, family, and studies is a common challenge for mature students globally, societal expectations and family obligations in Oman may add additional complexity. These context-specific distinctions highlight the importance of culturally responsive policies and practices that address the unique needs of mature students in different regions.

6.4. Interaction Between Structural and Psychosocial Influences

Following the discussion of structural and psychosocial influences on mature students' engagement, it is essential to recognise that these two categories do not operate in isolation. As shown in the adapted version of Kahu and Nelson's (2018) framework, discussed in Chapter 3, they interact in complex ways to shape how mature undergraduate students in Oman engage in HE. This interaction highlights the interdependent relationship between structural influences and psychosocial influences, as both sets of factors must be considered together to fully understand mature students' academic experiences. In this section, I will discuss how structural and psychosocial factors reinforce or counterbalance each other, drawing on the findings from both quantitative and qualitative data, as well as existing literature. I will also explore how these interactions can either enable engagement or raise barriers that hinder mature students' participation in HE.

One of the clearest examples of this interaction is how the relevance of the curriculum interacts with students' motivational drivers. The findings show that mature students are more likely to engage with academic tasks when they can see a clear connection between their studies and their personal or professional goals. For example, students who perceived their coursework as directly applicable to their careers expressed higher cognitive and emotional engagement levels, as they felt

their academic efforts were meaningful and valuable. Conversely, students who found some parts of the curriculum irrelevant or too theoretical reported lower engagement levels in these courses, indicating that engagement suffers when institutions fail to connect academic content to students' lived experiences. This reinforces the findings of Merriam and Bierema (2014), who argue that adult learners are intrinsically motivated by practical, real-world applications of their studies, and institutions must design curricula that reflect these motivations to maintain engagement.

Another significant interaction not usually documented in the literature occurs between workplace support and institutional support policies. It can be argued in light of the findings that those students who benefited from flexible working arrangements or were granted study leave by their employers were better able to take advantage of institutional resources, such as library services, academic advice, and extracurricular activities. In contrast, students without employers' support often found it challenging to access these resources, especially when institutional services were only offered during traditional working hours. This interaction highlights the critical role of partnerships between universities and employers, as collaboration between these two entities can reduce the burden on mature students, making it easier for them to balance work and study commitments (Houston et al., 2017; Jackson & Jamieson, 2009).

Structural factors such as family support also interact with psychosocial elements, particularly with completing academic tasks. The findings show that students with strong family support were more likely to complete their academic tasks and prepare for exams, as their families helped them manage household responsibilities, freeing up more time for university activities. On the other hand, students without such support reported feeling isolated from campus life and often finding it challenging to meet the demands of their studies due to time constraints. This suggests that institutions can do more for mature students who lack this support by providing proper counselling and advice systems to help them overcome the burden of study commitments.

Moreover, the interaction between students' personal traits and institutional practices plays a crucial role in shaping engagement. For instance, students who displayed resilience and self-motivation were more likely to remain engaged, even when faced with barriers such as rejection by younger peers or inflexible policies. These students often found ways to navigate challenges independently or seek support from peers and faculty. However, students who lacked these traits were more likely to feel overwhelmed and disengaged, especially when institutions did not provide targeted support services, such as counselling, mentoring, or academic skills workshops. This finding supports the results of several studies (e.g., Fleming & McKee, 2005; Fragoso et al., 2013; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Lowe, 2023; Sewell, 2000; Wang & Chen, 2017) that highlight that persistence and resilience are key to overcoming obstacles in academic settings. However, it also underscores the institution's responsibility to foster these traits by creating supportive learning environments that encourage confidence and self-efficacy.

The interplay between structural and psychosocial factors also emerged in age differences between mature students and their younger peers. Several students reported feeling socially isolated due to age-related gaps in classroom dynamics, which affected their emotional engagement. However, students who experienced inclusive teaching practices and peer collaboration opportunities, like Ibrahim and Ahmed, reported feeling more connected to the academic community, despite age differences. This finding reinforces the need for institutions to promote inclusive classroom practices that encourage peer interaction across different age groups, helping mature students to feel valued and included within the broader university community (Heagney & Benson, 2017a; Mallman & Lee, 2016, 2017; Tones et al., 2009).

In summary, the interaction between structural and psychosocial influences shapes mature students' engagement in HE in complex ways. Structural factors, such as university policies, curriculum design, and family and work support, interact with psychosocial factors, like teaching, motivation, and personal traits, either enabling or hindering engagement. Recognising these interactions is essential for HEIs aiming to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments that meet the

unique needs of mature students. By addressing both structural and psychosocial barriers, institutions can help mature students to maintain their engagement, overcome challenges, and achieve academic success. This understanding also sets the stage for the recommendations presented in the final chapter, which will outline practical steps for enhancing mature students' engagement in HE.

6.5. Evaluating the Adopted Conceptual Framework

As discussed in Chapter 3, the conceptual framework used for this research explains how structural and psychosocial influences affect SE in HE. Under these two groups of influences, the framework identifies two types of factors: university-related and student-related. It also considers engagement in three forms: cognitive, emotional, and behavioural. When applying this framework to my research, I found that it was very useful for understanding engagement among mature undergraduate students in Oman. Still, there were also some limitations and unexpected findings. In this section, I will evaluate how well the framework worked, which parts were most relevant, which parts were less useful, and what was missing.

6.5.1. Strengths

One of the ways that the adopted framework was useful to me was its distinction of the two main groups of influences impacting on SE. This distinction helped during the preparation of data collection instruments, the analysis of data, and the presentation of findings. It helped to look at each factor when discussing them with the participants and provided a clear path to understanding their views on what impacts on their engagement.

The second strength of the framework was that it included support from family, work, and friends. The inclusion of this factor was very important to my research because many mature students depend on support from their employers or families to continue their studies. For example, some students were only able to attend classes because their employers allowed them to adjust their work schedules. Others had family members who helped them with household responsibilities so they could focus on their studies. The framework already included support as an influence, so it was helpful for explaining this part of my findings.

Third, the framework's division of engagement into cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement was instrumental. The findings confirmed that mature students engaged differently depending on the type of engagement. For example, students showed high behavioural engagement because they attended classes regularly and participated in discussions. Their emotional engagement was also high because students felt proud and motivated, especially when their families supported their education and helped them with their other commitments. However, cognitive engagement was different because students were more engaged with practical tasks, but less engaged with creative and open-ended learning. This confirmed that the framework's categories for engagement were relevant and useful.

The last advantage I observed when using the framework for this research was explaining what students are engaged in, namely academic tasks and ECAs. As explained in Chapter 3, I refined Kahu and Neslo's (2018) framework by including these two ideas based on the critiques it has received. This clarification of what students are engaged in guided my investigation into how engaged students were and in what specific areas. It helped to identify patterns of variability, as some students were highly engaged in coursework but struggled to participate in extracurricular activities. In addition, it ensured that my data collection instruments and analysis of the data remained focused and organised, preventing me from treating engagement as a broad, undefined concept.

6.5.2. Weaknesses

While the framework was generally useful, after the analysis, I noticed that "discipline" as a factor presented in it was less important than expected for the participants of this research. One explanation for this is that these students are building on their past educational experience or studying a discipline that is related to their work. The findings show that curriculum matters more to these students than their academic discipline, which is their personal choice after years of professional experience in the same field.

Another limitation of the framework might be its inability to show how each student-related or university-related factor interacts with other factors from the same group

of influences. For example, it is clear from the findings that motivation and identity are closely related and interconnected. Some students wanted to set a good example to their children, while others studied to progress in their workplace. The framework lists motivation and identity separately, but in my findings, they influence each other. They show that the fewer identity conflicts that these students experience, the more motivated they are.

The last shortcoming of the framework is the ambiguity of “background” as a structural student-related influence. The framework does not specify whether background refers to educational, financial, cultural, or professional aspects, making it difficult to apply in a precise way. This was an issue when interviewing the participants and when analysing data related to this influence. A more refined definition of background would help to differentiate which specific factors have the strongest impact on engagement. For instance, separating educational background from socio-economic background would allow for a more targeted analysis, ensuring that institutional policies address the most significant barriers that mature students face.

6.5.3. Unexpected Findings

The findings show that some factors were not fully explained, leading to results that were outside the framework. One is the emotional cost of engagement, especially for female students. The framework does include emotional engagement, but it does not separate positive emotions (like pride and motivation) from negative emotions (like guilt and stress). In my research, some students felt guilty for spending time on education and being taken away from family responsibilities. This emotional burden was particularly strong for female students who had to simultaneously balance being a student, a mother, and an employee. The framework does not make a clear distinction between engagement driven by excitement and that driven by obligation, but my findings show that this distinction is important.

Another surprising finding was the effect of institutional ageism on extracurricular engagement. The framework includes ECAs as part of SE, but it does not consider that some institutions may have policies or cultural norms that exclude mature

students from participating. Some students in my research reported that ECAs were designed mainly for younger students, and they did not feel welcome or included. This is different from Western studies, where mature students tend to self-exclude from participating in these activities (Gregersen & Nielsen, 2022). In my study, some students wanted to participate but felt they were not fully accepted because of their age. The framework does not mention age as a barrier to ECA participation, but my findings suggest that this is an important factor.

In short, this evaluation shows that the framework was a strong starting point for analysing mature student engagement. But it also shows that engagement is more complex than a simple model can capture. The framework helped me understand how different factors influence engagement, but I needed to apply it flexibly, recognising that some factors interact with each other in ways that the framework does not fully clarify.

6.6. Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the key findings presented in Chapter 5. It started by examining the main findings of the first research question guiding this study. I found that mature students generally engage emotionally, behaviourally and cognitively in their academic tasks and are less involved in ECAs. This engagement is negotiated through three parties: the students themselves, their families, and their employers. The chapter then discussed the findings related to the second research question about the factors impacting on their engagement in Omani HE. I found that the factors are interrelated and that gender and familial commitments impact on mature students differently. I also found that some university policies are influenced by mature students' employers, making these findings one of the significant contributions of this research. The chapter concluded with an evaluation of the framework adopted. The main advantage was its distinction between the influences impacting on engagement, which was valuable at different data collection and analysis stages. However, it could not identify how negative emotions, and age, might hinder mature students from engaging in their academic tasks and ECAs.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1. Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I will provide a comprehensive overview of the findings, implications, and contributions. I will start with a summary of the main findings and then present the contribution of this research to the existing knowledge. Following this, I will offer my recommendations and outline some limitations. The chapter will conclude with my personal reflection, in which I will document what I learned from this research experience.

7.2. Summary of the Main Findings

This section summarises the study's key findings. It highlights the main themes that emerged from the data analysis and addresses how structural and psychosocial influences impact the engagement of mature students in HE. The findings are presented in relation to the research objectives and the conceptual framework, offering a clear overview of the study’s contributions.

The findings indicate that mature undergraduate students in Oman display a significant level of engagement in their studies. The quantitative data discussed in Section 5.2.2. show that they are behaviourally engaged as they actively participate in classroom discussions and group projects. They also attend their classes regularly, which further proves their commitment to their studies. Emotionally, these students exhibit a strong commitment to their studies. They often demonstrate a passion and enthusiasm for their subject matter, which enhances their overall learning experience. In addition, they are cognitively immersed in their academic tasks. They reported that they constantly employ critical thinking and problem-solving skills to understand complex concepts and apply their knowledge effectively. This comprehensive engagement suggests that mature students in Oman possess a unique blend of motivation and dedication, which enriches their university experience.

Another significant finding of this research reveals that mature students in Oman are less involved in ECAs. As explained in Section 5.3.5, different domains, including

students' families and employers, heavily influence this engagement. The findings confirm previous research findings that these students' obligations and time constraints are the main factors behind this trend. However, the findings show that mature students in Oman are very interested in these activities, yet some institutions tend to exclude them because of structural constraints.

Furthermore, the structural and psychosocial factors impacting on mature students' engagement in Oman are interrelated, even though they are theoretically separated. This shows that the concept of engagement is complex in nature and that students may be influenced by a variety of factors simultaneously, and to different degrees.

Another significant finding of this research is the critical role of employers in shaping the engagement of employed mature students in Oman. Their influence extends beyond admission policies, where employer approval is often required. The findings uncover their impact on employed mature students' ability to balance work and academic commitments. Employers offering study leave or flexible working hours enable students to attend classes and prepare for exams more effectively, which helps enhance their overall engagement in HE.

One significant finding of this research is the role of friends from non-academic circles. Little research has been carried out to investigate the relationship between mature students and their friends outside educational settings. This research contributes to understanding this relationship and how friends might motivate or demotivate mature students to engage in their studies. Unlike traditional-aged students, whose friends are typically from the same academic environment, mature students often have friends from diverse social circles. The findings of this research confirm that these non-academic friendships can significantly influence their attitudes towards the university experience.

The findings also indicate that mature students have different attitudes towards the impact of their relationship with traditional students. While most male students find it easier to deal with and integrate with their younger peers, female mature students reported isolation and preferred working only with other mature students. This might result from social and cultural norms, confidence levels, and learning styles and

preferences. It might be inferred from this finding that mature female students in Oman value shared experiences and study habits. These insights highlight the need for universities to implement targeted support strategies, such as peer-mentoring and networking opportunities, to enhance the academic experience of mature female students.

In addition, mature students' approach to their identities impacts strongly on their engagement. The findings show that when mature students' identities are reinforced rather than in conflict with each other, they become more engaged in their studies as they become more motivated and can see the transformative value of their decision to pursue their studies.

7.3. Contributions to Knowledge

This study contributes significantly to knowledge in HE by advancing empirical, methodological, and theoretical understandings of mature undergraduate student engagement.

Empirically, the research provides new insights into the experiences of mature undergraduate students in Oman, a largely underexplored area (Al'Abri, 2015). By examining the structural and psychosocial influences on their engagement, the study sheds light on their unique challenges, such as balancing academic responsibilities with family and work commitments. The findings highlight how these students experience HE. It offers a fresh perspective that extends beyond traditional student populations. This contribution enriches the discourse on SE by broadening the focus to include mature learners in non-Western HE contexts.

Methodologically, this research enhances the study of SE by employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative data. As discussed in Section 2.4.7, most studies that have looked at the experiences of mature students have tended to use qualitative methods. For this research, using a questionnaire to measure engagement levels, combined with semi-structured interviews to explore underlying influences, strengthens the validity of the findings through methodological triangulation. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of engagement and offers a model for future research

when examining mature students in underrepresented educational settings. The study's methodological framework also contributes to the growing body of research that seeks to incorporate diverse perspectives in SE studies, moving beyond conventional methodologies that often prioritise younger student populations.

Theoretically, this study advances the conceptualisation of SE by incorporating structural and psychosocial perspectives. As discussed in Section 3.4, its adaptation of Kahu and Nelso's (2018) student engagement framework and its attempt to build on the critiques it received from different scholars, as discussed in Section 3.2, further enhance our understanding of how structural and psychosocial factors impact on mature students. In addition, the findings challenge traditional engagement models, which often focus on younger students in Western contexts, advocating for a more inclusive perspective that accounts for diverse student demographics. The adapted framework emphasises that structural and psychosocial factors influence mature students equally.

7.4. Recommendations

The findings from this study indicate that mature students in Oman are highly motivated and committed learners, but they face unique challenges related to their multiple roles and institutional barriers. Building on the findings and their interpretation in Chapters 5 and 6, I make the following recommendations to enhance mature students' engagement across behavioural, emotional, cognitive, and extracurricular domains.

7.4.1. Flexible Learning Models and Policies

One of the key challenges that mature students face is balancing their academic responsibilities with their work and family commitments. In addition, the findings indicate that some mature students in Oman have to travel long distances after work to attend classes. HEIs in Oman should adopt flexible learning models that allow mature students to engage with academic content at times that suit their schedules and allow them to spend more time with their families. This can be achieved by offering blended learning options. Examples of these options include online classes, recorded lectures, and asynchronous learning activities. This recommendation

matches several researchers' (Andres et al., 2021; Duarte et al., 2018) suggestions that flexible learning models work better for mature students due to their different commitments.

In addition, institutions should review their attendance policies and assessment deadlines to ensure they are both flexible and accommodating for mature students (Tett et al., 2012) and to recognise their unique learning approaches (Gregersen & Nielsen, 2022; Nsor-Ambala, 2021). Where necessary, flexibility in assignment submissions and extensions can help to reduce stress and disengagement among mature learners (Patton, 2000; Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024). Offering alternative assessments, such as project-based learning and work-integrated assignments, would further enhance engagement by making academic tasks more relevant and manageable for mature students (Brewer et al., 2022; Karim et al., 2020).

7.4.2. Relevant and Applied Curriculum Design

The findings, discussed in Section 5.3.1.3., reveal that mature students are more engaged when academic content is practical and relevant to their personal and professional lives. Therefore, HEIs should ensure that their curricula include real-world applications of academic concepts (Brundiers et al., 2010; Morley, 2021). This can be achieved by incorporating case studies, workplace-based projects, and community engagement initiatives into courses. Previous studies support this move towards a curriculum design that matches the needs and expectations of mature students (Ashwin, 2014; Busher et al., 2015; Toynton, 2005).

In addition, institutions should offer short-term certification or micro-credentials within degree programmes. This will allow mature students to find alternatives to structured traditional courses, take short courses that are relevant to them, and help them advance in their professional contexts. This approach would provide motivation and recognition of achievement, keeping mature students engaged throughout their academic experience.

7.4.3. Targeted Support Services for Mature Students

As discussed in Section 5.3.1.2, some participants in this research expressed feelings of isolation and exclusion from university life. This might be primarily because existing support services and social activities are designed for younger, traditional students (Heagney & Benson, 2017). HEIs in Oman should establish additional dedicated support services specifically for mature students. These services could include academic advice, peer-mentoring, counselling services, and workshops on time management, balancing multiple roles, and stress management (Bolam & Dodgson, 2003; Tones et al., 2009).

Institutions should also create mature student networks or online communities where older students can connect, share experiences, and support one another (Abbas et al., 2022; Cavigioli, 2019; Deng & Yuen, 2007). The findings in Section 5.2.1 show that a significant portion of mature graduate students in Oman are unemployed. This shows the need to provide targeted career counselling services that help them transition into new roles or jobs. This would further enhance their engagement, as it would align their academic learning with their career goals.

7.4.4. Inclusive Extracurricular Opportunities

The findings show that mature students often feel excluded from ECAs due to age differences and time constraints, as explained in Section 5.3.5. Institutions should make ECAs more inclusive and flexible by offering virtual events, family-friendly activities, and career-focused clubs that better match mature students' interests (Stuart et al., 2011)

Furthermore, providing part-time leadership roles in student organisations and ECAs would allow mature students to take on active roles without compromising their other responsibilities. Recognising and celebrating mature students' contributions to campus life would foster a sense of belonging within the university community (Busher & James, 2019; Heagney & Benson, 2017a; King et al., 2021).

7.5. Limitations of the Study

While this research aimed to explore how mature undergraduate students engage with their studies in Oman, as well as the structural and psychosocial influences shaping that engagement, there were some clear limitations that need to be acknowledged (Ioannidis, 2007; Price & Murnan, 2004; Vargas & Mancia, 2019). These limitations are important not only for interpreting the findings but also for informing future research.

To begin with, the mixed-methods approach was both practical and well-matched to the research aims. However, it was time-intensive, and balancing data collection and analysis with my full-time professional role meant I could not always dive as deeply into the interview data as I had hoped. On the quantitative side, although questionnaires offered a good overview of engagement patterns, they relied on self-reporting, which can sometimes be influenced by what respondents think they should say rather than what they actually experience (De Vaus, 2002). This became noticeable when some students reported high involvement in extracurricular activities in the survey, which contradicts the findings of interviews, where most interviewees stated that their busy schedules left little time for such engagement.

The sampling method also came with some challenges. Although the snowball sampling made it easier to reach mature students with tight schedules, it likely resulted in a somewhat homogeneous group. This was especially evident in the case of three nursing students who offered nearly identical perspectives, likely shaped by their shared academic environment (Sadler et al., 2010).

Additionally, the sample size in the quantitative phase (n = 107) limited how far the findings could be generalised. The patterns were helpful, but a larger group would have provided stronger representation. Another point to consider is that the study only captured a single moment in time. Because it was cross-sectional, it did not reflect how engagement might evolve over a student's academic journey. Including voices of those who withdrew or conducting follow-up studies over time could offer a more rounded picture.

Going forward, it would be valuable for researchers to involve broader and more diverse samples, include students from multiple institutions, and use longitudinal designs to track changes over time. These steps could help paint a fuller picture of mature undergraduate students' engagement in Oman's HE landscape.

7.6. Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study open up several avenues for future research. One area that requires further exploration is the impact of flexible learning models on mature students' engagement and academic success. In addition, future research could explore gender differences in mature students' engagement or investigate the experiences of mature students in specific disciplines. The findings in Chapter 5 show that female nursing students had different experiences than their younger classmates, unlike the male students interviewed in other disciplines who attempted to integrate with other students.

Research on workplace partnerships between HEIs and employers would also be valuable (Basit et al., 2015; Foskett, 2005), particularly in understanding how these partnerships can help working students balance their professional and academic responsibilities. Finally, cross-cultural comparisons of mature students' engagement in different countries could provide broader insights into how cultural and institutional factors influence engagement. The findings of such research might reveal that mature Omani students struggle with balancing different responsibilities like other mature students in other contexts. However, the nature of these commitments and the impact that each structural or psychosocial influence has on their engagement might differ in other contexts.

7.7. Personal Reflection

Doing this research has changed me in many ways, both as a student and as a person. I chose this topic because of my own background as a mature learner and someone who teaches in higher education. From the beginning, I felt it was important to listen to mature students in Oman and share their stories. I always thought they were not given enough attention in research, and I wanted to do something about it.

There were many hard moments during this journey. Finding participants took a long time, and analysing the data was not easy. I was also working full-time, so managing everything together was exhausting. I felt stuck more than once. But I kept thinking of the students I interviewed. Their stories helped me to continue. Some of them had jobs, families, and many responsibilities, yet they still found time to study. That really inspired me.

One thing I did not expect was how close I felt to many participants. Some shared very personal experiences, especially about the stress of handling work, family, and education. I was moved by their honesty. At the same time, I felt happy when they talked about how proud they were to study again. It reminded me that research is about people. Behind every number or code, there is a person who is trying hard to learn and grow.

This project also made me reflect on what student engagement really means. In the past, I used to think it was the student's job to stay engaged. But now I see that teachers and universities have a significant role, too. We need to make sure the environment is welcoming and supportive, especially for older students who have other duties. I started thinking about my own teaching and how I can do better. I believe institutions should also make more efforts to help these students.

From this research, I learned many skills, like how to mix methods, organise data, and use theory to support my work. But honestly, what helped me most was learning to stay flexible. Not everything went as planned, so I had to change my ideas along the way and try different things. That was not easy, but it taught me a lot.

In the future, I want to continue looking into how higher education can support different types of learners, especially in Oman. There are still many questions to explore. I hope I can use what I learned here to help improve teaching and learning for students like the ones I met. This was not only an academic task. It was something that made me grow. It helped me see how important it is for education to be flexible and to respond to the real lives of students.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethical Approval

Educational Research | Lancaster University

20th September 2023

Dear Salim

Thank you for submitting your ethics application and additional information for **Mature Students' Perception of the Factors impacting their behavioural, cognitive, and affective Engagement in Omani Higher Education**. The information you provided has been reviewed and I can confirm that approval has been granted for this project.

As Principal Investigator your responsibilities include:

- ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licenses and approvals have been obtained;
- reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress) to the Research Ethics Officers (Dr Richard Budd & Dr Jonathan Vincent).
- submitting details of proposed substantive amendments to the protocol to **Dr Janya Komljenovic** for approval.

Please do not hesitate to contact your supervisor if you require further information about this.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Doherty

Kathryn Doherty
Programme Co-ordinator
PhD in Higher Education: Research, Evaluation and Enhancement

Head of Department
Dr Jan McArthur, BEc(Hons), PhD

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Paul Ashwin, BA, MSc, PhD
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Appendix 2: Information Sheet

Participant information sheet

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights, please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am a PhD student at Lancaster University. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study about **mature students' perceptions of the factors impacting their engagement in Omani higher education.**

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to investigate the factors that impact mature students' engagement in higher education in Oman and explore their perceptions of their behavioural, cognitive, and affective engagement in academic and extracurricular activities.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because I am interested in understanding how mature students perceive their engagement in their universities and colleges and what factors impact their engagement. I would be very grateful if you agreed to participate in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decided to participate, this would involve an interview and/or a questionnaire. Each interview will last 45 to 60 minutes and focus on the factors impacting student engagement. The questionnaire will take less than 15 minutes and will focus on behavioural, cognitive, and affective engagement indicators.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
Taking part in this study will allow you to share the challenges you experience as a mature student. It gives you a platform to contribute to enhancing policies related to mature students in Omani higher education. Moreover, your participation is an opportunity to reflect on your education engagement and reconsider how you approach your learning experience. Reflecting on the factors that affect your level of engagement can help you identify ways to improve your participation in the various activities offered by your university.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's entirely up to you to decide whether you participate. Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate in this study, this will not affect your studies and how you are assessed on your course.

What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this interview. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or

information you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after participating in the study.
Please understand that the questionnaire is anonymous, so that withdrawal may be impossible. The questionnaire does NOT collect your personal details; therefore, your response can NOT be identified.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
There will likely be no significant disadvantages to taking part.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study, will have access to the ideas you share with me.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g., your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential; that is, I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the participants' anonymity in this project.

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 have shared with me only for my PhD thesis. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, 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, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in our publications.

How my data will be stored
Recordings of interviews and electronic responses to the questionnaire will be stored in my Lancaster University OneDrive. I will securely store hard copies of any data in locked cabinets that I only access. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g., your views on a specific topic). Per University guidelines, I will keep the data secure for at least 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 get in touch with me at s.al-hashmi@lancaster.ac.uk or my supervisor, Dr. Janja Komljenovic at j.komljenovic@lancaster.ac.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 Professor Paul Trowler at p.trowler@lancaster.ac.uk.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Lancaster University

ورقة معلومات المشاركين

لمزيد من المعلومات حول كيفية معالجة جامعة لانكستر للبيانات الشخصية لأغراض البحث وحقوق البيانات الخاصة بك، يرجى زيارة صفحة الويب الخاصة بنا:
www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

أنا طالب دكتوراه في جامعة لانكستر. أود أن أدعوكم للمشاركة في دراسة بحثية حول تصورات الطلاب الدارسين للعوامل التي تؤثر على مشاركتهم في التعليم العالي العماني.

يرجى تخصيص بعض الوقت لقراءة المعلومات التالية بعناية قبل أن تقرر ما إذا كنت ترغب في المشاركة أم لا.

ما هو هدف الدراسة؟
تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف العوامل التي تؤثر على مشاركة الطلاب الدارسين في التعليم العالي في سلطنة عمان واستكشاف تصوراتهم حول مشاركتهم السلوكية والمعرفية والعاطفية في الأنشطة الأكاديمية واللاصفية.

لماذا تمت دعوتي؟
لقد تواصلت معك لأنني مهتم بفهم كيفية إدراك الطلاب الدارسين لمشاركتهم في جامعاتهم وكلياتهم وما هي العوامل التي تؤثر على مشاركتهم. سأكون ممتنًا جدًا إذا وافقت على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة.

ما الذي سيُطلب مني فعله إذا شاركت؟

إذا قررت المشاركة، فسيتضمن ذلك إجراء مقابلة و/أو استبيان. ستستغرق كل مقابلة من 45 إلى 60 دقيقة وتركز على العوامل التي تؤثر على مشاركة الطلاب. سيستغرق الاستبيان أقل من 15 دقيقة وسيركز على مؤشرات المشاركة السلوكية والمعرفية والعاطفية.

ما هي فوائد ممكنة من المشاركة؟
ستسمح لك المشاركة في هذه الدراسة بمشاركة التحديات التي تواجهها كطالب دارس. فهو يوفر لك منصة للمساهمة في تعزيز السياسات المتعلقة بالطلاب الدارسين في التعليم العالي العماني. علاوة على ذلك، قد تمنحك مشاركتك فرصة للتفكير في مشاركتك التعليمية وإعادة النظر في كيفية تعاملك مع تجربة التعلم الخاصة بك. إن التفكير في العوامل التي تؤثر على مستوى مشاركتك يمكن أن يساعدك في تحديد طرق لتحسين مشاركتك في الأنشطة المختلفة التي تقدمها جامعتك.

هل يجب علي أن أشارك؟
لا، الأمر متروك لك تمامًا لتقرر ما إذا كنت ستشارك أم لا. مشاركتك طوعية. إذا اخترت عدم المشاركة في هذه الدراسة، فلن يؤثر ذلك على دراستك وكيفية تقييمك في دورتك الدراسية.

ماذا لو غيرت رأيي؟
إذا غيرت رأيك، فلك الحرية في الانسحاب في أي وقت أثناء مشاركتك في هذه المقابلة. إذا كنت ترغب في الانسحاب، يرجى إبلاغي بذلك، وسوف أقوم باستخراج أي أفكار أو معلومات ساهمت بها في الدراسة وتدميرها. ومع ذلك، فمن الصعب، بل ومن المستحيل في كثير من الأحيان، الحصول على بيانات من مشارك محدد عندما يكون قد تم بالفعل إخفاء هويته أو تجميعها مع بيانات أشخاص آخرين. ولذلك، يمكنك الانسحاب فقط لمدة تصل إلى أسبوعين بعد المشاركة في الدراسة.
يرجى تفهم أن الاستبيان مجهول المصدر، لذا قد يكون السحب مستحيلاً. الاستبيان لا يجمع بياناتك الشخصية؛ ولذلك، لا يمكن التعرف على استجابتك.

ما هي العيوب والمخاطر المحتملة للمشاركة؟
من المحتمل ألا تكون هناك عيوب كبيرة للمشاركة.

هل سيتم التعرف على بياناتي؟
بعد المقابلة، سأتمكن أنا فقط الباحث الذي أجرى هذه الدراسة، من الوصول إلى الأفكار التي تشاركها معي.

سأحتفظ بسرية جميع المعلومات الشخصية عنك (على سبيل المثال، اسمك والمعلومات الأخرى عنك التي يمكن أن تحدد هويتك)؛ أي أنني لن أشاركه مع الآخرين. سأقوم بإزالة أي معلومات شخصية من السجل المكتوب لمساهمتك. سيتم اتخاذ جميع الخطوات المعقولة لحماية سرية هوية المشاركين في هذا المشروع.

كيف ستستخدم المعلومات التي شاركتها معنا، وماذا سيحدث لنتائج الدراسة البحثية؟
سأستخدم المعلومات التي شاركتها معي فقط في أطروحة الدكتوراه الخاصة بي. يمكنني أيضًا تقديم نتائج دراستي في المؤتمرات الأكاديمية.

عند كتابة نتائج هذه الدراسة، أود أن أذكر بعض الآراء والأفكار التي شاركتموها معي. سأستخدم فقط الاقتباسات مجهولة المصدر (على سبيل المثال، من مقابلتي معك) بحيث على الرغم من أنني سأستخدم كلماتك بالضبط، سيتم اتخاذ جميع الخطوات المعقولة لحماية سرية هويتك في منشوراتنا.

كيف سيتم تخزين بياناتي
سيتم تخزين تسجيلات المقابلات والردود الإلكترونية على الاستبيان في:
My Lancaster University OneDrive.

سأقوم بتخزين نسخ ورقية من أي بيانات بشكل آمن في خزانة مقفلة لا أستطيع الوصول إليها إلا. سأحتفظ بالبيانات التي يمكن أن تحدد هويتك بشكل منفصل عن المعلومات غير الشخصية (على سبيل المثال، آرائك حول موضوع معين). وفقًا لإرشادات الجامعة، سأحتفظ بالبيانات آمنة لمدة عشر سنوات على الأقل.

ماذا لو كان لدي سؤال أو استفسار؟
إذا كانت لديك أية استفسارات أو إذا كنت غير راض عن أي شيء يحدث فيما يتعلق بمشاركتك في الدراسة، فيرجى التواصل معي على:
s.al-hashmi@lancaster.ac.uk

أو المشرف علي، الدكتورة يانيا كوملينوفيتش على:
j.komljenovic@lancaster.ac.uk

إذا كانت لديك أية مخاوف أو شكاوى ترغب في مناقشتها مع شخص لا يشارك بشكل مباشر في البحث، فيمكنك أيضًا التواصل بالبروفيسور بول تروار على:
p.trowler@lancaster.ac.uk

تمت مراجعة هذه الدراسة والموافقة عليها من قبل كلية الآداب والعلوم الاجتماعية ولجنة أخلاقيات البحث بكلية لانكستر للإدارة.

شكرا لك على الاهتمام بالمشاركة في هذه الدراسة

Appendix 3: The Questionnaire:

A. English Version

Questionnaire Cover Sheet

Title: Mature Students' Perception of the Factors Impacting Their Behavioural, Cognitive, and Affective Engagement in Omani Higher Education

Introduction:

Dear Participant,

I kindly invite you to participate in a research study titled "Mature Students' Perception of the Factors Impacting Their Behavioural, Cognitive, and Affective Engagement in Omani Higher Education." This study explores the experiences and perceptions of mature students in Omani higher education and how various factors influence their engagement.

Purpose:

This questionnaire aims to gather valuable insights into your thoughts, opinions, and experiences as a mature student in Omani higher education. Your participation will contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by mature students and will help inform educational practices and policies.

Eligibility Criteria

To participate in this study, you must meet the following eligibility criteria:

- You are a mature student who was 25 years old or above when you commenced higher education or returned to higher education.
- You are currently enrolled in a higher education institution in Oman.

Instructions:

1. Your responses are crucial to this study. Please answer all questions to the best of your ability.
2. This questionnaire will take less than 30 minutes to complete.
3. Your participation is entirely voluntary. However, withdrawing from the study won't be possible once you submit your answers.

Confidentiality:

Your responses will be kept confidential and only used for research purposes for this study or other future academic work by the researcher. They will be protected and kept secure as per the University of Lancaster guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study. Moreover, your personal information, including your and your organisation's names, is not collected. This ensures that it won't be shared with anyone and won't appear in any reports, articles, or presentations.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, contact Salim Al-Hashmi at s.al-hashmi@lancaster.ac.uk or my supervisor, Dr. Janja Komljenovic at j.komljenovic@lancaster.ac.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 Professor Paul Trowler at p.trowler@lancaster.ac.uk.

Consent:

By continuing to the next page, you indicate that you have read the information above and that you voluntarily consent to participate in the study.

Please click " Continue " below to begin the questionnaire.

Continue ☐

Thank you for your valuable participation!

Sincerely,

Salim Al-Hashmi

PhD student

University of Lancaster

Part I: Demographic information

Select the best answer that describes you:

1. Your age group is:
   - 25 – 30 years old
   - 31 – 35 years old
   - 36 – 40 years old
   - 40 years and above
2. Gender:
   - Female
   - Male
3. You are:
   - Full-time employed.
   - Part-time employed.
   - Unemployed.
4. Mode of study
   - Full-time
   - Part-time
5. Nationality:
   - Omani
   - Non-Omani
6. Your studies are financed by:
   - Yourself
   - Your Family
   - Your work
   - Other. Please write: _____.
7. You are:
   - Single
   - Married
8. Do you have children?
   - Yes
   - No
9. Have you studied before in another Higher Education institution?
   - Yes
   - No
10. You are:
    - Studying to complete a degree that you have not finished before.
    - Studying for the first time in a Higher Education institution to get a degree.
11. You decided to study to: (Circle the most relevant three reasons)
    - Advance in your career.
    - Change your career.
    - Have a new journey in your life.
    - Return to a deferred dream.
    - Make your family happy.
    - Update your skills and knowledge.

Part II: Academic Engagement

Read the following statements about your learning experience; please circle the answer from 1 to 5, which best describes you.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

A. Cognitive Engagement

1.	Academic tasks (e.g., assignments, activities, or projects) are challenging for me.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	The academic tasks require critical thinking skills.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	The academic tasks encourage me to analyse the information critically.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	The academic tasks engage my creativity and imagination.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	The academic tasks require intense effort and concentration.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	The academic tasks make me think about different perspectives or viewpoints.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	The academic tasks challenge my existing knowledge and understanding.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	The academic tasks require me to apply complex reasoning and logical thinking.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	The academic tasks allow me to connect with real-world situations or applications.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I am motivated to invest my mental effort in completing the required academic tasks.	1	2	3	4	5

B. Behavioural Engagement

11.	I attempt to attend all my classes.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I actively participate in class discussions or activities	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I ask questions and seek clarification when faced with challenges during academic tasks	1	2	3	4	5
14.	I complete my required academic tasks on time.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	I stay focused and tentative during classes	1	2	3	4	5
16.	I seek additional resources or materials to enhance my understanding of academic tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	I interact with my teachers and contact them with issues related to my studies when needed.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	I collaborate and work effectively with other students on academic tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
19.	I stay focused during classes without getting distracted.	1	2	3	4	5
20.	I apply the skills learned from the academic tasks in other contexts.	1	2	3	4	5

A. Emotional engagement

1.	I am very interested and enthusiastic about academic tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I am very emotionally connected to the content of the academic tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I am curious and excited about academic tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I experience pride and accomplishment when working on academic tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	The academic tasks are relevant and vital to me.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I enjoy doing the academic tasks required of me.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I want to learn more because of the academic tasks required of me.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I am excited about the outcomes of the required academic tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	The academic tasks motivate me to explore new ideas or perspectives.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I am emotionally satisfied with my engagement with the academic tasks.	1	2	3	4	5

Part III: Engagement in Extracurricular Activities

11.	I like to participate in extracurricular activities at my college.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I contribute to the planning and organisation of extracurricular activities.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I interact with other students or groups involved in extracurricular activities.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	Engaging in extracurricular activities is valuable for my personal growth	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Engaging in extracurricular activities enhances my learning experience.	1	2	3	4	5
16.	Engaging in extracurricular activities improves my skills and knowledge.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	Engaging in extracurricular activities boosts my sense of belonging to the university.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	Engaging in extracurricular activities makes me feel more connected to the university.	1	2	3	4	5
19.	Engaging in extracurricular activities aligns with my goals for pursuing higher education.	1	2	3	4	5
20.	I am satisfied with my involvement in extracurricular activities.	1	2	3	4	5

This is the end. Thank you for your participation

B. Arabic Version

Lancaster University

تصور الطلاب الناضجين للعوامل المؤثرة على مشاركتهم السلوكية والمعرفية والوجدانية في التعليم العالي بسلطنة عمان

مقدمة:

عزيزي المشارك،

أتشرف بدعوتكم للمشاركة في دراسة بعنوان "إدراك الطلاب الناضجين للعوامل المؤثرة على مشاركتك السلوكية والمعرفية والعاطفية في التعليم العالي العماني". تستكشف هذه الدراسة تجارب وتصورات الطلاب الناضجين في التعليم العالي العماني وكيف تؤثر العوامل المختلفة على مشاركتهم.

الهدف:

تهدف هذه الاستبانة الى جمع رؤى قيمة حول آرائك وخبراتك كطالب ناضج في التعليم العالي العماني. ستساهم مشاركتك في فهم أفضل للتحديات والفرص التي يواجهها الطلاب الناضجون وستساعد في توجيه الممارسات والسياسات التعليمية.

معايير الأهلية:

للمشاركة في هذه الاستبانة، يجب عليك استيفاء المعايير التالية:

- أن يكون عمرك 25 عاما أو أكثر عندما بدأت الدراسة الجامعية أو عدت إلى الدراسة الجامعية بعد انقطاع
- أن تكون مسجلا حاليا في إحدى مؤسسات التعليم العالي في سلطنة عمان في برنامج دراسي بالمراحل الجامعية الأولى (البكالوريوس أو الدبلوم المتقدم أو الدبلوم).

تعليمات

ردودكم حاسمة بالنسبة لهذه الدراسة. لذا يرجى الإجابة على جميع الأسئلة بأفضل ما تستطيع. سيستغرق إكمال هذا الاستبيان أقل من 15 دقيقة. مشاركتك طوعية تماما، ومع ذلك لن يكون الانسحاب من الدراسة ممكنا بعد تسليم اجابتك.

السرية

سيتم الحفاظ على سرية إجاباتك وسيتم استخدامها فقط لأغراض البحث لهذه الدراسة أو غيرها من الأعمال الأكاديمية المستقبلية للباحث. وستتم حماية جميع المعلومات التي تقدمها والحفاظ عليها وفقًا لإرشادات جامعة لانكستر لمدة لا تقل عن عشرة سنوات بعد انتهاء الدراسة. علاوة على ذلك، لا يتم جمع معلوماتك الشخصية، بما في ذلك اسمك واسم مؤسستك. ويضمن ذلك عدم مشاركتها مع أي شخص وعدم ظهورها في أي تقارير أو مقالات أو عروض تقديمية

معلومات التواصل

: إذا كانت لديك أي أسئلة أو مخاوف بشأن الدراسة، تواصل مع سالم الهاشمي على

s.al-hashmi@lancaster.ac.uk

أو مشرفتي الاكاديمية الدكتورة جانيا كوملينوفيتش على:
j.komljenovic@lancaster.ac.uk.
إذا كانت لديك أية مخاوف أو شكاوى ترغب في مناقشتها مع شخص لا يشارك بشكل مباشر في البحث، فيمكنك التواصل مع بالبروفيسور بول تروللر على:
p.trowler@lancaster.ac.uk

الموافقة
من خلال الاستمرار في الصفحة التالية، فإنك تشير إلى أنك قرأت المعلومات الواردة أعلاه وأنك توافق طوعا على المشاركة في الدراسة. الرجاء الضغط على "متابعة" أدناه لبدء الاستبانة

شكرا لمشاركتك القيمة
تحياتي
سالم الهاشمي
طالب دكتوراه جامعة
متابعة

Lancaster University

أولا: المعلومات الديموغرافية

الرجاء الإجابة على كل سؤال مما يلي باختيار الإجابة المناسبة

1. **المجموعة العمرية:**
   أ. 25 الى 30 عاما
   ب. 31 إلى 35 عاما
   ت. 36 إلى 40 عاما
   ث. أكبر من 40 عاما

2. **الجنس:**
   أ. ذكر
   ب. أنثى
   ت. لا أعرب فى الافصاح

3. **الجنسية:**
   أ. عماني
   ب. غير عماني

4. **الوضع الوظيفي:**
   أ. موظف بدوام كامل
   ب. موظف بدوام كامل
   ت. موظف بدوام جزئي
   ث. موظف بدوام جزئي

5. **طريقة الدراسة**
   دوام دراسي كامل
   دوام دراسي جزئي

6. **تمويل دراستك عن طريق:**
   أ. تمويل شخصي
   ب. العائلة
   ت. العائلة
   ث. أخرى

7. **وضعك الاجتماعي:**
   أ. أعزب
   ب. متزوج

8. **هل لديك أطفال؟**
   أ. لا
   ب. نعم

9. **هل درست في مؤسسة تعليم عالي سابقا قبل هذه المرة؟**
   أ. لا
   ب. نعم

10. **أنت تدرس الان لكي:**

أ. تكمل درجة علمية لم تكملها سابقا
ب. تحصل على درجة علمية مختلفة عما درسته سابقا
ت. تحصل على أول درجة علمية في حياتك

11. قرارك بمواصلة الدراسة في التعليم العالي بسبب الرغبة في: (رتب الاسباب حسب أهميتها لك بالضغط على السبب وسحبه للأعلى)

أ. التقدم الوظيفي_____
ب. تغيير المسار الوظيفي_____
ت. الحصول على وظيفة لأول مرة_____
ث. تحقيق حلم مؤجل_____
ج. إسعاد عائلتك_____
ح. تطوير مهاراتك وتحديث معلوماتك_____

ثانيا المشاركة الأكاديمية:

القسم الأول: أقرأ العبارات التالية عن **المشاركة المعرفية** واختر الاجابة التي تشير الى مدى تكرار قيامك بكل عباره

	أبدا	نادرا	أحيانا	غالبا	دائما
1. تمثل المهام الاكاديمية مثل الواجبات والمشاريع والانشطة تحديا لي					
2. تتطلب المهام الاكاديمية المطلوبة مني تطبيق مهارات التفكير النقدي					
3. تشجعني المهارات الاكاديمية على التحليل النقدي المعلومات					
4. تتطلب المهام الأكاديمية مني الإبداع والخيال					
5. تتطلب المهام الأكاديمية جهدًا وتركيزًا مكثفين					
6. المهام الأكاديمية تجعلني أفكر في وجهات نظر أو آراء مختلفة					
7. تجعلني المهام الأكاديمية أعيد التفكير في معرفتي وفهمي الحاليين					
8. تتطلب المهام الأكاديمية مني تطبيق التفكير المعقد والتفكير المنطقي					
9. تتيح لي المهام الأكاديمية الارتباط مع العالم الحقيقي					
10. لدي دافع لاستثمار الجهد العقلي لإنجاز المهام الاكاديمية					

القسم الثاني: أقرأ العبارات التالية عن **المشاركة السلوكية** واختر الاجابة التي تشير الى مدى تكرار قيامك بكل عباره

	أبدا	نادرا	أحيانا	غالبا	دائما
1. احضر جميع محاضراتي					
2. أشارك بنشاط في المناقشات أو الأنشطة الصفية					
3. أطرح الأسئلة وأطلب التوضيح عندما أواجه تحديات أثناء المهام الأكاديمية					
4. أقوم بإكمال المهام الأكاديمية المطلوبة في الوقت المحدد					
5. أظل منتبها أثناء الفصول الدراسية					
6. أسعى للحصول على موارد أو مواد إضافية لتعزيز فهمي للمهام الأكاديمية					
7. أتفاعل مع أساتذتي وأتواصل معهم بشأن المسائل المتعلقة بدراستي عند الحاجة					
8. أتعاون وأعمل بفعالية الطلاب الآخرين في المهام الأكاديمية					
9. أحافظ على تركيزي أثناء المحاضرات دون تشتيت انتباهي					
10. أقوم بتطبيق المهارات التي تعلمتها من المهام الأكاديمية في سياقات أخرى					

القسم الثالث: أقرأ العبارات التالية **عن المشاركة الوجدانية** واختر الاجابة التي تشير الى مدى تكرار قيامك بكل عباره

	أبدا	نادرا	أحيانا	غالبا	دائما
1. أهتم وأتحمس للمهام الأكاديمية					
2. أرتبط شعوريا بمحتوى المهام الأكاديمية					
3. أشعر بالفضول اتجاه المهام الأكاديمية					
4. أشعر بالفخر والإنجاز عند العمل في المهام الأكاديمية					
5. المهام الأكاديمية مهمة وضرورية بالنسبة لي					
6. أستمتع بالقيام بالمهام الأكاديمية المطلوبة مني					
7. أنا متحمس لنتائج المهام الأكاديمية المطلوبة					
8. تحفزني المهام الأكاديمية على استكشاف أفكار أو وجهات نظر جديدة					
9. أنا راض شعوريا عن مشاركتي في المهام الأكاديمية					
10. المهام الاكاديمية تشعرني بالرغبة في تعلم المزيد					

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ثالثا: المشاركة فى الأنشطة الطلابية غير الأكاديمية

أقرأ العبارات التالية عن **مشاركتك في الانشطة الطلابية** واختر الاجابة التي تشير الى اتفاقك مع كل عباره

	لا أتفق أبدا	لا أتفق	محايد	أتفق	أتفق بشده
1. أحب المشاركة فى الأنشطة الطلابية فى مؤسستى التعليمية					
2. أساهم فى تخطيط وتنظيم الأنشطة الطلابية					
3. أتفاعل مع الطلاب الآخرين أو المجموعات المشاركة فى الأنشطة الطلابية					
4. يعد الانخراط فى الأنشطة الطلابية أمرًا ذا قيمة لنموي الشخصى					
5. المشاركة فى الأنشطة الطلابية تعزز تجربتى التعليمية					
6. المشاركة فى الأنشطة الطلابية تحسن مهاراتى ومعرفتى					
7. المشاركة فى الأنشطة الطلابية تعزز شعوري بالانتماء إلى مؤسستى التعليمية					
8. المشاركة فى الأنشطة الطلابية تجعلنى أشعر بأننى أكثر ارتباطًا بمؤسستى التعليمية					
9. المشاركة فى الأنشطة الطلابية تتوافق مع أهدافى لمواصلة الدراسة الجامعية					
10. أنا راض عن مشاركتى فى الأنشطة الطلابية					

نشكرك لاستقطاعك جزءا من وقتك للإجابة على هذا الاستبيان.

لقد تم تسجيل اجابتك

Appendix 4: Interview Consent Form

Interview CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Mature Students' Perception of the Factors Impacting their Behavioural, Cognitive, and Affective Engagement in Omani Higher Education.

Name of Researchers: SALIM SAID SHAMIS AL-HASHMI
Email: s.al-hashmi@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within TWO weeks after I took part in the study without giving any reason. If I withdraw within two weeks of participating in the study, my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information I give may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications, or presentations by the researcher/s. Still, my personal information will not be included, and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the participants' anonymity in this project.	☐
4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles, or presentations without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that any interviews or focus groups will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____ _____ _____
Name of Participant Date Signature

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 /person taking the consent_____ **Date** _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant, and the original will be kept in the researcher's files at Lancaster University.

Lancaster University

استمارة موافقة على مقابلة بحثية

عنوان المشروع :تصور الطلاب الناضجين للعوامل المؤثرة على تفاعلهم السلوكي والمعرفي والعاطفي في التعليم العالي في عمان
اسم الباحث :سالم سعيد شامس الهاشمي
البريد الإلكتروني: s.al-hashmi@lancaster.ac.uk
يرجى وضع علامة في كل مربع:

1.	أؤكد أنني قرأت وفهمت ورقة المعلومات الخاصة بالدراسة المذكورة أعلاه. لقد أتيحت لي الفرصة للنظر في المعلومات وطرح الأسئلة، وقد تم الرد على جميع استفساراتي بشكل مرضٍ .	☐
2.	أفهم أن مشاركتي تطوعية، وأنه يمكنني الانسحاب في أي وقت أثناء مشاركتي في هذه الدراسة وخلال أسبوعين بعد المشاركة دون إبداء أي سبب. إذا انسحبت خلال أسبوعين من المشاركة، فسيتم حذف بياناتي	☐
3.	أفهم أن أي معلومات أقدمها قد تُستخدم في التقارير المستقبلية أو المقالات الأكاديمية أو المنشورات أو العروض التقديمية التي يعدها الباحث/الباحثون، ومع ذلك، لن يتم تضمين معلوماتي الشخصية، وسيتم اتخاذ جميع الخطوات المعقولة لضمان عدم الكشف عن هوية المشاركين في هذا المشروع .	☐
4.	أفهم أن اسمي/اسم مؤسستي لن يظهر في أي تقارير أو مقالات أو عروض تقديمية دون موافقتي .	☐
5.	أفهم أنه سيتم تسجيل المقابلات أو مجموعات التركيز صوتيًا وتفريغها كتابيًا، وأن البيانات سيتم حفظها في أجهزة مشفرة ومحمية بشكل آمن	☐
6.	أفهم أن البيانات سيتم الاحتفاظ بها وفقًا لإرشادات الجامعة لمدة لا تقل عن 10 سنوات بعد انتهاء الدراسة.	☐
7.	أوافق على المشاركة في الدراسة المذكورة أعلاه	☐

_____ _____ _____

اسم المشارك التاريخ التوقيع

أؤكد أن المشارك أتيحت له الفرصة لطرح أسئلة حول الدراسة، وتمت الإجابة على جميع الأسئلة التي طرحها بشكل دقيق وبأفضل قدرة لديّ. كما أؤكد أن الفرد لم يتعرض لأي ضغوط للموافقة على المشاركة، وأن موافقته تمت بحرية وطواعية.

توقيع الباحث/الشخص الذي حصل على الموافقة: _____ التاريخ: _____ اليوم/الشهر/السنة

سيتم إعطاء نسخة من هذا النموذج للمشارك، بينما سيتم الاحتفاظ بالنسخة الأصلية في ملفات الباحث بجامعة لانكستر ..

Appendix 5: The Interview Questions

No	Question	Area of Focus
1.	Could you please describe your typical weekday as a mature student? What do you usually do? هل يمكنك وصف يومك الاعتيادي من أيام الأسبوع كطالب ناضج؟ ماذا تفعل عادة؟	Warm-up
2.	Why did you choose to start or return to university at this stage? Are you comfortable with this decision? لماذا اخترت البدء بالجامعة أو العودة إليها في هذه المرحلة؟ هل أنت مرتاح لهذا القرار؟	Warm-up
3.	Do you have other commitments in addition to your studies? What are they, and how do they impact your university of experience? هل لديك التزامات أخرى بجانب دراستك؟ ما هي وكيف تؤثر على خبرتك الجامعية؟	Structural Influences
4.	What are your thoughts on the university's policies concerning adult learners? Do they support your persistence in completing your studies? ما هي أفكارك حول سياسات الجامعة فيما يتعلق بالمتعلمين الكبار؟ هل يدعمون إصرارك على إكمال دراستك؟	Structural Influences
5.	Do you feel that you are part of the university? Why? Who and what makes you feel welcome in the university's community? هل تشعر بأنك جزء من الجامعة؟ لماذا؟ من وما الذي يجعلك تشعر بانك مرحب به في مجتمع الجامعة؟	Structural Influences
6.	Are you engaged with your curriculum and academic specialisation? How? هل أنت متفاعل في منهجك المقرر عليك وتخصصك الأكاديمي؟ كيف؟	Structural Influences
7.	Can you describe your background as a person? How does it influence your experience as a student? هل يمكنك وصف خلفيتك كشخص؟ وكيف يؤثر ذلك على تجربتك كطالب؟	Structural Influences
8.	How does your family feel about your studies? Have your responsibilities towards them changed after you started studying? Why? كيف تشعر عائلتك تجاه دراستك؟ هل تغيرت مسؤولياتك تجاههم بعد أن بدأت الدراسة؟ لماذا؟	Structural Influences
9.	How do you interact with your teachers? How do they make you feel about your studies? كيف تتفاعل مع معلميك؟ كيف يشعرونك تجاه دراستك؟	Psychosocial Influences
10.	Describe your relationship with other students. How does this help you as a mature student? صف علاقتك مع الطلاب الآخرين. كيف يساعدك هذا كطالب ناضج؟	Psychosocial Influences

11.	Can you describe your workload as a student? Is it manageable? Give examples هل يمكنك وصف عبء الأعمال المطلوبة منك كطالب؟ هل يمكن التحكم فيها؟ أعط أمثلة	Psychosocial Influences
12.	Since starting university, have you noticed any changes in your motivation for your studies? How? منذ أن بدأت الدراسة الجامعية، هل لاحظت أي تغيرات في دوافعك للدراسة؟ كيف؟	Psychosocial Influences
13.	Can you describe your personality as a student? Does your personality help you have a good learning experience? Give examples هل يمكنك وصف شخصيتك كطالب؟ هل تساعدك شخصيتك ومهاراتك في الحصول على تجربة تعليمية جيدة؟ أعط أمثلة	Psychosocial Influences
14.	What skills do you feel are helping you be engaged in your studies? What skills do you think you should improve? ما هي المهارات التي تشعر انها تساعدك على التفاعل في دراستك؟ ما هي المهارات التي تعتقد ان عليك تطويرها؟	Psychosocial Influences
15.	Besides being a student, you are a father/mother and an employee. How do these different roles you have contradict or complement each other? How do they influence your identity as a student? هل هناك تجانس بين هويتك كطالب وبين هويتك في الأدوار الأخرى التي تلعبها في حياتك (أب او ام / زوج أو زوجة/ موظف)؟	Psychosocial Influences
16.	Are you involved in extracurricular activities at your university? Do you find them significant for you? Why? هل تشارك في الأنشطة الطلابية في جامعتك؟ هل تجدها مهمة بالنسبة لك؟ لماذا؟	Both Influences
17.	As a mature student, what do you think can improve your experience at the university? Do you want to be more involved in your studies and extracurricular activities? How? كطالب ناضج، ما الذي تعتقد أنه يمكن أن يحسن تجربتك في الجامعة؟ هل تريد أن تشارك بشكل أكبر في دراستك والانشطة الطلابية؟ كيف؟	Wrap-up Suggestions

Appendix 6: National Centre for Statistics and Information Approval

رقم القيد : ٢٣٤٢١٥٨٣٦
التاريخ: ٧/ ربيع الآخر/١٤٤٥هـ
الموافق: ٢٢/ أكتوبر /٢٠٢٣م

الفاضل / سالم بن سعيد بن شامس الهاشمي المحترم
طالب دكتوراه
جامعة لانكستر بالمملكة المتحدة
تحية طيبة وبعد،،،

الموضوع/ طلب الموافقة لإجراء دراسة بعنوان تصور الطلاب الناضجين للعوامل المؤثرة على مشاركتهم السلوكية والمعرفية والوجدانية في التعليم العالي بسلطنة عمان

إشـــارة إلى طلبكم الالكتروني رقم (٢٠٢٣_٧٤٦) حول الموافقة على الموضـــوع أعلاه، يسـرنا إفادتكم بعدم ممانعة المركز من إجراء الدراسـة، مع تأكيدنا عليكم بضـرورة المحافظة على سـرية البيانات الفردية للمشـتركين واسـتخدامها لأغراض الدراسـة فقط وليس للنشـر العام على أي مستوى آخر، مع ضرورة الالتزام والتقيد بكافة الأحكام الواردة بقانون الإحصاء والمعلومات ولائحته التنفيذية.

وننوه أيضـــا إلى أن هذه الموافقة ســـارية حتى نهاية شـــهر يناير ٢٠٢٤م، وفي حال رغبتكم في إعادة تنفيذ هذه الدراسـة مسـتقبلاً أو أي دراسـات أخرى تتطلب جمع بيانات من المجتمع يرجى التكرم بالتقدم بطلب جديد.

وقد أعطيت لكم هذه الموافقة دون تحمل المركز أدنى مسؤولية أو تبعات قانونية ناجمة عن قيامكم بهذه الدراسة.

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق التقدير والاحترام،،

هدى بنت غابش الراشدية
رئيسة قسم منهجيات استطلاعات الرأي العام

المركز الوطني للإحصاء والمعلومات
تعزيز المعرفة
سلطنة عمان
NATIONAL CENTRE FOR STATISTICS & INFORMATION
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المركز الوطني للإحصاء والمعلومات
ص.ب ٨٤٨، | مسقط ر.ب ١٣٣، سلطنة عمان
هاتف: ٢٤٢١٦٩٠٠ (٩٦٨+)
فاكس: ٢٤٢١٠٠٥٢ (٩٦٨+)

Appendix 7: MANOVA Test

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Age	COGNITIVE	.559	3	.186	.679	.568
	BEHAVE	.068	3	.023	.041	.989
	EMOTION	.068	3	.023	.041	.989
	EXTRA	4.345	3	1.448	2.196	.098
Gender	COGNITIVE	1.377	2	.689	2.513	.090
	BEHAVE	.552	2	.276	.505	.606
	EMOTION	.552	2	.276	.505	.606
	EXTRA	1.811	2	.905	1.372	.261
workstatus	COGNITIVE	2.231	3	.744	2.713	.053
	BEHAVE	.634	3	.211	.387	.763
	EMOTION	.634	3	.211	.387	.763
	EXTRA	3.250	3	1.083	1.642	.189
maritalstatus	COGNITIVE	.085	1	.085	.311	.579
	BEHAVE	.068	1	.068	.124	.726
	EMOTION	.068	1	.068	.124	.726
	EXTRA	.026	1	.026	.039	.844
studybefore	COGNITIVE	3.306	1	3.306	12.060	.001
	BEHAVE	.647	1	.647	1.185	.281
	EMOTION	.647	1	.647	1.185	.281
	EXTRA	2.588	1	2.588	3.923	.052

a. R Squared = .570 (Adjusted R Squared = .228)

b. R Squared = .432 (Adjusted R Squared = -.021)

c. R Squared = .518 (Adjusted R Squared = .133)