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A Qualitative Study about First Year Students' Experiences of Transitioning to Higher Education and Available Academic Support Resources.

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Abstract

Successfully transitioning students to higher education is a complex problem that challenges institutions internationally. Unsuccessful transitions have wide ranging implications that include both social and financial impacts for students and the universities. There appears to be a paucity in the literature that represents student perspectives on their transition experiences. This research study aimed to do two things: first to better understand the transition experience and use of academic support services from the student perspective and second to provide strategies for facilitating a more effective transition experience based on student discussions.

This research explores the experiences of primarily non-traditional students at one institution in Australia. Data collection involved two phases using a yarning circle approach. The first involved participants in small unstructured yarning circles where they were given the opportunity to speak freely about their transition experience and their use of academic support services. This was then followed by a larger yarning circle that was semi-structured to explore some of the themes from the small yarning circles more fully. The yarning circle data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-steps of thematic analysis.

The analysis indicated that participants felt that the available academic support services did not meet their needs. It also provided insight into how the students approach higher education and what they are seeking from their institution by means of support. One major finding that has the potential to impact transition programs around the world is that older non-traditional students appear to approach higher education as they would a new job. This shifts the lens away from the traditional transition program of social integration to one that uses workplace induction strategies as a form of integration. The recommendations from this study also include recognising and accepting the emotions associated with transitioning to higher education, reworking the transition strategies for non-traditional students and facilitating opportunities for engagement as opposed to providing them directly.

Contents

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My research participants who spoke freely and openly about their experiences, I am thankful for the new knowledge that I have gained. I will be using your experiences to improve the experiences of those who will be taking that first-year journey in the years to come.

Finally, I would also like to thank my husband, Andrew, for his support and encouragement throughout this 5-year activity.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this Dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Dawn Dane

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.0 Introduction to my research context

Successfully transitioning new students into higher education is a global challenge that has been ongoing since before Tinto published his seminal work in 1975 on the theory of social integration and retention. Much has changed since then with regard to the type of students who attend higher education and the modes of study available. However, the problem of how to successfully transition and retain students in higher education remains a conundrum. Almost fifty years since the first transition models were introduced, we are still trying to understand the transition experience and how best to support students with this. There are a number of approaches to transitioning students with different transition programs including both academic and social orientation. Strategies range from focussing on attrition rates (which relates to the number of students who drop out) to retention rates (the number of students who continue with their studies). In addition, education has undergone massification over the same period as a response to government policy and globalization (including increased international student mobility). These two elements have further complicated an already challenging situation.

Beer and Lawson (2017) address the conundrum of transition from the angle of attrition. They frame attrition as a 'wicked problem' – that is, 'one that cannot be strategically addressed using traditional approaches to problem-solving' (Beer and Lawson, 2017 p773). For this reason, they believe that current approaches used in universities to reduce attrition 'are likely to fail' (p773). According to Beer and Lawson (2017) wicked problems were originally defined by Rittel and Webber in 1973 as complex, unpredictable, and open-ended. This resistance to straightforward solutions seems an apt classification for a challenge that has been ongoing for over 50 years. While Beer and Lawson do not propose a model for transition in their paper, by framing the problem of transition differently they are in keeping with more recent transition models that have been proposed by Gale and Parker (2014) and Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018).

Attrition relates to the number of students who are not retained each year and transition experiences are thought to directly impact attrition rates. The complexity of transitioning new students into higher education has been further complicated by the increasing level of massification and globalization in higher education. Each year students around the world commence their higher education studies in an educational space unlike those experienced at compulsory school levels. They enrol with enthusiasm which for some

can deteriorate to the student becoming overwhelmed and withdrawing (Stirling and Rossetto, 2015). It is my aim for this research to positively impact this scenario and help prevent this situation from continuing to happen.

Krause and Coates (2008, p9) identify the first year of university as 'arguably the most critical time' for transitioning successfully while Burnett (2007, p23) adds that transition to higher education can 'inform a student's success or failure in tertiary settings.' This first year is when students are either successfully transitioned or become part of an institution's attrition statistics. It is likely that most new students probably enrol not realising the significance that their first year of study has on their future success (Tinto, 1975, 1999, 2006; Briggs and Hall, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014; Stirling and Rossetto, 2015; Jones, 2018; Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2018; Gibson et al, 2019). Many authors have highlighted issues relating to the wider context that contribute to success and failure during the transition to higher education (see, for example: Tinto, 1975, 1999, 2006; Braxton, Milem and Sullivan 2000; Lynch and Dembo 2004; Bluic, Goodyear and Ellis 2007; Briggs and Hall, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014; Guzer and Caner, 2014; Stirling and Rossetto, 2015; Adekola et al, 2017). Protective factors for success noted in this literature include, faculty engagement, family support, previous educational experiences, motivation to learn, internet efficacy, time management skills, study environment management and learning assistance management. Risk factors were identified as: coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds, previous educational experience (this includes the level of previous education but also educational experiences whether the training took place in a vocational or higher education setting and the expectations placed upon students), requirement to work to pay for studies, lack of family or social support, isolation in a new environment, lack of faculty engagement, and lack of access to IT equipment. There seems to be significant research into the factors impacting transitional experiences but how best to manage this experience is less clear. The aim of this study is to understand the wider context in which I am working and students are studying to develop an improved knowledge of their experiences with transitioning to higher education and use of academic support services. By gaining this knowledge, I will be able to implement change which will hopefully see more students remaining at the institution that I work in and completing their degrees.

Most higher education institutions invest heavily in resources to assist with successful transitions. The financial benefits for the university if it can successfully transition new students into higher education include, but are not limited to, income via fees, a positive reputation that attracts more new students and also quality academics who will bring

research grants (Tinto, 2006; Beer and Lawson, 2017; Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017; Gibson et al, 2019). These are significant benefits for universities especially when government funding has been decreasing over the years in many jurisdictions (Beer and Lawson, 2017; Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017; Gibson et al, 2019). However, transition remains an area with no simple answers for policy and practice. Miles (2000 p10 cited in Gale and Parker, 2014 p745) claims that a 'failure to prioritize actual views, experiences, interests and perspectives as they (students) see them' has been counterproductive in successfully transitioning students. It is suggested by Krause and Coates (2008 p495) that 'understanding the first-year experience plays a critical role in managing transition to HE'. My research aims to offer critical insights into the experience of first year higher education students transitioning to higher education at one Australian university, looking particularly at their use of academic support services. My project should make an important contribution to knowledge in this field, informing academics, educational institutions and policy makers about different student perspectives and new insights into barriers.

While much research has been done into the transition experience there remains room for more research exploring student perspectives and student guided solutions. In 2009, Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (p38) note that 'the actual experiences of students entering university have somehow failed to attract the level of academic scrutiny that is necessary to appreciate this transition'. They also comment that research is 'moving towards a more student-side understanding of the transition' (p39). Gibson et al (2019) note that in 2014, Kahlke highlighted the desire for more student-centred approaches to transition. Tett, Cree and Christie (2017 p390) note in reference to transitions '[t]here is little research that has considered the perspective of students themselves'. According to Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews (2018) there remains a need for more research that represents the student perspectives using evidence-based methodology.

My research will allow for the students as stakeholders to be involved by providing the inclusion of:

- Individual student experiences with transitioning to higher education and use of academic support services.
- Individual perspectives on the existing support services including their experiences with using the services and ideas for improvement.

This will not only benefit me as a lecturer and head of course in planning my content and engagement activities, but also the institution will be provided with insight to assist with the

following areas: how to target available resources; how to design resources; and what resources to offer to support students during the process of transitioning in various ways and from various intervention points. It will also provide strategies to assist students to engage with the transition experience and available support services.

1.1 Global & local contexts of student transitions

There have been a number of major changes in higher education over the past two decades: arguably the two biggest are massification and globalization (Mok and Neubauer, 2016). A noteworthy contributing factor that has allowed these two changes to have a huge impact is the change in IT capabilities. The increased IT capabilities both at an institutional and student level has created greater flexibility and accessibility in how material is taught and delivered (Morgan, 2012). The flexibility of modes of study and accessibility coupled with governmental pressure for massification and globalization has led to not only increasing numbers of students but also increased social demographic representation in students attending university (Morgan, 2012; Nelson, Readman and Stoodley, 2018).

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations are shifting higher education systems to universal participation, according to Nelson, Readman and Stoodley (2018). Australia is approaching Trow's early 1970s vision of a universal access system. The Bradley Review of Australian HE (Bradley et al, 2008) and the subsequent Australian Government's 2009 response 'Transforming Australia's higher education system' demonstrate their aim to engage different types of students. The policy aims to increase higher education enrolments from diverse backgrounds, graduate them and have them contribute to the global knowledge economy. Retention and completion of degrees has been noted as an area for improvement. The OECD (2017) claim that highly educated adults are more likely to report positive quality of life factors including social engagement, good to excellent health, interpersonal trust and a level of political efficacy when compared with those who have not been educated to the same degree. Mok and Neubauer (2016 p2) confirm that graduates generally have much better employment prospects than non-graduates. However, they do warn of a 'broken promise' when individuals rely on the idea that a higher education degree will equate to a better life. The reason for this warning is related to other government policies that impact the work force, an example of which is Governments increasing the retirement age which means that people are staying in jobs longer, leaving fewer jobs available for young graduates.

The institution where I work is one of the highest ranked universities in Australia for inclusion of low-socioeconomic students, 1st in family and amongst the highest for rural/remote and indigenous students. As noted above these groups are more likely to face risk factors to success than traditional student entrants (Stirling and Rossetto, 2015; Gale and Parker, 2014; Tinto, 2006). However, Nelson, Readman and Stoodley (2018) suggest that some non-traditional students with multiple risk factors do stay and complete their studies, but they argue that currently no explanation or insight has been offered into why that may be. They put forward that risk factors may be mitigated by institutions introducing practices that privilege behavioural, cognitive, and affective student engagement. The institution where I work has a strategic plan that includes a statement around working with equity groups to help enable students to succeed and increase completion rates. The OECD statement, the independent Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act (2011) and the government-directed Australian Qualification Framework Council (2013) worked together to provide a systematic paradigm that guides and standardizes learning outcomes across the higher education sector. Their guideline attempts to ensure equitable access and support for success for all students entering higher education.

Diversification of the student body has brought with it some challenges, namely, how to transition and support a wider range of students as they accommodate to their new environments and the expectations to perform that are placed upon them (Tinto, 2006; Gale and Parker, 2014; Stirling and Rossetto, 2015; Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2018; Gibson et al 2019). Globalization has seen an increase in international student mobility: it is now relatively common to study and or work abroad (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2012). Mazzarol and Soutar (2012) claim that from 1950-1980 there was a doubling of international students each decade based on the previous one which has created what they now refer to as 'international education services market' (p718). According to them, as of 2010, there were over 3 million international students with the majority enrolled in Australia, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and United States of America. International experience forms many of the policy priorities related to employability and graduate outcomes (see HEA Go Abroad scheme in UK or the NCP in Australia). The value of multicultural learning environments, international degrees and opportunity to travel are all attractive features and for those now afforded these options, it means a greater range of opportunities for personal growth (Mok and Neubauer, 2016).

In some ways massification and globalization have collided to create the perfect storm for higher education institutions and the students they serve. With increasing student

numbers and a diversification of the student population, institutions are challenged to identify innovative ways to assist students to transition, bearing in mind the diverse, complex, and changing needs of such students. There exists a desire from stakeholders to find solutions, as the combination of massification and globalization provide governments and their populations with unique opportunities for growth and collaboration. These desires and solutions will be discussed in more depth in relation to the financial implications associated with them.

Growth and collaboration are both considered by the OECD (2017) to be positive in relation to economic and social development for many countries. The opportunity of advancing oneself educationally is reported to benefit not only the individual undertaking the study financially, but also contributes to their country's knowledge economy and their individual community. Mok and Neubauer (2016) discuss the value that countries and communities in developing regions place on becoming part of the knowledge economy. This desired economic and social growth is primarily why so many countries have implemented policies to encourage higher education institutions to provide increased opportunity to a wider subset of the population (Mok and Neubauer, 2016). This explains why the educational environment is changing and why this subject is important, but it does not explain how best to work in this new environment.

There are financially motivated reasons for providing students with support; primarily institutions rely on students financially for future growth and reputation development. As Mazzarol and Soutar (2012 p717) state, '[i]nstitutions with well-established reputations or strong brand images enjoyed a superior market position, although they needed to continuously re-invest in resources and skills in order to maintain their competitive edge.' Australian universities – where this research is located – are no different. Bunce, Baird, and Jones (2017) describe how in UK universities have slowly been remodelled into businesses where students are framed as the consumers. Rea (2016) argues this to be the case in Australia too. While my research does not focus on consumeristic changes in higher education and the associated impacts, and I do not intend to dwell on it here, this shift from institutions of learning and knowledge to something more akin to a business cannot be ignored. There is relevance to having some understanding of the changing context in which these services and student transitions to higher education are taking place. The successful transition and associated retention of students equates to stronger financial health which allows the universities to function smoothly; without the income from student fees, the daily operations of a university would suffer.

Australian government policy in the past 15 years has also resulted in increasing numbers of students from diverse backgrounds attending higher education. This increase has created opportunities for non-traditional students, who in my study are defined as anyone attending higher education who is not a school-leaver. The non-traditional group includes individuals who are mature, first in family to attend university, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, changing careers, part of a minority group, and/or with a disability. I will expand upon traditional and non-traditional students later as it becomes more relevant to the context of my research. This increased opportunity is positive for a number of reasons. Developing skill sets in a population has been proposed to provide positive implications for future growth and economic development of both the nation and the individuals (Mok and Neubauer, 2016; Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews, 2018). Governments in the 21st century are seeking to develop their populations with a special focus on those who may not have had opportunities previously (Bradley et al, 2008; Australian Government, 2009; Bok, 2010; Morgan, 2012; Dawson, Charman and Kilpatrick, 2013). There has been a rapid increase in access to university in Australia since the Bradley Review of Higher Education (Bradley et al, 2008). The Australian Government has set targets to encourage recruitment and acceptance of a more diverse student population, including an increase from 32 to 40% of students in the 25-34-year-old age bracket (Australian Government, 2009). It also included increasing low socioeconomic status enrolments from 15 to 20% between 2008-2025.

To achieve these targets, the face and structure of higher education institutions in Australia has also been altered. Universities have had to find ways to be inclusive, accommodating, and accessible. They have had to seek out students from these demographics finding ways to not only reach them but attract them into higher education. (The university I work in has slogans that indicate a recent shift to students driving their learning experiences - 'The uni that sees you!' and 'Be what you want to be!') However, while the drive to increase student numbers from non-traditional backgrounds has been going on, the Australian Government has been influenced increasingly by neoliberal views (Rea, 2016). The Australian Government has implemented policies to create more opportunities and places, but have also decreased funding to universities. This has led to public educational institutions moving from scholarly communities to something more like corporations as they compete to attract students. As Rea (2016) points out public university Vice Chancellors have been re-cast as CEOs answering to university councils akin to corporate boards. Universities in Australia now find themselves in a position of needing to pay CEO salaries to attract Vice Chancellors. Vice

Chancellors are some of the highest paid public servants in the country often paid many times more than the Australian prime minister (Rea, 2016).

Bunce, Baird and Jones (2017) discuss the increasingly consumeristic attitude amongst many who engage with higher education and, while this is not the direct focus of this project, it is relevant to discussions about student services and provisions for students as users and consumers of higher education. Wilkins and Burke (2015) suggest non-traditional students are more comfortable in the role of a consumer than that of a student. At the institution where I work, academic support services has formally moved to the corporate wing, this places these services as something for consumers to use and may impact the way that these services are engaged with by students. The globalization of higher education alongside the reduction in Government funding has meant that universities have had to rely heavily on the fees from international students. This is a high-risk strategy as demonstrated by the impact of the coronavirus outbreak in late 2019. The lack of international students being allowed into Australia has had a large impact on the education industry. It led to a cascade of universities re-structuring and significant job losses for academics and academic support staff demonstrating how reliant the Australian higher education system is on international students.

To successfully transition students into university there needs to be a well thought out plan in place to ensure that students are provided with the right support to succeed in reaching their educational goals. However, to have a plan, there first needs to be a good understanding of the problems and consideration of possible solutions. As mentioned previously, the first year of study is where attrition is highest. Attrition is also often associated with a poor transition. Beer and Lawson (2017) report that in Australia over the past 10 years in spite of significant investment in trying to address student attrition, attrition rates have only demonstrated a 1% reduction overall. They do qualify that some universities have decreased attrition rates more than others, however, many more have seen increasing rates. This overall lack of significant decrease in attrition demonstrates the importance of understanding and providing a successful transition experience. This lack of progress also speaks to the difficulty in providing a strong transition experience. My research aims to provide new insight into not only the challenges associated with the increasing massification and globalisation of higher education but also the student perspectives on the transition experience. By better understanding how students experience transition and what they identify as solutions for success, it will help to target resources and create effective transition programs.

1.2 Why this study?

This study has arisen from my desire to better understand how students transitioning to higher education are faring at my institution. While I appreciate the importance of the financial contributions of students to institutions and therefore the existence of my job, my interest is more altruistic. I am a first in family higher education graduate and am aware firsthand of the benefits associated with completing a degree program. My desire in undertaking this research is to fully understand the experiences of my students so as to help them, and hopefully others, on that path. The majority of my research participants are non-traditional students: students with dependent children, jobs, and spouses that all play a role in their complex juggling act of returning to higher education (while trying to maintain some level of normalcy). By understanding things from their individual perspectives, my research will provide the opportunity to higher education stakeholders to walk in the shoes of my participants for a brief moment. This chance to vividly experience the realities of non-traditional students transitioning to higher education by seeing the challenges and triumphs through their eyes. My research will aim to inform policy and practice to improve the experience for future students by providing a unique opportunity to understand the experiences from the viewpoint of the students. This is the context in which my research questions have emerged.

1.3 What does my situation currently look like?

Compliance with government policy over the past decade has meant that many more people have gained access to tertiary education. The experience of transitioning for these new students and universities alike has not always been smooth. Initially, universities offered traditional student support services, such as freshman 1st year seminars, orientation events, academic support centres, and extra-curricular programs (Tinto, 2006; Morgan, 2012). However, it has become apparent over the years that while traditional services may work for many traditional school leaver students, they are not always appropriate or accessible to non-traditional students (Burke et al, 2017). With an increased range of students, the challenge of meeting the needs of various groups increases for the support service teams (Morgan, 2012).

Institutions when designing their transition support programs generally subscribe to Tinto's (1975) seminal work focusing on the importance of social integration and belonging. The key idea being that settling into university is not just about being able to complete the required study but that by socially integrating, making friends, feeling a sense of belonging students are likely to be retained by the university. It is generally accepted in the literature

that an increasing sense of social isolation and a sense of not belonging academically is often followed by feelings of being overwhelmed and in worst case scenarios failure to progress or complete, which are common occurrences for first year students (Stirling and Rossetto, 2015). I hold a concern about whether non-traditional mature students require or need the same degree of social integration as traditional students. As the diversity of students attending university has changed, as well as the demands on these students in relation to their external obligations, it may be time to consider new ideas on how best to support students to transition into university. Burke et al (2017) refer to the challenges students face that are not necessarily on the radar of universities, or necessarily within their scope. Examples of challenges faced by students that are essentially invisible to the institution include a lack of a sense of belonging, lack of confidence to approach a lecturer, challenges in understanding available support services, family obligations, work obligations, and self-doubt. These factors can create hurdles for non-traditional students and introduce complexities that may not be faced by traditional students (Burke et al, 2017; Bell and Benton, 2018).

Wilkins and Burke (2015) consider the notion that faculty from widening participation backgrounds may be best placed to communicate effectively with non-traditional students. As a first in family widening participation student, it never occurred to me to consider using the academic support services in the five years I attended University. On reflection, I think I probably would have used the services if I had been encouraged to do so by a lecturer. I remember finding some of the teaching staff intimidating and perhaps might have found them less so if I knew some of my lecturers had experienced the same journey. I might have reached out to the formal support services when I was not sure about something instead of just relying on informal support from my friends. Bell and Benton (2018) discuss how non-traditional students frequently do not use academic support as they feel there is a pressure for them to prove they belong. While Jones (2018, p916) reports that students from widening participation backgrounds express 'not knowing the lingo' of higher education. It was not until I started lecturing at a university that I realised how many students experience feelings of self-doubt and also the importance of a supportive lecturer encouraging them to make use of the formal support resources. Wilkins and Burke (2015) and many other authors have noted that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are sometimes intimidated by educational institutions as they do not feel comfortable with their role in that context. Students are however used to being consumers, so while I am not advocating consumerism in education, there is potentially value in framing these services in a consumeristic light by encouraging students to use services that their fees pay for.

Over the past few years, I have watched students fail who had ability and desire but not the support they needed to be successful. This project grew out of my curiosity around the transition experience and how it could be better supported. The more I read about this area, the more I realised that transitioning into higher education is an individual multifactorial experience. What remains unclear is how to adequately address the often-individualized challenges that present to best support our students. Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews (2018) stress the importance and need for quality research that represents student perspectives using an evidence-based methodology.

1.3.1 Research Problem and Questions

To begin to address the multifactorial challenges associated with transitioning and the usage of academic support services, I will aim to explore the following:

- What are the students' experiences with using the services available?
- How do they describe/understand/evaluate their transition experience?
- How do they characterize their use of academic services? What are the main barriers and facilitators to accessing these services?
- How might they be encouraged to do so?

1.4 What to expect: The chapters of my dissertation

1.4.1 Chapter two: contextualising my research

I have opted to use my second chapter to provide the history of transitioning students to higher education while introducing the wider contexts in which my research is taking place. As a healthcare practitioner, when a patient presents, the first thing we do is take a history of the problem. By understanding how a situation came to be and what has been done about it until now, a healthcare provider or anyone trying to solve a problem is provided with important information to determine the future pathway. It is with this mindset that the format of chapter two was drawn up: rather than conduct a traditional literature review I chose to look at literature that would provide a history of the topic. By doing so, I was able to better understand the issue and responses to it over time, and introduce the reader to the current literature on transitioning students to higher education (including the wider contexts of political agendas, institutional drivers, and student experiences).While my project did not set out to focus on a specific group, my participants were almost all mature age students so I will include some discussions around the history of this group in higher education. I also provide some historical background to the concept of transitioning students to higher

education by introducing some key early theoretical models for addressing what was called 'dropout' at the time. Taking the time to introduce these models and the theorists whose work informed the researchers in the early 1970s to mid-1980s allows for some underpinning of the theoretical models. Understanding the context in which the current situation has evolved allows for increased insight.

I will then introduce new influential theoretical models that have been proposed for transitioning modern students to higher education. This will provide some idea of where the common views are at in relation to transitioning students and provide ideas for future work. I will also expand on the points introduced above using current literature to delve deeper into the current landscape of transitioning students to higher education and their use of academic support services. The changing educational environment in which we as academics and students find ourselves will be explored alongside a look at current transition programs including what they currently offer to students. The decision to contextualise my research was taken to assist in my aim for the reader to be able to place themselves within the student experience while having the benefit of the theoretical knowledge that has brought us to where we are.

1.4.2 Chapter 3: The research – methods and methodology

Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews (2018 p7) and Gibson et al (2019) identify a need for additional research to capture individual student views using evidence-based methodologies. Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews (2018 p125) argue that this would develop a 'richer and deeper understanding of student experiences'. By using accepted methods and methodology to explore the student experience this project should provide a better understanding of how students' experience transitioning to higher education and their usage of available services. I will then be able to provide commentary that will be useful for institutions, academics and policymakers to improve the transition experience for all. I undertook an interpretivist qualitative approach as the framework for this study. I chose this approach as it allows for an in-depth exploration of experiences from a range of individuals in order to provide comment and discussion. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2009, p17) state that interpretivists set out to understand individual participant's 'interpretations of the world around them' and aim to 'retain the integrity of the phenomena being investigated', which fits well with my desire to provide an authentic account of the experiences of my participants while transitioning to higher education. My selection criteria allowed for any student in their first year of higher education at my institution to participate. In the end, all but one of my participants were

mature students. This shifted the project slightly by focusing it more on one group within the non-traditional category.

I used a data collection approach that is frequently used in Australia but does not appear commonly in international literature. It is called a yarning circle, which is an Indigenous Australian way of knowing. I selected the yarning circle approach as it provides a mutualistic non-judgmental environment for participants to share their experiences, understandings, and ideas about a given topic (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010). I will further expand on the yarning circle as a data collection tool in the third chapter. To answer my research questions, my study involved yarning circle discussions with small unstructured groups followed by one large semi-structured group over a twelve-week period. The larger group followed from the smaller groups, thus providing the opportunity to delve into areas where additional clarification from the smaller groups was valuable. The yarning circle discussions were transcribed and then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis.

1.4.3 Chapter 4: Findings – stories emerge

The findings of my research expands on current knowledge and understanding while also adding new knowledge about the transition experience and the use of academic support services by mature students. The five themes generated from the data analysis will be presented in this chapter. The themes were:

- What academic support services?
- Getting the message through.
- Is the Academic Learning Centre (ALC) worth the time?
- Am I doing the right thing and do I belong?
- Wouldn't it be nice? (Student ideas for improving the transition experience and academic support services.)

The findings chapter does two main things. Firstly, it allows me to place the student voices into a set of stories about their experiences which the reader to empathise and better understand the lived realities of mature students transitioning to higher education. Readers will begin to understand how these students view academic support services including factors that encourage and limit their access. There is a gritty, granular reality that these students are working within and by even for a brief spell being able to experience it through their stories, higher education stakeholders may be provided with valuable insight. Secondly, the chapter provides a number of insights into the experiences of mature students. It illustrates

their understanding of the transition and academic support landscape. It presents many individual stories that overlap to demonstrate what it is like for a mature student in 2020 to transition to higher education within a model that may not be the best fit for them.

The contents in my findings chapter may shift our lenses of perception, allowing us to better understand the challenges mature students encounter and the way they approach the experience. With this new knowledge, it is possible to strategize new ways to meet the needs of non-traditional/mature students as they transition to higher education.

1.4.4 Chapter 5: Discussion – new understanding and insights

My discussion identifies and discusses some interesting observations that do a number of things. Some of my findings support and or expand upon the existing literature while some aspects suggests that we may have missed something along the way. These possible missing links may shift how we understand the experience of mature students in particular. My discussion also looks at the possibility that the type of support required in this domain is different to what is being offered. Another interesting topic that arose is related to how mature students approach higher education. My research details and describes how these mature students appear to be approaching higher education. This information provides valuable insight for institutions, academics, policy makers and academic staff looking to change their practice within the arena of transitioning mature students to higher education and academic support services.

1.4.5 Chapter 6: Conclusion – new knowledge, reflections, and recommendations

The conclusion of this dissertation provides suggestions and recommendations for changes in practice which will allow anyone reading this paper to have some take away ideas for how to better support mature students immediately. The students themselves found solutions through the discussions and value in participating in the research to assist them with their transition experience. It is my hope that readers of this paper looking to find ways to assist their students will also find this same benefit. There is also a reflection on the use of yarning circles as a data collection tool. I was unable to find a pre-existing research paper that combined a yarning circle with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis but as a pair they worked very well. As a data collection tool, the yarning circle was instrumental in achieving the level of information sought for this study. The final thing that my conclusion does is provides recommendations for further research from a strategic point of view to allow for pragmatic ideas to be progressed.

1.5 Closing summary

This project has arisen from my desire as a first-generation international higher education student who continued with my education to the point of becoming an educator myself to help others. I have watched countless students from various backgrounds fail to progress past the first year while also watching others succeed without issue. For me, I feel a level of pride and happiness for my students when they succeed and a sense of loss when they do not. It is my aim for this research to assist me and others to gain better insight into what is happening and how positive change can be enacted.

Chapter 2 - Contextualising my research

2.0 Introduction

This chapter contextualises my research by discussing relevant literature. I chose not to undertake a traditional literature review that would provide a synthesis of findings. Instead, I selected literature that would extend my understanding of the topic and allow me to contextualise the theories, models and research directly relating to transition. I particularly wanted to explore how ideas about, and models of, transition had changed over time. In this chapter, I will orientate the reader to common and changing terminologies in the transition to higher education. I will then examine the history of transitioning students to higher education both globally and in Australia where this study took place. I will then look at models of transitioning students to higher education over the past 50 years before looking at the current literature and theories on transitioning students to higher education. This will inform a discussion on future requirements and actions already started to address the challenges associated with transitioning to higher education.

I chose this approach primarily because as a qualified healthcare provider understanding the history of an issue or problem, looking at what has been done to address it and then reviewing the most recent research to move forward with is common practice. This represents my current practice for addressing situations where information, understanding and solutions are not black and white but rather include many shades of grey. While this approach to literature was designed to inform my practice and understanding of the professional situation, I find myself in, it also seeks to integrate the reader into the context in which students experience their transition to higher education. I hope that by providing information on how transition models and strategies have evolved over time, the reader will be provided with enough context and knowledge to allow them to situate themselves in preparation for understanding the student participants' lived experience as reported in the findings chapter.

2.1 Orientation to terminology

Over time terminologies change and as this chapter spans approximately 50 years of literature, I have decided to include a short paragraph identifying terms that have moved out of the literature and their replacements. I will also address terms that mean different things but are inextricably connected to the topic of transitioning students.

The first term is 'drop out' all of the early theoretical models on transitioning students into higher education from 1970-1985 refer to student dropout. Dropout is defined by Bean in

Kerby (2015, p15) as 'failure of a student enrolled at a particular university in the spring to enrol in that same university the next fall semester'. At some point the common terminology changed and was replaced with the term 'attrition' which is defined by Australia's Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) (2017, p8) as 'first-year higher education commencing students in a year who neither completed nor returned to study in the following year, to the total commencing students in that year.' For the sake of ease when discussing different literature, I will treat dropout and attrition as interchangeable terms.

Another term that appears frequently in the early theoretical models is 'persistence' which Tinto (1975) initially discussed in a somewhat interchangeable way with the term 'retention'. Retention is now commonly used to refer to students who persist with their studies and remain at the institution that they enrolled in. Tinto (1997) reports that the 1970s represented a change in the way retention was viewed: it began to take on the idea that there were social contexts that had implications for student persistence. Tinto (2017) discusses retention in relation to student motivation to persist and succeed. He discusses how universities may want to consider how they can encourage persistence in order to increase retention rather than constantly focusing on how to retain them.

The next term that is key to my research is transitioning. According to O'Donnell, Kean and Stevens from the Higher Education Academy (2016, p3) 'the literature to date on student transitions in higher education is underpinned by a lack of clarity and agreement as to what is meant by 'transition''. This sentiment is also acknowledged by Tinto (2017), Gale and Parker (2014) and Colley (2007). The challenge presented to researchers is that without a definitive definition, research is subject to individual interpretation which is why providing a working definition for my study is useful.

O'Donnell, Kean and Stevens (2016) describe Eccelstone's four conceptualisations of transitions which includes:

1. Institutional transition - which for example involves moving from one context to another.

2. A focus on a more socially cognisant transition which acknowledges a shift in identity. (See also Briggs and Hall, 2012).

3. Focus on the process of being and becoming. (See also Gale and Parker (2014)

4. Rejects the first three and argues that life is in a constant state of flux so transitioning to higher education is just part of the whole life experience.

O'Donnell, Kean and Stevens (2016) describe different time periods of transition including: transition to higher education, transition to second and third year of higher education, transition to post-graduate level study, transition out of higher education into work. All of these types of transition have different components. While my study just focuses on the experiences of first year students, it is important to note that, as Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes (2010), Hussey and Smith (2010), Christie et al (2016) and Tett, Cree and Christie (2017) point out, transition experiences occur across a broader timeframe than just the first year of higher education. Tett, Cree and Christie (2017) describe a longitudinal journey for students that starts with them losing their sense of belonging and then learning to fit in during their first year. Followed by changing approaches to learning and gaining a sense of belonging as they progress through second and third year before the transition beyond graduation to a changed self. The key transition experiences described by Tett, Cree and Christie (2017) have some similarities with the social theories put forward by Mead, Marx and Durkheim which will be discussed later in this chapter in relation to the early transition models. The idea that the transition experience could be extended across the entire degree has shifted my viewpoint as a head of course from just the first year to the possibilities of what students might want or need in the second and third years of their degrees. However, this study will remain focused on the first year of the transition to higher education experience as these are the students that I primarily work with.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I have decided to use O'Donnell, Kean and Stevens' (2016, p8) definition of transition:

> Transition to higher education is a process of shifting identities through engagement in the practices of the higher education community, where those practices are constructed and reconstructed through individual meaning-making within the context of microsystems and broader social macrosystems, all of which impact upon individual action, participation in the higher education community and identity.

I have selected this definition because it encompasses the views of social theorists, the literature to date, and allows for individual contexts to exist within the same experience.

The final point to make before moving on to the history of transitioning to higher education is that attrition, retention, and transition are all inextricably linked. I state this now because in the coming chapters I will discuss research that has been done on attrition, retention and/or transition. There is an acceptance in the literature that a poor transition

experience is commonly associated with high attrition and low retention, while a good transition is commonly associated with high retention and low attrition. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Beer and Lawson (2017 and 2018) discuss attrition as a wicked problem and refer to transitional factors that contribute to attrition. Tinto's (1975) original work discusses factors that impact attrition including those factors that contribute to a positive transition experience. Briggs and Hall (2012), Gale and Parker (2014), and Stirling and Rossetto (2015) also discuss transition and its role on retention and attrition. Stirling and Rossetto (2015 p10) included a comment in their paper that resonated with my experience as a lecturer, they stated '[t]oo often, we saw the excitement that marked student attendance at Orientation sessions dissipate into an overwhelmed sense of anxiety by about Week 8'. Tinto (2006, p6) succinctly stated: 'It is one thing to understand why students leave; it is another to know what institutions can do to help students stay and succeed'. Tinto (2006 p5) went on: 'unfortunately, most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation.'

2.2 Introduction to the history of transition to higher education research

Even though universities have been in existence since the year 1088, with the University of Bologna being the oldest institution (Tucker 2021), theoretical models on transitioning students to higher education did not become widespread until the 1970s (Tinto, 1975). Theoretical models first entered the literature in the early 1970s (Tinto, 1975) and since that time transition has progressively grown in importance. Tinto is widely recognised as a key researcher in the attrition, retention, and transition of higher education students, though as mentioned previously, in the 1970s they referred to dropout instead of attrition. Tinto wrote his seminal paper in 1975 where he proposed a longitudinal theoretical model of transition. Tinto (1975) reports that until the early 1970s there were a number of papers that adequately described the dropout rates but did not manage to explain them. Almost 25 years after his first paper on the topic, Tinto (1999) wrote an article called 'Taking Student Retention Seriously' in which he laments that institutions and governments have not used the research that exists to change practice. Instead, while they continue to espouse the importance of addressing attrition through student experience, they do not take translational steps to enact the findings from the research.

A further 15 years later, Gale and Parker (2014) report that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations have set a goal of moving from mass higher education (16-50%) to universal (>50%). In order to achieve these targets, attrition

needs to be effectively addressed. In Australia, the Brady Report (2008) set new aspirational targets for Australian Institutions which would see wider demographics specifically targeted to increase representation. This is not unique to Australia: for example, the Department for Education and Skills in Ireland did likewise, as have many other governments over the past two decades. Morgan (2012) discusses how government policy changes aimed at maintaining global competitiveness are shifting the demographics of the students involved in higher education. She notes a change over the past twenty years in the student bodies of many institutions, to include students from different ethnic backgrounds, non-English speaking students, international students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, mature students, first in family, and those with disabilities. The complexities of transitioning a wider group of students to higher education is discussed by Morgan (2012) and Beer and Lawson (2017) amongst others.

2.2.1 Academic support services

For the purposes of contextualising this research, when discussing transitioning students to higher education, it is important to include academic support services in the discussion as they are often responsible for running first year orientation and transition activities (Morgan, 2012; Briggs and Hall, 2012; Stirling and Rossetto, 2015; Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews, 2018). Gale and Parker (2014), Stirling and Rossetto (2015), and Beer and Lawson (2017) all note that many institutions now include student retention and attrition in their strategic planning. However, the idea that retention, attrition, and transition are being taken seriously is questioned by Tinto (2006), who reports that universities are not translating the research into practice and as a result are having limited impact. He goes on to argue that institutions that provide academic support services such as freshman seminars or orientation events as standalone services are essentially trying to 'vaccinate' students with educational assistance against attrition.

Evans, Henderson and Ashton-Hays (2019 p1123) report that academic support services 'struggle to be valued at an institutional level' while academics generally view them as 'running on a deficit model, rather than a developmental model'. A deficit model is one that aims to address student weaknesses or perceived deficits in their knowledge or skill. This is particularly concerning as it seems widely accepted that academics are one of the main conduits for students reaching out to academic support services (Tinto, 1975, 1999, 2006; Morgan, 2012; Kerby, 2015; Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews, 2018; Evans, Henderson and Ashton-Hays, 2019). Evans, Henderson and Ashton-Hays (2019) go on to state that best practice involves embedding and integrating academic support into the curricula. If the

pathway for students entering and using academic support services is one that does not recognise the value or the opportunities available in those service areas, fewer students will be helped along the way. In addition, according to Catterall, Aitchison and Rolls (2016 p72) these services become relegated to being 'foot soldiers in essentially remedial campaigns, tasked with ensuring that "underprepared" students do not pose reputational risk to universities'.

The impacts of academic support services on student experience and how these services have changed over the years are discussed by numerous authors (such as Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Morgan, 2012; Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews, 2018; Evans, Henderson and Ashton-Hays, 2019). Evans, Henderson and Ashton-Hays (2019) report that most academic support service staff have a teaching background and they primarily run one on one sessions with students who need assistance with time management, narrowing a topic, structuring an assignment or checking if the student is on track for an assignment. However, both Morgan (2012) and Evans, Henderson and Ashton-Hays (2019) note there is a changing need for academic support staff to have more training, skills and knowledge in delivering online services.

2.2.2 Global context

The globally changing landscapes of higher education impacts higher education institutions in almost all countries. The two main changes have resulted from Government agendas that have involved i) encouraging institutions to become more socially inclusive (see the Bradley Report 2008 for Australia's context), and ii) changes in funding. As Governments around the world have decreased higher education funding, universities have been forced to change in order to survive. These changes have resulted in universities relying heavily on international student fees which bolster their financial reserves and make up for lost funding from the government. These two changes have contributed to massification and increased globalisation of the higher education arena. Hussey and Smith (2010 p155) in reference to massification in higher education state that 'problems arise not just from the increased numbers but also from the greater diversity of the students.' They go on to discuss how universities have tried to process the increased numbers through the normal degree and timetable structures. In the end they argue that as 'higher education is extended to an ever wider population the system has to be radically changed.' (p162). While Payne, Hodges and Hernandez (2017 p21) state '[d]emographic research findings support conducting needs assessments to meet the emerging needs of our changing student demographics.' Polson (2003) also discussed the assumption that mature students could undertake graduate study

without needing special services but that in fact the data suggests that mature students have high attrition rates. These high attrition rates have served as a counter to the earlier assumption. Institutions require more information and guidance on how to successfully transition non-traditional students in the contexts of globalisation and massification, while students need to be supported as they transition into unfamiliar settings.

2.2.3 Australia's changing context

The impact of Government policy on higher education institutions in Australia over the past twenty years has involved a progressively neoliberal agenda that enables 'government funding to be increasingly withdrawn, students to be constructed as both consumers and the problem, and a juxtaposition between open-access and stricter enrolment conditions to exist' (Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews, 2018, p.119). According to Bunce, Baird and Jones (2016) there has been a shift in universities to something akin to large corporations providing consumer products. Bunce, Baird and Jones (2016) use the example of students and universities being included under the Consumers Rights Act (2015) in the UK as evidence of the changing landscape. While Higher Education is Australia's 3rd largest export. Watson (2013) also discusses the repositioning of students as consumers. Mazzarol and Soutar (2012), Gokcen (2014), and Bunce, Baird and Jones (2016) describe the sophisticated branding and advertising activities that universities are undertaking to survive under new commercial pressures. These corporate-like changes appear to be a bid to remain competitive to make up for lost government revenue.

Beer and Lawson (2017) note that governments create tables based on university performances across a number of key performance indicators which are used to inform funding. Beer and Lawson (2017) report that attrition is now used as a key performance indicator by governments to determine the quality of an institution and inform their funding arrangements. Evans, Henderson and Ashton-Hays (2019) note when courses or degrees, get bad reviews or have high attrition rates, it reflects poorly on the institution. This then impacts on reputation and likelihood of attracting more students which the university relies on for financial support, thus, creating a negative downward cycle. While retention and attrition are becoming increasingly important to institutions as a result of the financial pressures placed upon them, Beer and Lawson (2017) suggest that the current methods used to transition students to higher education are not currently very effective. They state that 'universities have been expending resources on their attrition problems for years, the rate of attrition across the Australian higher education sector as whole, between 2001 and 2012, has improved by less than 1%' (Beer and Lawson, 2017 p.775)

As mentioned, political policy and agendas have significant impacts on universities in regard to targets and funding which in turn directly impacts available resources and services. Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews (2018) describe how changing political agendas allow for problems to be framed differently. By creating developmental transition programs, universities are in some ways able to negate responsibility for attrition by placing the onus on students regarding their commitment to succeed. Tinto (2006) and Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews (2018) suggest that the neoliberal approach seeks to achieve is a shift in the responsibility for attrition away from the university on to the students. Tinto (2006) likens this behaviour to victim blaming. This placement of students as both the problem and the solution allows the university to be the good Samaritan providing a product and trying to help their customer. Lawson and Beer (2017), and Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews (2018), surmise that since institutions have invested large sums of money over the past twenty years in an attempt to address attrition and retention with minimal impact on either being recorded, it seems the responsibility to succeed is being placed back onto the students.

Beer and Lawson (2018) followed up their 2017 paper with further discussion on attrition describing how, in the current context of diverse student cohorts, there is a range of interlinking issues that impact the transition experience, but these issues vary between students and are beyond the scope of most universities to address. The variability in student needs, expectations, and hopes for their education experience, make it very difficult for institutions to rely on one service to provide the one size fits all service which many continue to attempt. They also succinctly state: 'The practical implications of these findings are that current approaches to attrition are likely to fail' (Beer and Lawson, 2018 p498). This fits with Tinto's (2006) paper, noted earlier, where he re-iterates the need for universities to put the available research into practice rather than continue to rely on past models. Gale and Parker (2014) describe how, rather than viewing transition as an induction or development process, it can be viewed as a process of becoming. This shift could make it possible to challenge consumerist notions of neoliberal discourses that have become increasingly present in this arena.

2.3 Introduction to the history of theoretical models of transitioning students to higher education

While the research into transitioning students to higher education did not really take off until the 1970s, when it did there were a number of theoretical models proposed. The emergence of theoretical models related to attrition and retention, and the associated transition experiences, in the early 1970s will be discussed in the coming paragraphs. Until the early

1970s the idea of institutions playing a role in transitioning students to higher education was not frequently considered with any genuine concern (Tinto, 1999). In fact, it is suggested by Tinto (2006) that up until the 1970s, transitioning to higher education was viewed through a psychological lens as a reflection of an individual student's abilities and aptitude to study. Those who did not succeed were deemed to be less driven. Tinto (2006 p2) states the common view at the time was: 'Students failed, not institutions.' This view appears congruent with the current neoliberal push of returning the responsibility to the student as discussed above.

2.3.1 Early theoretical perspectives

I will introduce and briefly discuss three classical social theorists whose work has been drawn upon by the authors of the theoretical models of student attrition discussed below. Marx, Mead and Durkheim were all interested in the social context within which we lived. According to Kerby (2015, p3) they were particularly interested in 'the relationships between organisational structures and the functions of individuals within those structures'. Marx theorised that being part of large institutions dehumanised individuals resulting in social alienation (Kerby, 2015). This idea helped to construct the theoretical models below that describe social isolation as a factor in students dropping out of higher education. Pascarella (1980) felt that Marx described something Pascarella referred to as *desocialisation* (at the beginning of the educational experience) followed by *socialisation* (as the student became integrated in their new surroundings).

Mead (1934) (see Kerby, 2015) looked at the phases of development or belonging to an identity. Mead observed that individual influences and experiences are derived from our collective values, morals, and beliefs more so than individual or personal elements. Current literature from Coertjens (2017) and Christie et al (2008) amongst others around the challenges of identity formation for new students supports Mead's earlier work on the importance of identity. Mead's idea that individuals form positive personal bonds with a sense of place or belonging - in this case students to an institution and cohort - was also significant to the development of later models which retain the concept of belonging as playing an important role in persevering in higher education (see Kerby, 2015).

Kerby (2015) reports that Durkheim's main work on suicide was also used in the development of new models of attrition. Durkheim proposed three main reasons for suicide, the third one is relevant to our discussion and was used in the development of the early theoretical models. He proposed that anomic suicide resulted from a lack of 'normlessness' which, when applied

to the context of higher education transition experiences, meant that students who were not integrated well with a strong sense of normalcy in their environments were more likely to drop out (or in Durkheim's context commit suicide). Tinto (1975) argued somewhat against this concept suggesting that Durkheim's model was descriptive and so not sufficient to explain suicidal behaviour or in Tinto's context dropout amongst a range of varying scenarios. However, he did still rely on some aspects of Durkheim's work in his seminal paper.

2.3.2 Historical models of student attrition

Spady Model – 1970/71

Spady wrote two influential papers (1970, 1971) detailing his model which he called *Model of the Dropout Process* (MDP). According to both Tinto (2006) and Nicoletti (2019) his model was possibly the first to identify the relationship between the institution and a student's decision to continue or leave. He drew on early work from Durkheim (1897) that proposed the concept of social integration. Spady's model involved a number of variables and components such as disposition, interest, attitude, expectations and demands that were fluid between students namely something referred to as Normative Congruence. The fluidity of the components meant that they were hard to characterise and or measure. This concept of individual needs and dynamics continues to be discussed in the literature today with Beer and Lawson (2017) referring to attrition as a wicked problem due to the changing nature and dynamics of the challenges faced by individual students and year to year for those same students.

Tinto Model - Conceptual Schema for Dropout – 1973 - 1975

Tinto and Cullen (1973) released a five-chapter report on dropouts in higher education. They describe a model referred to as the *Conceptual Schema for Dropout* (CSD), and proposed categories for dropout: voluntary, non-voluntary, transfer to another institution, and permanent. They also sought to determine individual motivations, strengthening convictions to succeed by understanding the emotional and intellectual baggage that a student may possess. This understanding was then proposed to assist with integrating the student into the university environment. They further proposed that there are two types of integration normative and structural. It was proposed that the more socially and academically integrated a student was, the greater the chance they would persevere with their studies. It was unclear how to turn this report into practice, which Tinto (2006) reflects remains an issue for much of what we have learned about transitioning students to higher education.

However, Tinto (1975) revised and refined the 1973 model. He claims that he was the first author to put forward a detailed longitudinal model that illustrated not only the impacts of environment on students' decisions to stay or leave but also the opportunities for institutions to play a role. Tinto detailed the factors that impact on student experience across time, in particular across their first year. By doing so he identified opportunities for the institutions to have an impact on the student experience and ultimately their decision to persist or dropout. He categorised these factors as:

- Pre-entry Attributes
- Goals Commitments T1
- Institutional Experiences
- Personal/Normative Integration
- Student Effort
- Educational Outcomes
- Goal Commitments Term 2
- Outcome

Each of these elements had subcategories that when met or achieved would increase the likelihood of persistence which was his ideal outcome. Tinto (1997) revised this same model emphasising the link between student effort and student learning/educational outcomes.

Pascarella's Model - 1980

Pascarella (1980) put forward a model to address attrition and retention. This model included five components: student background characteristics, institutional factors, informal contact with faculty and other college experiences and educational outcomes. He put forward that how these 5 components were experienced by students would in turn impact on their decision to continue with their study or to drop out. Pascarella, like Spady and Tinto before him, came up against the same challenge of identifying impacting factors that were difficult to measure. The challenge presented was how to determine which factors were relevant to which students, and how much they contribute to each student's personal decisions to persevere or give up. He did place emphasis on the importance of informal student interactions with peers and faculty (Nicoletti, 2019). Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2011) discuss the importance of knowing and understanding what challenges are faced by students in order to provide appropriate support. Appropriate support has proven hard to identify for institutions globally with the OECD (2017), Beer and Lawson (2017), Rossetto and Stirling (2015) all reporting continued high attrition levels.

Bean's Model - Conceptual Model of Dropout Syndrome - 1985

Bean and Metzner (1985) presented the *Conceptual Model of Dropout Syndrome* or Bean's Model. This model was built upon past works and understanding of something he referred to in 1965 as 'dropout syndrome'. He defined this as 'a conscious, openly discussed intention to leave an institution coupled with actual attrition' (reported in Nicoletti 2019 p55). His new model was made up of three components that he believed impacted attrition/retention they were: Academic, Social-Psychological and Environment. This model appears to re-affirm and attempt to simplify the models that went before it but, in doing so, becomes too general for pragmatically analysing dropout/attrition according to Nicolletti (2019).

2.3.3 Recent transition models

The early models discussed above were considered to be directional, causal, or descriptive models in that they tried to explain or measure student dropout. Kerby (2015) noted that later models tried to develop predictive models using regression statistics and structural equations to understand student dropout. An example is the work by Lizzio, Wilson and Simons (2002 p31) to expand on Biggs' 1989 work - the '3P model' (p27): presage (student character), process (approach), and product (outcomes). The idea here is that a student's character and approach directly impact their educational outcomes. Lizzio, Wilson and Simons propose the 5 senses model (see Lizzio, 2006). This 5 senses model accepted that transitioning to higher education is not a one size fits all activity. The five senses included in the model were: capability, connectedness, purpose, resourcefulness, and academic culture. Lizzio theorised that if a student had a strong 'sense' of themselves in each of these categories they were more likely to transition effectively. He provides a reflective questionnaire for staff to consider the environment they are creating for new students as well. This model begins to embrace the increasingly diverse student cohorts that were present in Australian universities in the early 2000s by providing institutions with a self-reflective framework to examine practices.

Kahu (2013) and Gale and Parker (2014) also proposed new models that moved further along the continuum of transition models to become increasingly student centric. I consider these models to be particularly relevant to my context and I will return to Gale and Parker's model in the discussion chapter. They and Kahu build on the work of Lizzio (2006) by further exploring and theorising how the modern student environment and its associated complexities can be approached in transitioning to higher education. With each of these models there has

been a shift to the modern context with an attempt to address the current realities of students transitioning to higher education.

Kahu Model 2013

Kahu (2013) looks at four existing perspectives on student engagement and the implications for student experience or transition. These four perspectives are:

- Behavioural: incorporating both the student behaviour and teaching practice.
- Psychological: psychosocial processes that evolve over time and varies in intensity
- Sociocultural: broader social context in which the student experience is taking place
- Holistic: an effort to encapsulate the first three into one

Kahu (2013), like Lizzio (2006), places the student at the centre of the model or framework, she identifies 'influences' and 'consequences' that play a role in student engagement and theorises that if they are met then student outcomes improve. The influences are structural and psychosocial which contribute to engagement. While the consequences are described as proximal and distal. Proximal includes things like learning achievement and satisfaction, while distal includes things like retention, work success and lifelong learning. The ability to attempt to conceptualise competing factors that play a role in the transition experience fits with the idea that transitioning is a wicked problem that will not have a one size fits all solution.

Gale and Parker Model 2014

Gale and Parker's model appears frequently in the literature with almost 500 citations and is often held as an exemplar model for the modern transition experience. The final concept of *becoming* in Gale and Parker's (2014 p2) own words 'remains more a proposition, yet to be fully expressed in HE research, policy and practice'. Gale and Parker (2014 p738) introduced the following three tiers of student transition:

1. Induction – described as a pathway or journey navigating institutional norms involving activities such as orientation with campus and significant staff, first year seminars and introduction to information such as curriculum content.

2. Development – described a trajectory or life stage navigating sociocultural norms and expectations involving activities like mentoring programs, career and research culture development activities and championing the narratives of students.

3.   Becoming – described as whole life or rhizomatic navigating multiple narratives and subjectivities involving flexible student study modes removing the distinction between full-time and part-time, flexible student pathways allowing multiple opportunities to change course

The Gale and Parker model (2014) was significant because it furthered general understanding around transitions by proposing these three theoretical tiers of experiences. The first tier called induction relates to generally common practice in most institutions. While for the second, development, most universities also provide a range of services that support the development of students through mentoring programs, career pathways, and cultural awareness. The third tier of becoming as Gale and Parker note is more of a proposition at this point than normal practice. Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) provide recommendations for future models that build upon Gale and Parker's 'becoming' which will be discussed later in this chapter when the future of transitioning students to higher education is addressed.

2.4 Current literature and services or programs for transitioning students to higher education

The current literature around transitioning students to higher education and the associated programs used will be introduced here and discussed in further depth as the dissertation progresses and additional context and examples are supplied to inform the discussion.

2.4.1 Current social theories in the literature

Bourdieu's theories on social capital and capital habitus are frequently drawn on when discussing transitions to higher education. For example, Murtagh (2012) and Leese (2010) both argue that social capital (in the form of advantages gained through socioeconomic status) puts students in a position to be more likely to succeed or transition effectively. Bell and Benton (2018) discussed how first in family students and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to use university support resources. The argument put forward was that the students felt a pressure to prove themselves worthy of their spot at university. Something similar was noted by Wilkins and Burke (2015) who reported that widening participation students were less confident in their role as a student in an educational institution than they were as a consumer in a store. A sense of never fully belonging amongst non-traditional students transitioning through higher education is discussed by Tett, Cree and Christie (2016). They do note that as this cohort of students transitions and gains a stronger sense of belonging and confidence in their role, they are also more likely to then reach out for support. Jones (2018) reported that traditional students from both public and private

schools were more likely to have parents who held degrees. This familial history was considered an advantageous form of social capital for these students. From their past experiences, they were more likely to expect and reach out for support when required than their non-traditional peers. Christie et al (2008 p569) state: 'emotional dynamics are most pronounced amongst students with no previous familial experience of higher education, where there is no reservoir of knowledge to draw upon'. This also speaks to the advantages of cultural capital.

Holton (2015) uses Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus to explore the idea of geography or location playing a role in student identity formation. He argues that mobility/immobility 'can accentuate unequal access to education social interactions and learner outcomes.' (p2373) He explores the formation of student identity by looking at the impact of mobility and location on the transition experience stating: 'this is useful as it provides a more critical insight into how students' [dis]advantaged learner identities are [re]produced through their everyday sociability' (p2373). This concept was touched on by Christie et al (2008) who noted a sense of dislocation in non-traditional students who were not commonly part of the social life scene of the more traditional students. The student body where my research study is based has a large number of commuting students. Lectures are online and so students frequently travel down for practical classes but leave immediately to catch the train home, leaving limited opportunity for engagement with more local peers. This lack of physical presence perhaps impacts on some of these commuting students' abilities to form a strong positive student identity during the transition to higher education.

2.4.2 Current services and programs for transitioning students to higher education

The majority of current models of transition continue to subscribe to Tinto's 1975 theory on social integration for student retention (Tinto, 2006; Kerby, 2015; Altermatt, 2019; Nicoletti, 2019). The Tinto model highlights the importance of social encounters and a sense of belonging for students to their new environment. Since the 1970s universities have sought to provide orientations, inductions, student experiences that allow their students to integrate and socialise with each other while learning about their new environment in order to improve attrition and student success (Tinto, 2006). Tinto (2006) suggests that these practices have failed to implement the research that has been done since his original paper in 1975.

To provide a better or more effective transition experience, it is imperative to understand what the student experiences are with the current offerings, and what the facilitating and limiting factors are for students currently enrolled. It is put forward by

Altermatt (2019) that a move away from Tinto's model is necessary to address the changes in lived realities by modern students. While Burke et al (2017) discuss the new and complex obligations that many students have to contend with while studying. Many students are now required to hold down jobs to pay for their education, care for young children, or care for elderly parents. These additional obligations bring a complexity that perhaps did not exist to the same degree for traditional students in the 1970s and 80s.

2.5 Suggestions from the literature for the future

Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) suggest that any new models need to be more dynamic and tailored to student needs or desires, rather than proposing a structured model that students must conform to. They begin their discussion with Gale and Parker's (2014) work that introduces a tiered level of transition. Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) have taken Gale and Parker's 2014 work and have expanded on it using the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) to propose a reconceptualization of transitioning students to higher education. They suggest focusing on Gale and Parker's 'becoming' in relation to an assemblage which they describe as 'an emergent, temporarily stable yet continually mutating conglomeration of bodies, objects, spaces, affects, forces and desires' (Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2018 p1258). This is congruent with Beer and Lawson (2017 p775) who describe the issues related to attrition as 'socially complex, diverse and fluid, which means they resist mechanical, time-limited solutions'.

Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) go on to suggest that an alternative lens to view student transition experiences could involve a rhizomatic lens. They propose rhizomes as 'a means to de-stabilise root and branch, linear or hierarchical systems of organisation.' (p1260). They suggest that a rhizomatic model would allow for institutions to move away from a linear fixed model to something that has the potential for 'multiple entryways and exits' (p1260). Gale and Parker (2014), Beer and Lawson (2017), and Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) all appear to agree that the current models for transitioning students to higher education are not working and that a new model that allows for variability based on individual circumstance is necessary.

Successful transition is often measured by attrition rates, retention rates, completion rates, and student evaluation surveys. These measures also reflect on the institution and its reputation (Beer and Lawson, 2017). In the last 10-15 years the challenges of effectively transitioning students increased as the institutions were guided by Government policies to provide opportunity for students from diverse backgrounds (Bradley et al, 2008; Dawson,

Charman and Kilpatrick, 2013). This meant that the traditional university student was no more. It meant increased diversity across all aspects of recordable demographics in the student population. Ellis (2019) mentions that non-traditional student enrolment is predicted to increase by 50% between 2008 and 2019. However, with historical high attrition rates in non-traditional students the importance of addressing transition increases.

Ellis (2019) suggests that high attrition rates are directly related to low persistence which has been linked to demographic, academic and situational factors (see also Markle, 2015). Transitioning students to higher education is not an easy task. While resources have been directed increasingly at providing support services, no perfect solutions have been identified. This failure to find solutions is, according to Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018), in part because current transition models require students to fit in to the established structure which they feel creates a wedge between their lives inside and outside the university setting. Requiring students to lead a life of duality does not contribute to the 'becoming' discussed by Gale and Parker (2014), or the 'belonging' mentioned in the early models of transition. Gale and Parker (2014) suggest that we need to move away from models that require students to conform and rather provide an experience that has some fluidity on microlevels to allow for an inclusive model that responds to the multifaceted elements of individual students. The next section of this chapter will investigate the literature to identify what is needed for transitions to higher education to be successful.

2.6 What is needed for successful transition to higher education?

There is no simple answer here. As discussed above, institutions have been seeking to transition students more effectively for decades with little impact. However, Tinto (1999, 2006, 2017) places the responsibility for failing to adequately support students as they transition to higher education at the door of the institutions themselves. He argues that the literature provides insight into what a successful transition experience might look like. However, he argues that most institutions have not taken the issue of retention seriously. There are a number of things that appear frequently in the literature around the needs of first year students transitioning to higher education: most of them are still in keeping with factors identified by Tinto (1975) in his original work. There remain a number of superficial similarities between the models from the 1970s and ones developed in the past 10 years which may be underpinning the lack of progress. Students appear to still need support both from their peers, parents, and lecturers. This support can come in the form of encouragement, financial backing, academic or social.

Belonging also appears frequently in the literature as something that needs to be fostered in order to build confidence and lead to success. The need to belong is commonly framed as, to a group of friends, to a discipline and or the university itself (Tinto, 1975; Briggs and Hall, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014; Stirling and Rossetto, 2015; Altermatt, 2019). The suggestion being that if students feel like they are a part of something bigger than themselves, they will then feel like they belong in the environment and will persist. This is in keeping with the social theorist perceptions discussed above. Coertjens (2017) discusses the need to build a student identity as part of the belonging process. She suggests that when a new student accepts their new identity within their new setting, they gain a sense of place for themselves. This builds on Christie et al (2008) who discuss the rollercoaster of emotions involved in first losing ones identity and then developing a new learner identity during the transition to higher education. Building a new student identity and the importance of this for students transitioning to higher education will be expanded upon in relation to the findings of my study.

There is also literature to support the integration of support services into the academic environment, rather than framing students and services within a deficit model for weak students to go and find help. The proposal is that these services should be integrated with lecturers identifying and encouraging students who may benefit from them in a more positive light (Tinto, 1975, 1999, 2006; Morgan, 2012; Kerby 2015; Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews, 2018; Evans, Henderson and Ashton-Hays, 2019). Gale and Parker (2014) and Evans, Henderson and Ashton-Hays (2019) delve into the *messiness* of transitioning and the need for fluidity in services to provide students with the best experience possible. Tinto's (1975) original model also identified *touchpoints* where institutions and staff may positively impact a student's decision to persist or drop out. Gaining a better understanding of where these touchpoints are for students today may provide some additional insight into how and when faculty should reach out. These are areas that my research will seek to provide additional insight and understanding of in relation to the transition experience.

2.6.1 Approach to higher education

Students' approaches to higher education can play a significant role in their general success. A focused attitude with a commitment to succeed is discussed in Tinto's (1975) model. It is widely acknowledged that the first year of higher education has the highest attrition. Barriers and facilitators of students transitioning to higher education have been heavily researched for some time with the limiting factors or barriers having already been discussed in the introduction chapter of this paper. Tinto (1997) described a direct link between academic

success in higher education and the non-academic support students receive. He described a scenario wherein, if the students were satisfied with their outside of school experiences, they were more likely to do well and succeed in higher education.

More recent research illustrates a detailed picture of some of the commonly reported factors that facilitate and or restrict student transition experiences (Braxton, Milem and Sullivan 2000; Lynch and Dembo, 2004; Tinto, 2006; Bliuc, Goodyear and Ellis 2007; Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014; Guzer and Caner, 2014; Stirling and Rossetto, 2015; Adekola et al, 2017). Facilitating factors included things like having a dedicated study space at home, having the correct equipment and software to study online, feeling a sense of belonging at their institution and cohort, having a connection with the academic team responsible for their course, and having time to dedicate to study. Some of these factors impact the majority of students while others seem to be more demographic specific. The less tangible factors such as a sense of belonging, adapting to new surroundings, change in access to friends and family support network, insecurity about new accommodation, are hard to quantify or qualify in any generalizable way but remain significant nonetheless in how well a student fares in their transition experience. The invisibility of these factors to the institution make them difficult to address or resolve with many being beyond the scope of available university resources.

Students in 2020 include a diverse range of demographics and their approaches to study are important to understand. Kember, Leung and Prosser (2021) suggest that background characteristics can influence how students interact with their new learning environment.   Bok (2010) compared the experience of non-traditional students with that of actors trying to perform a play without a script. She discusses the impact of real lived experience vs sociocultural backgrounds in relation to aspirations and capabilities. It is her stance that non-traditional students often have high aspirations but do not always have the same access to the information that their more traditional peers have which impacts on their capability to achieve. She explains that traditional students often have parents who have attended higher education and they share their insight and advice. This type of information is less likely to be shared with non-traditional students by their parents due to circumstance. She argues that students are not being provided with the information required to successfully approach higher education. While Heagney and Benson (2017) recommend a more focused approach from universities, one that sees staff familiar to the students who they know and trust providing them with guidance on available resources to succeed.

Jones (2018) reports on student expectations comparing non-traditional students to traditional and private school students. He found that non-traditional students felt that there was a *lingo* to learn, and they needed to *learn to play the game* while more traditional students did not feel these needs in the same way. He also reported that non-traditional students were less likely to expect academic support while traditional students from both public and private schools were more likely to expect and use academic support services. He suggests that the non-traditional students were less likely to be familiar with using academic support while the traditional students were likely to have parents who attended higher education and would encourage them to make the most of the resources. This builds in some ways upon Bok's (2010) work where non-traditional students are at a disadvantage based on not being fully aware of the information that could assist with their success.

Bell and Benton (2018) detailed the non-traditional student experience with transitioning to higher education. They presented a story of students who were trying to prove that they deserved to be there. That they had earned their place and could achieve success without support. They noted that non-traditional students reported that they did not think support services were for them and the importance placed on proving that they had earned their place and belonged at the institution. This lack of surety in belonging and in some ways communicating leads to an interesting discussion on how students can be best supported. Wilkins and Burke (2015) discuss how staff that had previously been non-traditional students were in a good position to work with these students to help them achieve.

2.6.2 Transitioning to higher education – fitting it all in!

Time management is important for students who are trying to manage work, family, and study. With work and family commitments being beyond the scope of the university to manage, and the degree to which students are impacted by these factors varies between students and their individual circumstances. Time is a big thing, finding time and spending time are common concerns in students who have outside obligations. Bolham and Dodgson (2003) discuss that retention of mature students is impacted by lack of preparedness and timetabling. As described by Bennett and Burke (2018 p914) 'time is experienced contextually'. They claim (p916) that 'there is a significant tension and disjuncture between official institutional discourses of time that mask important inequalities and difficulties that many students experience in higher education.' For mature students who have a wide range of non-academic obligations and responsibilities such as: children, spouses, elderly parents, and work to contend with timetabling can result in a sort of forced attrition.

2.6.3 Academic support services

Another factor that has likely played a role in the challenge to find solutions to transitioning students into higher education is that academic support services have often been misunderstood, underappreciated and at worst seen as an after-thought in higher education institutions (Kahu, 2013; Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews, 2018). Even as things are starting to slowly improve in this arena, academics and students commonly admit to not knowing what is available and how to best use the resources (Walsh, Larsen and Parry, 2009; Kahu, 2013; Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews, 2018). Academic support services are sometimes used as a 'catch all' place for weak students to go and get support, not something that the academics need to engage with in any real depth (Tinto, 2006; Kahu, 2013; Baker et al, 2018).

Neoliberalist views often frame support services in a deficit model as something students only need if they are not up to an expected standard or perhaps somewhere to send students who are taking up too much of an academic's time (Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews, 2018). Kahu (2013) argues if students were not placed in a deficit model but instead one that attempted to understand sociocultural contexts then the truths of individual experiences would become apparent. Kahu (2013) claims that understanding students in an effort to build or develop them as opposed to viewing them as under prepared or less capable than their peers would encourage a higher uptake of services. Curran (2017) and Jones (2018) describe the need for staff and student voices to provide qualitative understanding to the discourse around transition and the available services.

There appears to be some slow growth and movement towards a change of perspective in relation to academic support services, with some students starting to see it as a place to strengthen and improve existing skills that are already satisfactory (Kahu, 2013). It is also true that in some institutions academic support services are being increasingly integrated into previously academic territory. For instance, online learning platforms like Moodle can now have direct links to the academic support services and academics are able to directly refer students for specific areas of interest. In some places it is no longer the realm of the weak student and while this is exciting, doubts remain about how widespread this may be. Another interesting thing to note is that the language is changing, institutions are moving away from 'support' to words like 'learning' which has a more positive spin.

Currently, there is limited data detailing students' experiences and views on using available academic support services in relation to transitioning to higher education. The literature suggests that non-traditional students are less likely to use academic support

services (Bell and Benton 2018). This lack of use has been attributed to a wide range of factors including the need to prove they can succeed on their own, external life commitments that limit opportunity, 'not thinking it is for them' just to name a few.

2.6.4 Communicating with students

Language and communication amongst stakeholders in higher education is important for ensuring that messages are being received and understood. An important aspect of how students begin to feel like they belong is when they understand their environment and what is being communicated to them. By finding effective ways to communicate with students, it is possible that they will tell us what they need to achieve a successful transition.

When considering how to encourage students to speak about their experiences, and also reach out to use available academic support services, it is important to consider what communication and language will have the intended impact. In particular, how these communications impact a student's sense of belonging within an institution and also whether they have a different cultural practice for communicating than the institution is providing. Ball and Vincent (1998), Slack et al (2014), and Baker et al (2018) explore communication preferences and discuss them in terms of temperature with each subsequent research paper building on the last.

Ball and Vincent (1998) explored how non-traditional families chose schools. They were able to identify that non-traditional students preferred 'hot' information which was described as coming from someone they knew and trusted, this included friends and family who may have information or commentary on a given situation. The students and their families were less likely to value or trust information that was classed as 'cold'. This was information that came directly from the university via formal written or verbal communication. Ball and Vincent (1998) comment that there was a general distrust from students that the institutions were pushing their own agenda and unlikely to be sharing accurate information in particular they felt the institutions were unlikely to share any downfalls or weaknesses present in their courses.

Slack et al (2014) returned to the idea of temperature in communication however they added a new category, 'warm'. Their paper focused on student decision making in higher education. The findings were similar to that of Ball and Vincent (1998) in that students preferred 'hot' knowledge, they were most likely to listen to and value the information if it came from someone, they had a direct relationship with. However, Slack et al (2014) introduced 'warm' information which was described as coming from someone they considered

an acquaintance or had some form of connection with. This included others in their community who had attended higher education, perhaps other students in their classes or course, and sometimes academic support staff. While 'cold' continued to be classed as any information that came directly from the university. Slack et al (2014) reported that students had a distrust of institutional provisions when it came to information about higher education courses or student experiences. Slack et al (2014) identified that non-traditional students had a smaller range of 'hot' resources to gain information from and were less likely to attend open days which further limited their opportunity to gain 'warm' information from existing students.

Baker et al (2018) move the discussion from purely communication to support. They looked at where refugee students go for assistance at university. Temperature was again used to identify categories. The students again preferred 'hot' support which was received from friends and family who had some experience with education or training. This was followed by 'warm' support which included in some cases academic support services staff if the student had developed a pre-existing relationship with them through some other type of encounter in the community. While the least preferred and least valued was 'cold' support provided from the institution. Cold support included lecturers and tutors with whom the student had not developed a connection with and formal services. It was suggested by one student in their paper that they felt as though the formal support viewed the students as having deficits when they were struggling which compounded their sense of belonging or not belonging as the case may be.

The literature generated by Ball and Vincent (1998), Slack et al (2014) and Baker et al (2018) around communication and support, all seem to paint a picture that includes a general sense of us versus them. Overcoming that interpretation of the situation to allow for a meaningful two-way communication pathway is important for ensuring that communication and support as a whole becomes meaningful and valuable to students.

There are indications that new communication methods are being trialed on an ad hoc basis with some academics trying to engage students in their preferred styles. So (2016) discusses the surge in students (both traditional and non-traditional) using mobile instant messaging (MIM) such as WhatsApp for a wide range purposes, including peer collaborative support and classroom interaction and discussion. He also reports an increase in MIM amongst academics to teach or reinforce content and as a tool for classroom interaction and discussion. There is no indication of how widespread this practice is, but Rambe and Bere (2013) acknowledge there is a lot of potential opportunity that as yet has not yet been fully

explored. Klein et al (2018) discuss how higher education institutions are increasingly employing mobile technology to cope with their students' needs and expectations. They specifically refer to Whatsapp which is widely used claiming that these types of platforms provide synchronous interactions and a sense of presence for staff and students.

2.7 What is being done?

Awareness of this problem is not new and, over the past couple of decades, universities have been working to develop a range of student support services that are more accessible to all students. Neither easy nor generalizable solutions have been identified. Evans, Henderson and Ashton-Hay (2019) describe the changing roles of academic support services alongside the diversification of students. They note that the services are increasingly required to be offered outside of standard work hours and in varying formats to meet the needs of students. This is in keeping with Burke et al (2017) who discuss timescapes and competing external factors for students' time that may limit them from being able to access resources during the standard 9-5 day.

The literature suggests that integration of academic support services and encouragement to use the services by academics are important for student utilization. Evans, Henderson and Ashton-Hay (2019) discuss the increasing need for advisors with eLearning training as more and more universities make use of online learning platforms. As academic content is increasing delivered online, the students and staff, must upskill in order to be able to competently access the content. Baker et al (2018) and Bennett and Burke (2018) discuss invisible or hidden factors that impact student transition that are unseen by the institution. Things like having appropriate equipment and software while also knowing how to confidently use them would fall into this category or confidence speaking a foreign language and or family demands.

Institutions both here in Australia and internationally are trying innovative approaches to provide students with other options such as Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) which subscribes to the concept of 'near peer' learning described by Bulte et al (2007). The 'near peer' essentially puts forward that students are more comfortable asking questions and learning from someone a year or two ahead of them in a degree rather than their lecturers, this speaks to the importance of communication. The PASS service also fits with the research done by Baker et al (2018) and Ball and Vincent (1998) that students are more likely to trust information coming from someone they feel they have a connection with and or have developed a personal connection with as opposed to that coming from a 'cold' institution.

2.8 Brief summary of research context:

The Australian higher education context has changed significantly over the past two decades primarily as the result of government policy and an increasing neoliberal agenda. These changes have involved increasing numbers of students from wider demographic backgrounds with increasingly different ways of engaging with the institutions within which they have enrolled. Current transition to higher education services and programs are primarily inherited from the early theoretical models that were developed between 1970 and 1985 by Spady, Tinto, Pascarella, and Bean. These researchers have had a significant impact on the literature and lives of many including students, academics, policy makers and other stakeholders over the past 40 years. Much of their follow-on research does not appear to have had the same impact as Tinto (2006) notes that new research has not been translated into practice. Academic support services are attempting to shift with the times but knowing what will work remains an unknown for most universities. Research over the past ten years suggests that the with the changing demographics and learning modes that exist now which were not present in the 1970s, it is time to re-examine the ways in which we transition new students to higher education. Gale and Parker (2014) provide a significant and much cited paper detailing three levels of transitioning that occur or could occur. Their paper provides insight into the complexities involved with trying to transition students who are not just students but are also parents, employees, and carers trying to juggle a number of responsibilities in a complex life scenario.

For me, as an educator this chapter has helped me to understand the complexities of a situation that I naively thought was going to be black and white. I anticipated that students were just not making the most of the available resources because they did not know they existed and if the available resources were communicated properly, students would use them and the transition to higher education would be easier. This chapter especially the research on changing global and Australian contexts and the more recent models on transition impacted my understanding of the situation I am working within. Gale and Parker (2014) and Taylor, Harris-Evans (2018) have influenced how I think about transitioning to higher education the most. Their work has shifted my understanding to be able to see how complex the issues are for both students and institutions and how important finding a dynamic model for transitioning students is for students in today's day and age. The social theories that informed the early models and Bourdieu continue to apply to the current times which provides some reassurance that the initial models have provided a good base for which new models can develop and evolve from to keep up with the challenges associated with

increasing student numbers and increasingly diverse student populations. It would seem that universities need to explore and implement ways of accommodating students to assist them with transitioning to higher education rather than trying to make the students fit into an existing structure.

Chapter 3 – Methods and Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter will provide details of the methods and methodology I used, including the justification for the selections I have made. I will introduce my positionality early in this chapter to assist with explaining my chosen method and methodology before detailing my approach. I undertook a qualitative interpretivist case study to explore the experiences of first year students transitioning to higher education and their use of academic support resources. This chapter will explain the research framework and approach I used. I will detail my selection of both the methods and methodology including my rationale. I will review my ethics including considerations that were undertaken and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on my research. After that, I will discuss the participants in relation to both selection criteria and recruitment. Once I have introduced what, why and how I planned to explore my research questions I will introduce my data collection and analysis activities, followed by my reflections on the limitations of my methods and methodology.

Researcher Positionality

Holmes (2020) discusses the importance of positionality for placing the researcher within their project and addressing assumptions that they might make. Taking the time to reflect on my positionality and how it has influenced this research project, provides me and my readers with additional understanding and context. As a first in family female international higher education student, I ticked several of the non-traditional student boxes. However, I did not tick them all: I was fortunate to have no dependents or a need to work to support myself during my first degrees.

When I qualified as a chiropractor in 2004, I quickly became aware of inherent power imbalances and also the responsibility and trust placed upon the individual who has the perceived power (in my case as a practitioner) to take care of those on the vulnerable side of the relationship (the patient). Experienced healthcare practitioners seek to 'share power' with their patients. Nimmon (2014 p4) quotes a physician who said that 'there is always a power relationship, in any relationship… acknowledging it and recognizing it is important'. I think this is true - by recognizing and acknowledging power imbalances, practitioners can try to mitigate them by creating a safe space. By creating a safe space and empowering the patient to communicate openly with the practitioner the impact of the power imbalance is decreased. The doctor-patient relationship is similar to the teacher-student relationship in

many ways. I believe this made creating positive relationships with students, when I moved into academia, relatively easy for me.

As my career progressed and I was promoted to the head of course role, the power of responsibility that I had increased. So too did the trust from, and responsibility I felt for, the students. Having been a first in family non-traditional student, I felt a strong need to assist my students to succeed. I was acutely aware of the complexities of external life that many of my students were encountering as I now had a family and full-time job while studying part-time. As I watched students who were trying to succeed disappear from my classroom, I tried to determine what was impeding their progress. I increasingly felt that one of my responsibilities was to assist my students by removing barriers or challenges while accommodating their situations where I could. This is partly where the idea for this project began. I felt that I did not fully understand the barriers that were restricting their progress and I wanted to better understand so I could help. The university where this research took place prides itself on being inclusive and accessible to everyone. It provides a wide range of academic and personal support for students but still almost 30% of my students were not progressing past the first year. This project grew out of my desire to better understand the issues that the students were encountering so I could further assist them to succeed.

To explore the issues, I felt might be affecting my students, I wanted to gather data in a way that foregrounded their voices and minimized power imbalances between researcher and participant. To truly foreground their voices and stories, I decided from the start that this was going to be a qualitative study. I felt that qualitative methods and methodologies would allow for the vividness of experience that I was seeking. However, I needed to identify the methods and methodologies that would allow me to achieve the desired level of information. I am living in Australia and was familiar with an Indigenous Australian way of knowing and being that would provide a mutualistic environment for me and my participants: yarning circles. By selecting yarning circles, I knew my participants would be familiar with the format but also that it would allow me to mitigate power imbalances because it requires everyone to share information and past experiences thus creating a more level starting point. My desire to provide a safe space for students to share their stories would no doubt have also been in part due to my early career as a chiropractor and my early higher education experiences. My past experiences started to play on my mind when I saw my students struggling. Reflecting on my own early experiences, I realized that the challenges were considerably more widespread than had occurred to me in my pre-academic days. My initial thoughts were that perhaps the students were not engaging with the academic support

services and if strategies could be identified to assist them to do so then many of the issues would resolve. As I now know, this was a very simplistic and naïve assumption, but it demonstrates where I started from with this project.

Research approach

To gain insight into student experiences I created the following research questions:

- What are the students' experiences with using the services available?
- How do they describe/understand/evaluate their transition experience?
- How do they characterize their use of academic services? What are the main barriers and facilitators to accessing these services?
- How they might be encouraged to use the services?

I chose an interpretivist case study approach for this research because it allows for an in-depth exploration of experiences from a range of individuals to provide comment, discussion and further understanding. Interpretivists accept that many truths can exist at one time (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). This perspective is important when dealing with participants who have a wide range of backgrounds, histories, and experiences undertaking a similar activity, especially when different limiting factors exist. It allows for individuals to have different perspectives on the same thing, perspectives that can be influenced by their individual life experiences and personal circumstances.

In exploring the data, reading, reflecting, and analyzing it, I will seek to understand participant experiences and what these experiences may mean. I think it is also important to note that, as Guba and Lincoln (1994 p113) state, 'multiple 'knowledges' can coexist when equally competent interpreters disagree'. I think it is essential to acknowledge the personal influence that I will have on the interpretations in relation to the integrity and trustworthiness of my project. As I have selected an interpretivist approach, the findings from this research will be subjective and so they may not be generalizable to other contexts. However, they will provide insight into the experiences of some students transitioning to higher education which will be valuable to academic staff, professional staff, policy makers and other stakeholders who may be seeking ideas for innovating their transition programs.

There are many critiques of qualitative research, where methods, analysis and overall usefulness are called into question (Kvale, 1994; Hammersley, 2008). Williams and Morrow (2009, p576) note that 'there exists a subtle and lingering concern that qualitative research provides merely a collection of anecdotes and has not firmly established scientific grounding.'

To overcome this lingering doubt that exists around qualitative research, I will ensure my study meets the measures of goodness and trustworthiness laid out in the literature. I think to fully understand the transition experience, it needs to be representative of the lived experience. This means that it will likely be messy as described by Lincoln (1995) and not always fit in to a pre-determined box but that does not mean it will not be valid or reliable when describing the experiences within the context that they took place.

While it is true that my research may not be generalizable to all contexts, it will contribute to understanding of realities for a range of students in a certain context. For all intents and purposes this research is a case study. Heale and Twycross (2018) explain that case study methodology is almost always undertaken in a qualitative manner and allows a framework for evaluation and analysis of complex issues. My research looks specifically at the transition of first year higher education students at one university in Australia. The institution offers a high level of flexible multi-mode study options. This degree of flexibility attracts a wide range of demographics. The participants in this research will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter but in summary, they were mainly mature students using their studies to transition from one career to another.

3.1 Framework for ensuring quality

There are a number of different proposed criteria for assessing goodness in qualitative research. Williams and Morrow (2009, p576) wrote about achieving trustworthiness which is a measure of goodness in qualitative research, providing examples in their paper to 'emphasize the need for a shared language to reduce confusion between qualitative traditions and with researchers from a more strictly quantitative orientation'. Williams and Morrow (2009 p577) propose three categories of trustworthiness that all qualitative researchers should address: integrity of the data, balance between reflexivity and subjectivity and clear communication of findings.

Integrity of the data refers to the 'adequacy' or 'dependability' of the data (Williams and Morrow, 2009 p577). This means providing descriptive details of the methods to allow for other researchers to replicate the study, they also state that the analysis strategy needs to be clearly articulated. The final item required within this category is evidence that the 'interpretation fits the data' this is often done by supplying quotes alongside interpretations. The second category: balance between reflexivity and subjectivity, is 'the balance between what the participants say and the ways in which the researchers interpret the meaning of the

words' (Williams and Morrow, 2009, p577). I opted to use what Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as 'member checking' in that I shared my interpretations with the students to ensure I had accurately captured their experiences as they viewed them. I selected this as it allowed me to be personally reassured that I was managing any personal bias, it also ensured that my participants' comments were grounded in the context of which they were spoken. Xerri (2018) also reports using this checking in method to confirm his interpretations are correct. He goes on to confirm that this method of checking in meets the measure of goodness referred to as 'credibility' by Lincoln and Guba in 1985. Williams and Morrow (2009) state that ensuring the participants' comments are presented in context is 'an essential, if not the essential, component of good qualitative research' (p577). The final category relates to clear communication and application of findings. The findings need to represent the analysed data in a clear way that allows others to understand what has been found and the relevance of the findings to the context and existing literature.

Xerri (2018) also wrote about measures of goodness, however, he relied more heavily on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) measures: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is described as undertaking research in away that the findings are likely to be found credible and also likely to be approved by the participants. This has been discussed above so will not be expanded upon further. Transferability is a little more difficult to achieve given the uniqueness of each situation in which research takes place. Xerri (2018 p39) reports providing a 'thick description' that would allow a reader to decide for themselves if the information could be transferred to another context as an acceptable way to achieve this. He also looked at dependability as a substitute for reliability. It was his claim that using member check ins and triangulation allowed him to achieve this dependability. Member check ins refers to returning to the participants in the research to confirm they agree with the analysis and or reporting. The final measure was confirmability which relates to how the research findings can be corroborated.

I considered Lincoln and Guba's (1985) methods for ensuring quality, but it became apparent that they were trying to produce criteria that would be acceptable to quantitative researchers but by doing so may have been missing out some of the essence of qualitative research. Schwandt (1994) also puts forward a set of criteria that seeks to justify itself to positivist theory. The concepts put forward by Schwandt (1994) and Lincoln (1995) included setting standards, benchmarking, and regulative ideals. The challenges of finding a standard or universal set of measures of goodness is that qualitative research is fuzzy, fluid

and uncertain (Lincoln, 1995). Qualitative research has many paradigms and ontological approaches that, it seems, cannot accurately be evaluated by one tool. In fact, Williams and Morrow (2009) identify the multitude of approaches and unknowns as an area for future research.

Authors (Lincoln, 1995; Mays and Pope, 2000; Malterud, 2001; Whittemore et al, 2001) have put forward possible approaches each of which were considered. In the end to ensure I could achieve trustworthiness within the context of my research study, I drew from Malterud (2001), Whittemore et al (2001) and Williams and Morrow (2009) to design this framework which includes the following primary criteria:

1. The research question must be clear.
2. My perspectives on the research topic and my motives for the study need to be acknowledged.
3. The methods and methodology must be appropriate for answering the study question.
4. Participant selection process must be described.
5. Details of the procedures involved in data collection and analysis must also be clearly provided.
6. The findings, discussions and conclusions must be clear and true to the data.

These primary criteria provide a strong framework for this study to explore the research questions. However, I did not just want to explore the questions, I also wanted a level of detail that would allow the reader to not just understand the experience but also to be able to imagine the lived experience. This would require acknowledging and prioritizing expression, authenticity, and vivid commentary. To do that, I have included secondary criteria that have a stronger qualitative feel to them. The aim of the secondary criteria is to bring life and authenticity into the primary criteria, to help anyone reading my research to be able to imagine the experience. The secondary criteria are:

1. The analysis needs to be thorough and sensitive.
2. The reporting needs to be authentic, explicit and vivid.

I sought to increase the value of the findings and ensure that there was compliance with the measures of goodness identified in the literature to assist with creating my framework.

As noted above, Williams and Morrow (2009) claim that ensuring the participants' comments are presented in context is essential to producing trustworthy research. In order to ensure that what I found through my data analysis and interpretations accurately represented my participants' voices, I shared with them a summary of my findings after each phase including common topics that occurred during each yarning circle and outliers as well. The

yarning circle data collection tool that I used in some ways naturally arranged the data. As students commented on their own experiences, they would also touch on that of others in relation to whatever was being discussed. This is clearly demonstrated in the findings chapter where one student will comment on something, and another will say something like: 'I have also experienced that but for me it was more about ….' This natural arrangement of data in some ways represented an organic form of triangulation. Walker et al (2014 p1219) stated in relation to data and participants in a yarning circle: 'essentially, their values are centered in the research process, and this allows them to become an active voice for their community's needs and concerns'.

Once I had analyzed the data and generated the themes and subthemes, these were also shared with my student participants for their comments. This provided me with confidence that they felt their views were accurately represented in my findings. As I will discuss later in this chapter, during the generation of the themes, I did initially try to structure them to fit my understanding but after some reflection and discussion with my supervisor, I was able to identify where I had been starting to move away from the measures of goodness that I was working with. At that point, I went through my data with fresh eyes and was able to ensure, through reflection (Williams and Morrow, 2009 and Xerri, 2018), that I kept to my measures of goodness. This in itself was a good learning experience as it is very easy to go down a rabbit hole if one is not continuously reflecting 'in action' as Schon (1984) details.

While I have acknowledged that there are critiques of qualitative research, critique can be made of any research and the responsibility of providing clear quality criteria to evaluate the research, lies with the researchers and authors of a study (Qazi, 2011). I am confident that my framework allowed me to explore my research questions in a way that ensured goodness to enable my findings to contribute to the understanding of student experiences while transitioning to higher education and their use of academic support services.

3.1.1 Methods

I considered a number of methods to best approach this study to ensure that every opportunity was taken to accurately and vividly describe the experiences of students who are transitioning into higher education. It was important to me that students who were being asked to discuss personal experiences be provided with a safe forum to do so to assist with

the authenticity of the data collected.   My decision-making here was influenced by Xerri (2018) who discussed the dynamics of power when interviewing or researching your own students. He acknowledged that if participants 'felt in any way coerced [he] would be invalidating [his] research' (Xerri, 2018 p38) While I was not directly responsible for teaching any of my participants, I am the Head of Course for their discipline. My role in their education means that students could perceive me as holding a position of power or influence over them. The potential for students to feel any type of pressure when participating in my project was an important factor and I was conscious of the need to ensure that I created a safe space to speak openly.   My research invited individuals to share personal experiences with others and as such creating a safe environment was required to get open and honest information. My main objectives were to prioritise the student perspectives and elicit their voices on the topic of transitioning to higher education and use of academic support services.

To encourage the students to speak openly and freely, it was important to acknowledge that power imbalances exist to varying degrees with different data collection tools. It was important to me that the students were not to feel judged or 'researched' if I was going to ask them to open up and share their experiences. I wanted them to be able to speak freely. I know as a healthcare professional that I have to constantly be aware of power imbalances in the clinical setting as patients will sometimes try to give the answers, they think I want to hear. If this occurred in my research, I would lose the authenticity that I am seeking. I sometimes feel that same power imbalance with students and so I needed to find ways to address this potential limitation.

To address potential imbalances, I drew on research by Witteman et al (2018) who put forward 12 lessons learned for effective research partnerships. This included things like providing the participants with some background about me, my project, why I was doing it and what I needed from each of them in relation to roles they would play. For illustration purposes, I introduced myself with a story of who I am and what I was trying to achieve rather than giving my title. I explained what the goals of the project were, and the roles each person would play. This included details of the ground rules of the chosen data collection tool, which I will expand upon in more detail below. These actions served to reduce the risk of creating a hierarchy. In that all roles would involve the same activities, no one was taking on a bigger role and everyone was clear on the approach. I wanted participants to each have the opportunity to speak without there being one voice more important than the others and for them to be allowed to express themselves entirely. With my goals clear on what I wanted

from a data collection approach; an exploration of possible data collection methods was undertaken.

The potential for an obvious power imbalance exists in most methods I considered:

- Focus groups were considered. However, in order to answer my research question, I needed to hear about the participants' experiences in detail. It is claimed by Acocella (2012) that in a focus group when one person is talking about something that resonates with another person, that other person will frequently interrupt to add their experience and by doing so neither participant ends up completing their comments. If as a moderator of the discussion I was to start telling people to wait their turns the aim of not having a hierarchy would be lost.
- Individual interviews were also considered. While they would have provided the participant with the opportunity to talk freely some students might have felt uncomfortable doing so with one of their academic staff members and the inherent power imbalance that would be present.

In the end, I chose a yarning circle approach. Walker et al (2014 p1217) describe yarning as follows: 'In Australia, indigenous people recognize yarning as a conversational process that involves the telling and sharing of stories and information'. A yarning circle is an Indigenous Australian way of knowing and learning. I selected this approach as it aims to provide a mutualistic non-judgmental environment for participants to share their experiences, understandings and ideas about a given topic (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010). Walker et al (2014) note that yarning circles are different from interviewing because 'research topic yarning is a conversation that, whilst deliberate and with a determined beginning and end, is also relaxed and interactive'. Unlike research that uses formal interviewing, 'research topic yarning provides an opportunity for participants to take the research topic and respond as they see fit' (Walker et al p1218).

Yarning circles are an important part of Indigenous Australians' culture. They are used for a number of different reasons including social yarning, therapeutic yarning, research topic yarning, and collaborative yarning. This is in keeping with Kvale (1994) who claims that conversations take place between people for a number of different reasons including personal, academic, artistic, political, professional, religious, and therapeutic. I have opted to employ a yarning circle using the research topic yarning style. Research topic yarning is described by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010 p40) as a:

'Yarn that takes place in a un or semi structured research interview. The sole purpose is to gather information through participants' stories that are related to the research topic. While the yarn is relaxed and interactive it is also purposeful with a defined beginning and end. Research topic yarning is a conversation with a purpose. The purpose is to obtain information relating to the research question.'

Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) acknowledge that yarning circles within Western research communities have been critiqued. It is noted that as recently as 2000, Bessarab saw her attempts to use yarning as a research tool in her PhD challenged by academics who argued that 'yarning' was not a 'bona fide' research method and was not recognized by Western academia (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010 p39). The critiques revolved around a lack of structure and a messiness associated with stories. However, I would refer to Lincoln and Guba (1995) who describe qualitative research as messy, fluid, fuzzy, and uncertain. Thematic analysis also has a messy nature to it but that is where we can find the vivid details of the experiences. Rarely are experiences neat and tidy, ready to fit into little boxes, especially when looking at complex experiences like transitioning to higher education.

Using a yarning circle for data collection meant that all participants and their voices held equal value and importance which, assisted with decreasing the potential power imbalance of having me within their midst. The yarning circle method sees all participants sitting in a circle with one person speaking at a time. While this one person is speaking the others are actively listening until it is their turn to speak. A yarning circle often involves something referred to as a 'talking stone' which is passed between speakers. The yarning circle continues until each person has had as many opportunities to speak as they need (For step-by-step instructional guides see: Mills, Sunderland and Davis-Warra, 2013, and Queensland Government, 2020). In some ways, it is like any conversation, it ebbs and flows until all participants are done talking. However, in a yarning circle, participants can not only share their experiences or knowledge on a given topic but also understand the experiences of others and gain new knowledge. Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) state:

'Conversation is a major form of communication between people and can take place in different forms such as oral conversation or written conversations where people converse through letters, memos and/or email. Formal or informal conversation is involved in the production of knowledge. People talk to each other to convey information or to receive information, which once received and processed can lead to different understandings of the subject matter at hand.' (p38)

The yarning circle only allows for one speaker at a time; this method means that others sit actively listening with a view to understanding the other participants as opposed to listening

to respond. A yarning circle finishes when each person has had as many opportunities as they desire to speak. As a method, the yarning circle met the framework criteria for this research project. Both the data collection approach and the data analysis method were selected in part because I had used yarning circles and Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis previously in a trial study looking at the impact of time budgets on students' time management. I was confident that I could use them in this setting to answer my research questions.

Undertaking a yarning circle involves some orientation to the process, but most of my participants were not new to this type of activity. In my study, for the first three small yarning circles, students were provided with a password protected zoom (video conference) link. They logged in at the scheduled time, I welcomed the participants, performed an Acknowledgement of Country, and then introduced myself and the research project. I then explained the rules of a yarning circle and why they were in place. I felt it important for students to understand that they were in a mutualistic environment to encourage open sharing. The participants were asked not to speak over each other: one person at a time would discuss their experience or thoughts on a given topic. We then agreed on the speaking order, this is normally not required as it is natural and obvious whose turn is next when sitting in a circle, however, on videoconferencing each screen displays the position of the participants in a different order which often changes. To ensure the continuity of the circle and to avoid the yarning circle becoming a focus group discussion, an order was agreed upon prior to the start of the circle. All participants were informed that the zoom meeting would be recorded for transcription purposes. They were also offered the opportunity to ask questions and re-confirmed their consent verbally due to the online nature of the yarning circle. Once everyone was ready to proceed a volunteer was sought to begin sharing their experiences, once the first student started speaking all others muted their screens and sat quietly listening. Only upon that speaker finishing and confirming that they were finished by muting themselves would the next student unmute their screen and begin to speak.

Initially, there was some hesitation from the speakers regarding the relevance of what they were sharing and if the information was 'right', but as they progressed around the circle they began to relax and speak openly about their experiences and add to others' experiences by sharing their thoughts and perspectives on the same things. Some participants also made mention that they were learning things during the yarning circle that they had not previously known about existing services. They noted they had not spent much time reflecting on their experiences previously and that working through it out loud was useful. On average across the three yarning circles each person spoke approximately 4 times during the hour-long sessions.

The yarning circle discussions appeared to come to a natural close as all participants felt that they had shared everything that they had experienced during their first term of higher education. At the close of the session, I thanked the participants for volunteering their time and closed the meeting.

The yarning circles as a method of data collection were interesting in that the participants initially seemed shy and unsure about whether what they were sharing was 'right' and if their experiences were relevant to the discussion. This self-doubt will be picked up on later in the discussion section of this paper. However, as they progressed and realized that they were not alone in their experiences and that indeed others had found similar challenges they became empowered to not only share the challenges they had encountered but also some of the solutions they had found. This was followed by ideas on how they felt things could be changed from the university side of things to make the overall experience of transitioning to higher education easier. They seemed to feed off or gain momentum from each other's experiences and thoughts or reflections. This fits with Walker et al (2014) who described the yarning circle method as empowering for participants. By the end they were offering each other ideas and solutions on individual challenges based on their experiences.

Another unforeseen benefit of using this method of data collection was that while the students in each yarning circle were different and had varying backgrounds, they highlighted many of the same challenges, solutions, and ideas. I opted to run three small unstructured yarning circles first because Acocella (2012) suggested smaller groups could feel safer to participants who would be speaking. Hughes and Barlo (2021) suggested allowing participants to speak freely on a topic as opposed to providing structure was more in keeping with the yarning circle method when trying to learn about individual accounts. The first three yarning circles were unstructured, and students were encouraged to speak freely.

Across these three yarning circles many of the same challenges, solutions and ideas were explored by the participants. Any items that were raised which were different between the yarning circles, or would have benefited from some additional discussion, were raised in the final large yarning circle towards the end after the participants had had their chance to speak in an unstructured format first. This method made some themes more apparent from the outset, it also allowed for creation of rich data from the student perspective to be collected on each theme and finally it allowed the opportunity to seek clarification and or greater depth on areas that were potential outliers. By taking early steps to reduce the power imbalance that could be perceived and then allowing the students to explore and reflect on

their experiences in an orderly way, the quality of the data collected seemed to become deeper and more reflective of the experiences of these students.

3.1.2 Data Analysis

The data collected in this research project was analyzed using thematic analysis, in particular, Braun and Clarke's six steps. It involved two phases of data collection and interpretation. The reason I opted to collect data and analyze it in this way was to ensure that I captured all of the information I needed to tell the stories of my participants. By taking the time to initially analyze the data from the three small unstructured yarning circles, I was able to identify some areas to prompt the participants in the second phase of data collection.

In the past I have found that sometimes once all of the data is collected and analyzed there are still questions outstanding and rather than report them as a limitation of my findings, I decided to have a second phase to find answers to any outstanding thought lines. I am glad that I did because my final theme was generated from this last yarning circle.

3.2 Ethics

3.2.1 Ethical considerations:

Ethical considerations for this study focused on ensuring that the participants were protected from possible harm. Sanjari et al (2014) describe the main ethical considerations for qualitative research as beginning with the researcher-participant relationship. As a Head of Course working with students in my course, there is a clear power imbalance that needs to be addressed. While I was not directly assessing the students during their first year, it remains a possibility that students may be swayed by my presence and participation. To address this concern, students were reassured that there will be no negative consequences to participating, not participating, or withdrawing at any point. In addition, a mutualistic data collection method was selected as the sole data collection tool. As discussed above, all participants are considered equal and only one person is allowed to speak at a time.

Participants were provided with a detailed participant information sheet, detailing the nature of the research, what was expected of them, and any perceived risks or benefits for them. They were also given an informed consent document to read and were invited to ask any questions before agreeing to participate. While confidentiality and anonymity were challenging to guarantee due to the nature of a yarning circle, all participants were de-identified in this written dissertation. Hammersley (2017) discusses the importance of storing clean data in a way that prevents any opportunity for linking the data to the participants. The

data were cleaned upon transcription being completed. The topic of this research was unlikely to generate concern or upset amongst the participants, however as Sanjari et al (2014 p4) point out 'clear protocols for dealing with distress should be in place'. In keeping with this, all participants were provided with information about available support services within the university should they feel any upset associated with their participation in the research project.

3.2.2 Ethics process and post-COVID amendment

This research was designed and conducted in full compliance with the University of Glasgow and the Central Queensland University policies and processes on research ethics. Approval for this project was granted from both institutions to undertake on-campus yarning circles starting in the first half of 2020.

Following the move to online learning as a result of the pandemic lockdown, I submitted an ethics amendment to the University of Glasgow and Central Queensland University Ethics Committees to move the on-campus yarning circles to online yarning circles recorded using Zoom software. There were no additional risks identified in this scenario: as with the on-campus approach, students were voluntarily participating and provided with details of the same support services who could also provide online support. There were no students who opted to not participate because of this change.

3.3 Participants

3.3.1 Selection and recruitment of participants

Students enrolled in their first year of higher education at Central Queensland University were invited to voluntarily participate in this research by student email and by their cohort social media page. There were no restrictions placed on whether they were full-time, part-time, traditional, or non-traditional students.

Recruitment started out as planned, students were informed of this project in mid-March 2020 via email and posters. They were advised to expect additional information and an invitation to participate in the coming weeks. Unfortunately, in late March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic saw all students moved to online learning. This created a delay as staff and students settled into their new mode of study. Initially, it was unsure how long students would remain online so it was agreed that the data collection would be pushed back two months, however, the students were not back on campus after two months. An ethics

application amendment was submitted requesting that the yarning circles move to an online format. It was approved in June 2020 and recruitment was able to re-commence.

Recruitment took place in the break between the first and second term of their first year. All students were provided with a participant information sheet detailing the proposed study, informed consent including the opportunity to ask any questions they may have had. Seven students registered to participate in three small yarning circles. Recruitment was more difficult than anticipated with the students not being on campus and seemingly somewhat disengaged from the university as a result of all of the implications on their studies and personal lives from the impact COVID-19 pandemic. It meant that there were fewer responses than would have been preferred. However, the three yarning circles took place over one week at various times of the day to make them as accessible to students as possible. Approximately four weeks later, recruitment for the second phase of data collection began. The same emails and flyers were updated and shared with the students seeking volunteers. There were five volunteers to participate in the final larger yarning circle.

My original aim was to recruit between 18-20 participants for this study, however, in the end I had a total of 12 participants accepted the invitation to participate in this study. Although smaller than I would have preferred, the rich data generated is evidence of the depth of understanding of their perspectives. I decided given the quality of the data that the number of participants was acceptable to proceed. There is more information about the participants and their contexts in the findings chapter so I will just provide the details in numbers here. The 3 smaller yarning circles involved seven of the total 12 participants. There were two yarning circles that had two participants each and one that had three participants. The final larger yarning circle included the remaining five participants from the overall 12. There were five female and seven male participants. Eleven of the twelve participants were mature students of those six had young children at home. From the eleven only one was not working to support a spouse or children. There was one traditional school leaver student who did not have children or work commitments. As this study was open to all first-year students and the data collection method was a yarning circle. Participants did not complete an initial survey providing their personal characteristics. However, during the yarning circles they shared information about their personal circumstances which have been described above and collated below in the table. Where a student did not comment or identify their position, I have allocated them to the unknown category.

Characteristics of Participants (5 Females and 7 Males)			
	Yes	No	Unknown
Working to support dependents (children and/or spouse)	10	2	0
Mature age student	11	1	
First attempt at university	3	6	3

3.4 Data collection and analysis

3.4.1 Yarning circles: initial phase

The data gathered from the initial three yarning circles described above was rich and full of experiences. Many of the comments and thought lines appeared in all three yarning circles even though the participants were not provided with structured questions or prompts. This suggests that the data gathered is sufficient to provide insight into some of the common experiences of first year students transitioning to higher education. I transcribed the recordings myself as a way to further familiarize myself with the yarning circle content prior to conducting the thematic analysis.

3.4.2 Thematic analysis

I selected Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis process (2006) which is a well recognised and rigorous approach for analysing qualitative data. Prior to data analysis commencing, I undertook a complete review of the thematic analysis process to ensure that I followed the steps properly. As Braun and Clarke describe there are many decisions and considerations to be made prior to starting the analysis process. This study will provide a rich description of the entire data set which is encouraged by Braun and Clarke (2006) for under-researched areas. While transitioning to higher education is not what I would refer to as an under-researched area, Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009) and Gibson et al (2019) suggests that there is a need for further high-quality research representing student perspectives.

Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that a decision is taken early in the research about whether the thematic analysis will be approached from a theoretical or inductive approach. I have found being pure to either of these is difficult, in that I have read extensively around this topic for my literature review which will influence an inductive approach. At the same time being familiar with the literature may influence a deductive approach by subconsciously trying to make things fit with what I have read and the codes I selected. This speaks to the messiness of analyzing qualitative data. It would seem this is a common challenge for qualitative researchers using thematic analysis with Braun and Clarke

(2020, p4) stating 'you cannot enter a theoretical vacuum when doing TA [thematic analysis].' The 6-step process allows for a fluidity in that you revisit your themes and codes more than once. In fact, Braun and Clarke (2020, p5) confirm 'The analytic process involves immersion in the data, reading, reflecting, questioning, imagining, wondering, writing, retreating, returning.' During one of these revisits, it appeared to me that my codes were too narrow, and not fully encapsulating all the pertinent data. I returned to the data and was able to identify a number of additional codes that helped to more accurately represented my data.

The next thing that had to be decided was whether the thematic analysis would occur at a semantic or latent level. Semantic level identifies themes within the surface meanings, the analysis does not seek to go beyond what the participant has said. However, it is expected that the author will 'identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualizations' that may underpin the participants' words (Braun and Clark 2006, p84) While a latent level analysis seeks to go beyond the surface to theorise what the data means. I have opted to undertake this thematic analysis at a semantic level. This approach allowed me to identify codes and themes that encapsulate both what the participants have overtly said and consider the underlying information that the participants have shared. This research will provide a vivid and thorough account of the student perspective on transitioning to higher education and their use of academic support services. Thematic analysis of the data from the first three yarning circles was undertaken by following the steps described below:

Familiarisation with the data

After the initial transcription of the first three yarning circles was completed. I read through all of the data in one sitting, it was at this time that I began to make additional rough notes about the codes that may be present across the three yarning circles discussions. The data seemed to present a number of codes, that at first were hard to piece together in a meaningful way. There were things related to the academic environment, life experience, expectations, and preferences.

As I reviewed the data some things became more apparent due to repetition across the students and the yarning circles. Their experiences and usage of academic support services seemed to heavily hinge on a few unique factors;

- Lack of awareness of support available

- Time commitment involved with participation (speed of gaining access and of any response)
- Relevance of offerings
- Communication style
- Use of external resources
- Self-paced internal support
- Peer-peer support
- Balancing life and study
- Emotional struggles

Some of these elements from my initial readings were used as talking points in the larger yarning circle to provide me with additional perspective and understanding on the intricacies of how students are experiencing and using services. I also used them to seek student perspective on how these things could be delivered in a way that would encourage usage. Any additional thoughts on their transition to higher education and perspectives on positive and negative impacting factors were also sought.

Generating the initial codes

Braun and Clarke (2006) advise that this step should be influenced by whether the project is being completed from an inductive or deductive approach and whether it is being performed at a semantic or latent level. The codes should also represent one (or more) insights into the broader data. At this point I returned to my initial notes to identify ideas and interesting items in the data. A list of initial codes was drawn up using the entire data set from the first yarning circles. The initial data had 9 codes that appeared frequently within the data set. These codes seemed to broadly fit the data, however, further refinement and consideration was required.

Generating Initial themes

A theme summarises a number of insights organised around a central concept. I returned to my list of initial codes to analyze them for 'candidate' themes in the data. This can be done in a number of ways from colour-coding, tables and/or mind mapping. I trialled all of these and found colour-coding to be the most useful. According to Nowell et al. (2017), during this phase in the process it is also a good idea to identify possible sub-themes as well as themes. At this stage I struggled to decide how and where to place the peer-peer support component. The students used this in several ways: it could fit in with the theme about communication or

types of informal support, but in the end I placed it in the subtheme of empowerment. I felt that for all the things they were using peer-peer support to help them with, empowering each other and themselves was the interpretation that captured this best.

The themes that I initially identified from the data were:

Presentation of support: the majority seemed unfamiliar with existing services, but one student had a phone call prior to joining, introducing the services (she was advised that they were calling because she was older than 35).

Type of communication: emails are not useful and just get ignored. One student called the forums archaic, another found the idea of phoning for an academic learning centre appointment 'too hard'.

Style of support: preference for independent options that are tailored to the content and external sources. They felt peer or student mentors would be good, Lecturers were hit and miss as far as speed of response.

Speed of support: instant is the preference but how? There was mention of a mentor or student in a higher year being accessible as something that would be useful.

There was also interesting information from the participants about the need to juggle competing outside commitments, moments of self-doubt, emotional struggles and notably peer-peer support. Initially I was not sure where to place this and thought I might set it aside and save it for the larger yarning circles to delve deeper into the topic. It just was not clear how and where to include these elements and whether it was relevant to my research question. In the end, as I reviewed the candidate themes, I decided this information was both relevant and important to account for and report in my research. Understanding how these wider context factors contribute to the transition experience and their ability to make use of academic services will be useful to inform change.

Reviewing the themes

The candidate themes were reviewed to represent the data more accurately and clearly. I did this in two ways, first by reviewing the codes that had been placed underneath the candidate themes. My aim was to determine if the codes and the themes accurately

represented the data. At this stage, I was not convinced that the candidate themes fully expressed the stories of my participants. This led me to re-evaluate the codes which resulted in some of the themes being combined and two additional ones being created.

The new themes were as follows:

- General awareness of academic support services – which included elements of the presentation of support in the awareness of available resources at different levels
  - Subthemes
    - Formal resources
    - Semi-formal resources
    - Informal resources
- Communication – which included components from both presentation of support and communication
  - Subthemes
    - Timeliness
    - Effectiveness
- Relevance and usability – which included components from style and speed of support
  - Subthemes
    - Likelihood of the resource being relevant
    - Fear of losing time to an activity that may or may not help
    - External vs internal resources
- Wider context factors – which included the emotional struggles, the peer-peer support, the need to approach differently due to competing life factors.
  - Subthemes
    - Approaching higher ed with a strategy
    - Managing life and study
    - Emotions
    - Empowerment/peer-peer support

The new themes were developed by combining the presentation of support and type of communication candidate themes into one theme as both of these relate to different aspects of communication. The last two candidate themes were also combined into one overriding theme of usability while these two candidate themes became subthemes of usability and two

new themes were also generated. These new themes brought the experiences to life by providing 'light bulb' type information from the stories. By this I mean information that revealed the experiences of students transitioning to higher education in a modern setting with complexities that are often invisible to staff and institutions but impact both the transition experiences and the likelihood of students using support resources.

The second level of review involves reviewing the themes in relation to the entire data set, this was done by reading through the transcripts and all of the early notes to ensure that the themes and subthemes captured the essence of what the students were sharing. It was important to ensure that the data was accurately represented by the themes. Ensuring this fit with Malterud's (2001) and Whittemore et al's (2001) measures of goodness; it was imperative to be confident that these themes represented the data. To this end, the themes were shared with the students for comments. Students were asked to respond via email if they felt that the analysis had not accurately represented their experiences and our encounters. (No students did this.)

Theme	Subtheme
What academic support services?	1. Formal 2. Semi-formal 3. Informal
Getting the message through	1. Timeliness 2. Effectiveness
Is ALC worth the time?	1. Likelihood of the resource being relevant 2. Fear of losing valuable time 1. External vs internal resources
Am I doing the right thing, and do I belong?	1. Approaching higher education with a strategy 2. Managing life and study 3. Emotions 4. Empowerment through peer-to-peer contact

Defining and naming themes

As already discussed, the themes from the first yarning circles needed to capture the 'essence' of what was being conveyed and this was ensured by re-examining the data and consulting with the research participants. While there are comments and quotes from students that have been identified and will be used in the discussion to provide vividness and context of the voices and stories shared, I wanted to make sure that the themes were named in a way that portrayed a sense of their feelings about the topic.

3.4.3 Yarning circle second phase

As mentioned above, there were two phases of data collection in this research project to report in the dissertation. This initial phase encouraged participants to speak about their experiences in smaller circles. The second phase involved a larger yarning circle where I provided the participants with some prompted talking points from the findings from the first yarning circles. I took the decision to undertake two phases of data collection because, as I mentioned, in past research I have found that after all of the data is collected there is almost always some information that I wished I had asked the participants to expand upon. By undertaking two phases, I was able to first collect the unstructured data from students, just sharing their experiences. At this point the story of my data was only partially complete. While the themes from the first yarning circle discussed above provided interesting and relevant information, by waiting to gain additional clarity and perspective on some of the experiences the data set and the reporting of the data were more robust.

The larger yarning circle included 5 volunteers. The students participating in the second phase yarning circle were not the same ones from the first phase of data collection as the aim of the project was to gain understanding of a wide range of student experiences. The second yarning circle lasted one hour and followed a similar process as the smaller yarning circles. Participants were now back on campus but for continuity in the style of data collection, I decided that the yarning circles would continue in the online format. Students were recruited via email, social media, in-class announcements, and posters. The process and introduction to the yarning circle format and rules were similar to the first. This yarning circle was larger than previous ones and I was not sure if the size would impact the quality of the data but in some ways, it seemed to improve it. With more ideas and reflections on their experiences the students seemed to zero in on areas they felt had been key in regard to the challenges they had faced and came up with solutions that met and addressed some of the themes and subthemes from the first stage of analysis. I will expand on this further in the findings and discussion section of the paper.

The same six-step process was undertaken to analyse the data from this yarning circle. The data from this second yarning circle confirmed the themes from the smaller yarning circles. As was noted during the smaller circles the same was true of the large circle in that many of the comments and challenges were the same. I was pleased with this as it further suggested that the original themes were representative of the student experience. However, two important things were generated from this second phase:

1. Understanding of belonging
2. A new and final theme related to student led solutions

It was during this yarning circle that I began to realise that my own understanding of what 'belonging' means to students may not be accurate. In the literature that I have read (examples: Tinto, 1975; Kerby, 2015; Stirling and Rossetto, 2015), I had thought it meant belonging socially to a group of friends and feeling connected to your lecturers or your institution, but the kind of belonging these students were discussing was something different, something more internal. I will expand on this in my findings.

During this second phase of data students were asked to comment on factors that limited their usage of academic support services. The discussion initially centered around the problems but as the yarning circle progressed, one student would comment on a previous student's challenge by saying something like:

> '*Same with you there, like if you didn't understand something I found it quicker to google something. I was a bit scared to go on the discussions to ask something that may be repeated or to sort of put something out there and just feel dumb. I think it was BD our chiropractic lecturer, I did email him some questions and he got back to me. I preferred the one on one.*' [Student M]

This changed the dynamic of the discussion, in that others started to consider how they had faced challenges with their transition and what they had done to overcome them. This discussion of positive actions led to the generation of one new and final theme: Wouldn't it be nice? Student ideas for improving the transition experience and academic support services. This final theme rounds out the story of transitioning to higher education and the usage of academic support services.

The final themes after the second phase were:

1. What academic support services?
   ○ Subthemes
       ▪ Formal – lack of awareness and usage

- Semi-formal – good for self-directed work
- Informal - peers

2. Getting the message through (communication about resources)
   o Subthemes
     - Timeliness – if short notice not able to plan for it
     - Effectiveness – spam email doesn't work, too wordy, clunky process for booking
     - Peer to peer social media

3. Is ALC worth the time?
   o Subthemes
     - likelihood of the resource being relevant and applicable to their needs
     - fear of losing valuable time to an activity that may or may not apply to them
     - external resources vs internal services

4. Am I doing the right thing and do I belong?
   o Subthemes
     - Approaching higher ed with a strategy
     - Managing life and study
     - Emotions
     - Empowerment through peer to peer catch ups and group chats

5. Wouldn't it be nice? Student ideas for improving the transition experience and academic support services
   o Subthemes
     o Orientation
     o Encounters
     o Mentors (discipline specific)
     o Insider knowledge

3.5 Limitations

There are limitations that I would like to discuss in relation to my study at this point. As it is a qualitative study that used yarning circles, organizing and finding times that suited as many participants as possible was difficult. This along with the fact that my research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic meant that I was unable to recruit as many participants as I would have liked. An additional complicating factor was the Government restrictions in place at the time which limited the opportunity to meet up and actually sit in a circle. This meant that we needed to move the research online to a zoom session and create a speaking order to ensure that the discussion flowed as closely to a circle as possible. My participants are somewhat unique in that our university has always delivered tutorials online so they were well practiced with conversing using zoom by term 2. However, in a different setting this may have thrown off the quality of conversations. Small numbers are commonly associated with

qualitative research and what is lost in scope of participants is made up for in depth of responses and shared information. I also spent some time reviewing Braun and Clarke's website where they describe how to determine suitable numbers for thematic analysis and qualitative studies of this nature. I am satisfied that while I did not have as many participants as I wanted, my participant numbers are acceptable.

The other potential limitation was my chosen data collection approach. Inherent in a yarning circle is waiting your turn to speak and not interrupting someone who is speaking. This meant that conversations were not organic and did not involve back and forths between participants which might have stimulated a less structured conversation. However, the yarning circle appeared to produce more reflective and thoughtful comments and discussion than can occur in conversation. This is possibly because the participants were not listening to respond but rather listening to understand each other. In the end, I think that my data collection approach is one of the strong points of this study.

3.6 Conclusion

The decision to use thematic analysis and yarning circles in combination to answer the research questions while complying with the primary and secondary framework worked well overall. I was unable to find research relating to the use of these two tools in conjunction but found that they complemented each other very well. By using these methods together, this research will hopefully encourage others seeking to answer similar questions to consider them.

Some of the interesting points from this methods and methodology chapter for me was gaining more insight into how well the yarning circle works, not only a method of knowing but also of learning. The students commented afterwards on the benefits of taking time to reflect on and learn things in a group to inform their future practice. The process may be messy and require significant time and effort to sort and identify themes but when the themes were right, it became apparent. My themes will be carried into the findings chapter where they will be presented with my interpretations of what they mean in the context of transitioning to higher education and the use of academic support services.

Chapter 4 – Findings

4.0 Introduction to findings

The findings from the yarning circles have provided a rich and meaningful descriptive account of the transition experience and use of academic support services of 12 first year higher education students. While they did not all have the same experiences at the same times, they were able to relate to and discuss both individual and group experiences. Their voices and stories were clearly influenced by their individual wider contexts. This allowed me as the researcher to vividly see and hear their truths. In this chapter, I will present my findings supported by the voices of my participants.

I will first introduce the participants through their own words to create imagery of the speakers and their experiences. The value of this is to provide context to the themes and the findings reported in this dissertation. There were a total of 12 participants in this research project. All of the participants except for one were mature aged students. All except one of the 11 mature age students were working while studying. In addition, more than half of the 11 were responsible for young children at home or supporting a stay-at-home spouse. These students lead complex lives in regard to managing all of the many competing factors while trying to study a challenging degree level course. I have selected a few quotes to illustrate the realities faced by a number of these students. The quotes represent the situations being faced: shift working, childcare, leaving the workforce, supporting a spouse.

> *'I have been a qualified nurse since 2002 so I decided to do chiropractic as a way of changing careers. I do have children and I still work part-time in my job. I do shift work so for me it is difficult as I don't have a fixed roster so sometimes it's pointless knowing that the lessons are at such and such a time when I know most probably, I will be at work. It makes it difficult to even attend'* -Student 1

> *'I have just turned 31 to start study at this age and stage of life meant quitting a full-time job and all of the layers attached to the practicalities of studying.'* -Student 2

> *'My Mrs is not from Australia so I have had to support her over the covid time, as well as study and try to support myself.'* -Student 3

The realities of my participants may not be generalisable to all programs or cohorts but provide vivid images of the experiences of some mature age students transitioning to higher education while trying to also keep all of their proverbial juggling balls in the air. One

participant was a traditional school leaver student who was living at home with her parents and siblings. The findings of this research are primarily dominated by the mature age student experience. Additional research is recommended to understand the younger more traditional student transition experience. However, the younger student did provide relevant comments on her experiences which were similar and different in varying measures.

A number of themes were generated from the first phase of data collection, which were further refined and added to following the second phase of data collection. The findings discussed in this chapter are the final themes:

- What academic support services?
- Getting the message through
- Is ALC worth the time?
- Am I doing the right thing, and do I belong?
- Wouldn't it be nice? Student ideas for improving the transition experience and academic support services

These themes provide insight into the mature student experience with transitioning to higher education and their use of academic support services. The experiences identified in the data discuss the limited awareness of formal services offered, the exceptional amount of semi and informal academic support being employed. The students speak to the current presentation of support and why it has not worked for them while also weighing up the time gamble of using a formal service. The other interesting and significant transition experience that came through clearly in the data was a sense of needing to belong to the student role and the importance that peer-to-peer contact plays in empowering mature learners to succeed.

The final theme revolves around the students' thoughts and views on how the transition experience could be improved. It introduces ideas that would build upon the semi-formal provided resources and the informal peer-peer support that they currently rely most heavily upon. They discussed the potential value that some near-peer connections would have for them when they were feeling uncertain but did not necessarily require assistance from the university. They envisioned this as something along the lines of a mentor. It also describes ways of usefully increasing authentic encounters of real experiences of past and present students as a potential way of empowering students who are dealing with mixed emotions as they develop into the student role. The themes and data are rich in experience and thought-provoking perspectives on transitioning to higher education. Students, institutions, policy

makers and staff will find useful information in this chapter which could assist with future planning for student transition programs at higher education institutions.

4.1 What academic support services?

Within this theme there were 3 sub-themes identified that captured the student experience: *Formal services – mixed views and confusion, Semi-Formal services – the most valued resource,* and *Informal services – the most popular resource*. My student participants demonstrated a general lack of familiarity with the available services. When initially asked to participate in this project to discuss their experiences with academic support services students were unsure what was being referred to by the term. With some prompting, participants stated they were aware that there were 'services' but many had not engaged the services or, when they tried to, found them to be inaccessible. (The experiences associated with the university ALC were placed under the sub-theme 'formal'.)

The students also spoke of their experience and the value that they placed on the self-directed learning support that the lecturers placed into their learning platform. The experiences associated with these resources were placed under the sub-theme 'semi-formal'. The final sub-theme was called 'informal' this section captured the students experiences with informal and or external resources. These included peer social media study groups, Google, YouTube, lectures from other universities available online and students from other degrees or within the same degree but different years. These three sub-themes allow us to understand how students both view and use academic support services during their first year of higher education.

4.1.1 Formal services – mixed views and confusion

The majority of participants were unfamiliar with the available services from ALC. This is consistent with Bolham and Dodgson (2003) who investigated student engagement with support services in England. They found that the level of awareness was very mixed with some being aware of the services and others having no knowledge of them. My participants knew that the ALC existed but did not feel it was something that would benefit them and so had not really investigated the offerings to any real depth. For those who had made the effort to use the services the experiences were influenced by dynamic factors that were individual to the participants speaking:

'As for academic learning support, it is not something I have spent a lot of time wondering about. I sort of stuck right in to learning the material before the semester even started and didn't even enquire into what was even available'

-Student 4

'Looking for academic support, same situation as J, I haven't really, I didn't think my situation was applicable for it. Yeah… I didn't even know where to look to be honest.' -Student 3

A few of the students had attended Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) which are run by senior students from different disciplines. They provide students with a student led session to work through material or concepts in a specified unit. Bulte et al (2007) speak to the value of near peer learning as a useful method of engaging students. PASS seem in principle to be a good idea, but the students in my study had mixed views. Students in general liked the idea of these sessions but finding them, signing up for them and gaining benefit were not always guaranteed. My research participants shared their views on using this formal ALC service:

'The PASS sessions are really awesome and I really like those study sessions, you get to connect with other people, it was fun' -Student 5

'I attended one of the PASS sessions, I think they are helpful but I also think that the way they work and are structured in that they are run by students and if you have other students who are in there but they are at step 3 and you are at step 10 and they are asking questions it is not productive for me to attend so I ended up only attending one of them' -Student 2 (For clarity, this student is not referring to formal steps in the PASS session but rather students along a continuum of understanding a concept.)

'I thought maybe I might delay other people from progressing, so I stopped attending them' -Student 1

These last two comments are interesting as it seems that students on opposite ends of the academic spectrum were put off attending the ALC-PASS sessions for different reasons. The confident students because they felt they were being slowed down; this will be expanded upon later in the Is ALC worth the time? Theme where students discuss time gambles. While students who appeared to lack confidence were worried about slowing others down. This is concerning as research by Stirling and Rossetto (2015) indicates that if students start to become overwhelmed and dispirited, they are more likely to give up or fail out.

Frequently, the discussion indicated the beliefs that these services were more designed for traditional school leavers or that traditional school leavers would have more time for engaging with them:

> *'It is possible the services suit students who are fresh out of high school and they don't have the same commitments that I have which get in the way of these things.'* -Student 6

Interestingly, the only school leaver in the group commented that she did not engage with the ALC services as she was used to sourcing information online when she needed it and did not feel the need to engage with formal services. This may speak to a 'new normal' for students coming through formal education currently. The staff developing ALC training will have their own learning experiences to reflect on, but this may be dated and no longer in keeping with the reality of students.

One student who was more mature than the others was well aware of the services as she had received a phone call ahead of the term starting. However, even with the phone call introducing the services she still decided not to engage with them as a result of the confines and restrictions of her personal context.

> *'Someone rang me from the ALC a couple of weeks before uni even started and said 'we acknowledge anyone over 35 may need some assistance with maths computing and science and just want you to know we are here' so that's how I came to know about them. Basically, I am old and they knew I would need them. It was a useful call to understand what was available.'* -Student 6

> *'The service is in the back of my mind, making an appointment is a pain, having to travel in is time away from home, every minute of my day care time I have to prioritise and make the most of. It is something that has to happen, but accessibility is also a hindrance if that makes sense.'* -Student 6

It seems that if the formal services are to remain as a service some modifications could be made to increase engagement. Even when they knew the services existed, they struggled to prioritise time for them. The final theme discussed in this chapter discusses thoughts and ideas provided by the participants on changes they feel would not only help them transition to higher education but also to make engaging with services more user-friendly.

4.1.2 Semi-formal Services – the most valued resource

Semi-formal services were defined as activities or guidance provided by the university but not specifically from the ALC. These resources involved unit content, unit specific forums and contact with their lecturers. The most popular and most useful semi-formal service reported by the participants was the self-directed resources provided by the unit coordinators/lecturers. These included things like formative study questions, quizzes and or study guides. The students explained that these resources, were ideal because they could use them in their own time:

> *'The subject provided sources study notes, study guides and study quizzes are the best things. They are the best thing for studying and preparing that I have come across. I think I get more out of those than the lectures themselves.'* -Student 7

> *'I did really like that every week they had a test for you. That was probably the biggest help for me to test me on the content. I would go through it and it was sort of like a scale for me to know how I was doing because there was no teacher there to say you are doing well, picking this up etc so I could grade myself and say yeah you are killing this week, let's move on but if I wasn't so good, I would spend more time. I think that was the best academic support available to me because I knew week to week how I was doing and where I needed to work harder.'* –Student 3

> *'Sometimes things can go hairy pretty quick, I definitely find the independent stuff like the self-assessment quizzes great. For note making and assessment prep also I can do it at night, in the morning anytime that suits.'* –Student 8

They sometimes used the study notes, guides and quizzes alongside the lecture recordings to ensure that they were not missing the key information in the lectures.

Participants seemed to appreciate and use resources that were able to be employed during their own time, as and when they needed them:

> *'I print off the study guide and go through them at the start of the work or even before the semester started if they were up early. Really to just have them when watching a lecture, if you don't understand something you can stop the lecture and go back over it a few times.'* -Student 3

They also liked that they could return to the lectures as frequently as they liked to review and refresh their content knowledge:

'I have found it to be a good thing, you can pause, rewind and re-watch you know so even with the tutorials it is the same nature, having all of those resources there online and maximising on them has kind of been my approach.' -Student 2

This ease of access and online availability of these resources is likely something that is not only valued by mature students but also traditional students.

On completing the weekly tasks, students felt that they either gained a confidence boost when they were able to complete the task successfully and confidently. On the other hand the tasks gave them a 'kick in the teeth' when they needed it, to encourage them to spend more time studying or working on the content:

'Most definitely, in two ways when there is content that I am quite confident with it gives me the reassurance that I am on the right path and on the other side it gives me a kick in the teeth if I need it to get me back on track. It serves as a wakeup call for certain subjects as opposed to leaving it until the exam to see how things go.' -Student 8

'For me, they also provided insight into the type of questions we could expect to be asked on the exam or assessment because it's not just regurgitating stated facts it is often displaying your understanding of certain material.' -Student 7

This last quote also speaks to a desire to know what is ahead, to in some way gain some insider knowledge. This is discussed in the literature by Jones (2018) but also later in this chapter under the theme where students provided ideas for improving their experience. This desire for insider knowledge also fits with Baker et al (2018), Slack et al (2014) and Ball and Vincent's (1998) research where they discussed communication and engagement in relation to temperature. Students in that research indicated a strong preference for warm or hot information as opposed to what they viewed as cold information provided formally by the university itself. This will be discussed later as well but this point provides valuable insight into how information should and could be communicated to students more effectively.

4.1.3 Informal Services – the most popular resource

The final sub-theme relates to views and usage of informal academic support services. This was one of the most popular forms of academic support services engaged with by all participants. All of the students except for the traditional high school leaver had joined a peer study group chat. These groups tended to be no larger than 7 or 8 people and served as a support group, a notice board, and a forum for questions about the study content.

The chat groups were valued by all of the students who use them for keeping them up to date on deadlines for assignments, aware of any upcoming events, even scholarships:

> *'I joined a peer group, just a couple of people in a group chat where we keep in touch, if someone sees something from the university about a scholarship or something, they will screenshot it and put it up.'* –Student 3

> *'I have often leaned on peers, we have a small group of students that we chat quite often, reminding each other when assessments are coming up or anyone has questions… I have found that very very helpful.'* -Student 4

Students also found the social media chat groups were a quick and easy way to get answers or clarification about content being covered in the class. A typical comment from the yarning circles was:

> *'I guess if I need help, I usually ask another student on fb or another messaging app.'* -Student 5

> *'I also discovered the power of having small groups. We remind each other of assessments and assignments that are due and also just ask each other general questions if we are not understanding certain stuff or if we come across stuff that might be of interest like diagrams or things that will help us remember things we normally share.'* –Student 1

These social media chat groups also served as a place where students could share their concerns and be reassured by their peers that their feelings were normal:

> *'Just a small group of people that we talk to on a regular basis, even if nothing profound comes out of it, it is still good to connect on a peer group level.'* - Student 4

This desire to know that the things they were feeling, and experiencing, were normal for the stage they were at appeared a number of times in different ways. There was a clear desire for connection with others going through the same classes. This form of peer support and empowerment will be raised later in the chapter.

Another popular and commonly mentioned informal support service used was external resources. Students found accessing a short video on YouTube or a webpage on Google much faster and easier than trying to contact a lecturer or the ALC to discuss something:

'If I needed help writing if I hadn't or I needed to learn how to write an essay then I just YouTubed it.' -Student 5

'The PASS sessions.....I completely avoided it, it was far easier for me if I didn't understand a concept, it was far easier to quickly google for example how muscle actions work.' -Student 4

'I went to crash course, I went to 5-6 mediums online to find what I needed, just to get that different perspective.' –Student 8

'I have also been guilty of using google as a source of study material but I do the same process, I verify it across a bunch of different sources to ensure it is correct. I might use Wikipedia to sort terms or definition of something but for more complex ideas, it will be verifying across several different sources until I have a good understanding.' -7

Student 8 summed it up by saying *'the same with emails it was much easier to go searching for the concepts myself than to use the processes available there'*.

The students appeared open to using formal resources but, in the end, almost always opted for a more autonomous methods for learning. It is hard to say if this was because they were motivated and driven to succeed and as such sought out the information that best met their needs. It could also be that as mature students they were used to finding fast and easy solutions to solve problems they come up against. It could also reflect an issue with the delivery of the ALC support. I think from listening to the students it is a combination of these things. They are all very capable adults and have to make judgements about how to spend their time, while they understand that ALC offers useful resources they weigh that against the practicalities of using the service. It seems that this is the point where they decide against using ALC in favour of at hand resources that are accessible at all times.

4.2 Getting the message through

This theme explores the challenges with students engaging with ALC services. There are three subthemes that will be discussed in more detail as we move through this theme. The first is timeliness of the information, many of the students are working and having young children so they need to be able to plan to attend things. Another was the effectiveness of the message, most of the participants were aware of the service but not what services and how they would benefit them. Finally, the students discussed the surprising way that they most frequently

received information about ALC services. This theme provides interesting insight into areas for improvement within the presentation and communication of internal services.

The quote below suggests that the method of communication was ineffective and as a result this student may have missed out on support that may have made his transition easier by decreasing financial pressures. A number of participants reported finding out about grants and scholarships after they had already closed. One student commented:

> *'Whilst there were a few emails they tended to be very wordy and didn't really cut down to the nuts and bolts and didn't seem relevant to my situation anyway. I know there were a bunch on scholarships and stuff that probably would have been helpful but when I quickly looked over them none of them seemed applicable to my situation, so I didn't go through them at all.'* –Student 4

The students were easily overwhelmed by long overly wordy emails, this was also discussed by one student in relation to question-and-answer forums. They felt the level of information was overwhelming and as a result they disengaged. This means that students were and are missing out on support that could make their lives easier. For example, a scholarship or grant may mean not having to work as many hours which would give them time back in their days and decrease their financial stresses. However, the presentation of the support meant it was not absorbed by the students who could have readily benefited from it. Institutions and support providers will need to consider how to deliver information in a way that it can be easily digested by students who are time poor and do not engage with large amounts of information at one time.

4.2.1 Timeliness

The majority of the students in this research were mature age students who not only had young families but also had work commitments on top of their academic workload. They discussed the timeliness of the available internal resources and the impacts of potential delays. In particular how long it would take to get a response or gain the information versus using an external resource:

> *'I would definitely say speed does play a big part in it. There is an aspect that I understand these people have jobs, lives and other students so it isn't just me. So, if I pose a question, I try to be ahead of the game so it isn't so urgent so I am not trying to get an answer back in 20 mins.'* -Student 8

'Usually, a 24 hour turn around the only thing I find difficult is that it is not a conversation it is more an answer to a specific question and if the answer leads to more questions than it is another 24-hour turn around and so it becomes clunky.' - Student 7

'In regards to timetable stuff other logistical things I haven't been able to get in contact with anyone straight away. I just leave a message and often I don't hear back from someone for a couple of days or awhile and usually by then, I have gone somewhere else and figured it out somewhere else.' -Student 5

The response times being less than ideal for study conditions seems to have further pushed the students to use alternative external resources. The delay in responding impacted abilities to move on with studying certain components and, as a result, students ended up seeking out the answers from elsewhere. For example, student 6 noted: *'I had to source other information more than I thought I would need to.'*

A few students strongly expressed the feeling of being on the back foot before they even got started in regard to knowing where university resources could be found and how to use them which impacted on their time management and approach:

'I went to high school about 20 years ago.. hmm I went to first year college and then got the opportunity to travel and so I dropped out of college after the first year. I didn't do particularly well, I passed but just sort of barely. Then I did zero studying until I came to uni so it has been a cultural shock for me to try and learn new disciplines that have been long been forgotten...' –Student 9

'When I was in school and had a project to do. I had to go to the public library and photocopy things and do it that way.' -Student 9

'Intricacies like term 1 starts the week before week 1 because of all of the pre-reading or all of those little things that you don't account for all of these things that nobody tells you. There is all of this information that you realise in the first two weeks that okay now you have to approach the unit differently and you are already behind for example.' -Student 6

This feeling of being on the back foot is a concern as transitioning to higher education is complicated and difficult to manage for many. Stirling and Rossetto (2015) describe how students in the first year can become overwhelmed and drop out. This suggests that while

there are plenty of resources available to support students, they are not being delivered to them in a timely manner which is impacting their mindsets and confidence to continue.

4.2.2 Effectiveness

This subtheme refers to way that the information was shared or communicated to the students. The students frequently discussed how they were unaware of activities occurring in ALC as they did not feel it was communicated in a way that they could engage with it:

> *'I am probably not even aware of the services that they offer at this point.'* - Student 5

> *'The modern technology is really great and has made things a lot easier but only when you know how to use it, only when you know what you are doing it. Even now when we are talking about all of the resources, I am thinking I wonder what resources I am not using because I only really know about the ALC.'* -Student 9

They generally felt that spam emails were pointless, they complained that the emails were 'too wordy'. For those that got through to the end of an email and decided to sign up for something the links took them to another 'wordy' page where they would then have to try and figure out how to sign up.

Most admitted giving up before they actually got enrolled or registered for whichever activity they had been interested in:

> *'I briefly went looking for PASS services for human body systems but it kind of led me to this big jumble where there was too much to sort through in a quick amount of time'* -Student 8

The students commented that they often found out about things from their peers immediately before or after an activity which meant they did not have time to plan to attend. The effectiveness of peer-to-peer transmission of information was notable in all of the yarning circles. Students often relied on their online chat groups to keep up with university requirements:

> *'I'd ask a quick question of a peer rather than sit through an 60-90 minute study session with others that may or may not be relevant'* -Student 4

The visibility of the services appears to be low for students who are already burdened down with life and university commitments:

'I find trying to find that information is another pressure on time. I am in a similar boat to J, in that I have three kids, working and studying so time is somewhat constrained.' -Student 7

It is worth noting that it was not only the non-traditional students who had issues with the available services. The one traditional student was also unaware of the services available and had not used them but during the yarning circle, closer to the end, she commented:

'Everyone else is busy and have commitments but I am just at home so I should try the ALC this semester' -Student 10

It is likely that she was feeling acutely aware of the different experience that she was having during her first year to the others in the group. I think there would be value in looking into the traditional school leavers experiences using the yarning circle method as a data collection tool as it allows participants to dig into a topic. It was interesting to see how they responded to what the person before had said but then built upon it with their experience, whether they were agreeing that there was a problem or to mention how they had met the problem identified and moved passed it.

It seems that the pathway for engaging with services has too many obstacles for students to persevere through to get where they want to be. The participant comments always come back to time. Time it takes to sign up, amount of notice given in order to plan to attend, time the session lasts versus other available resources. Burke et al (2017) wrote about timescapes and how time is viewed and experienced by non-traditional students, and their work is supported by the data from the yarning circles. The students have a range of competing factors that all need to be managed, an inefficiency in their daily activities has a real impact on the other aspects of their lives. It is possible that streamlining and creating intuitive pathways would allow potential participants a more equitable experience when it comes to engaging with support services.

4.3 Is ALC worth the time?

This theme speaks to the constant battle faced by these mature students on how to spend their time. They spoke of having to weigh up whether the likely benefit was worth the time investment involved in attending a session at the ALC. It was important to each of them that they were certain they could not get the same benefits somewhere else in a shorter time. The three subthemes within this theme are the likelihood of the resource being relevant and applicable to their needs. The second was a fear of losing valuable time to an activity that

may not apply to them and finally the internal vs external resources in particular the ease and convenience of use.

4.3.1 Likelihood of the resource being relevant and applicable to their needs

The participants wanted to be reassured somehow that the resources were going to be relevant and applicable to their needs. They felt that sometimes this was unclear from the description of the offered sessions. Sometimes they felt that they just needed a small component, or a specific topic clarified but were not sure if it would be in a group setting. They mostly did not like the idea of interrupting a session to ask specific questions or seek clarification in case they ended up embarrassed:

> *'I found it quicker to google something. I was a bit scared to go on the discussions to ask something that may be repeated or to sort of put something out there and just feel dumb.'* –Student 3

This attraction to quick and easy external resources that allowed you to find the information without feeling intimidated was mentioned by a number of participants. Along with the possibility of feeling embarrassed there was a discomfort at the idea of slowing others down. Time was always on their minds. This meant that they could potentially sit through an hour session and not get the information they needed which posed a risk to their time allowances for the week:

> *'As for ALC I haven't used it that much umm I think I joined one or two chemistry classes but it was not something I really enjoyed. I like learning at my own pace and making sure that I understand obviously go over and over stuff for me to understand. I thought if I if I you know I stayed on ALC umm classes maybe I might umm delay the progress because they are obviously some who have got time limit.'* –Student 1

Bell and Benton (2018) discuss non-traditional students' aversion to using formal support services with the implication that they need to prove that they belong and that they can do the work themselves. There is some element of that sentiment in the comments around the resources being relevant and applicable to the participants. However, it seems to be related more to being intimidated by the fear of looking 'dumb' or slowing others down as opposed to a bravado of needing to prove anything.

This concern of relevance and applicability to their individual needs appears to again lean towards time investments. In particular whether asking the members of their chat group,

searching for the content online and reviewing multiple sources would equate to the same outcome and possibly save time and embarrassment. While the ALC run sessions may need to explore providing explicit details and multi-level learning strategies to engage all participants that turn up to activities. Losing students not because the activity was irrelevant or non-applicable but because the activity was not prepared and delivered for all potential attendees is problematic. If targets of educating wider demographics are to be met, then support needs to be strategic. While further research is required to explore this in more detail gaining an understanding of the challenges faced by participants and reasons why they are not engaging will be beneficial to institutions and policy makers.

4.3.2 Fear of losing valuable time

These students all mentioned having allocated study time in their diaries for the week. This meant that they had work time, family time and study time all etched out for the week. This protected time to study was valuable to them as it meant they were taking time away from their families or outside work which meant that they needed to maximise the time to make it worth that sacrifice. Some viewed ALC services as a surplus service that in theory would be nice to be able to attend but due to other pressures was not something that could be prioritized.

> *'I am aware that there are services available but I kind of think when I am going to have the time.'* -Student 6

Participants' time is tightly held and using it on something that may or may not meet their immediate needs was viewed as a gamble - in that if it paid off, it was great and they could move on. If it did not, it was lost time that had been wasted:

> *'I do feel that I am so pressed for time that I don't have time to do anything else that is not … that doesn't directly help me with an assessment or learning something that I need to know so primarily I haven't really been thinking 'I could get help from that or that' I've been thinking 'I need to do that in order to do that' so everything else is not important so I haven't really utilised many of the services.'* -Student 5

The participants also had to include travel time if the activity was on-campus, booking time as the process was often described as 'clunky'.

This constant need to calculate time spent vs benefit of any potential activity re-appeared frequently as can be seen in the comments throughout this section:

'The service is in the back of my mind, making an appointment is a pain, having to travel in is time away from home, every minute of my day care time I have to prioritise and make the most of.' -Student 6

While the university does supply online ALC services in addition to on-campus offerings. The participants did not appear to single them out as more or less convenient. These perceived time challenges associated with ALC vs using on online search engine placed ALC at a disadvantage for attracting student participation.

4.3.3 External resources vs Internal resources

External resources vs internal resources were frequently discussed by all students in relation to their transition to higher education and usage of academic support services. The majority of students felt that if they were unsure of something they could go on to YouTube or Google and find material that would clarify the concepts for them. They each had certain pages on YouTube that they regularly used but also mentioned watching 4-5 different videos to ensure that the concept was explained the same way in each of them as a way of validating the information:

'I also use a lot of YouTube, I'll watch one and then watch a couple of others to make sure the material is similar and then I will take it back to the material provided by the uni to better understand it.' –Student 8

There was also a general reluctance to use internal formal resources from ALC or lecturers, if they could find the information externally on the web and or informally via peers.

'If I have trouble with the concepts or just something I am learning. I haven't gone to the uni and asked like I probably haven't. I haven't emailed a lecturer and said I don't understand this. I usually just try to figure it out myself with YouTube or some other external source. Or just chatting with friends who are also doing it.' -Student 5

In relation to internal resources, students also discussed using resources within the unit's online learning platform page that were self-paced to test themselves to help identify areas for improvement. Once found, they would always go online to find videos or websites to learn more:

'I print off the study guide and go through them at the start of the work or even before the semester started if they were up early. Really to just have them when

watching a lecture, if you don't understand something you can stop the lecture and go back over it a few times.' -Student 3

Some mentioned contacting lecturers but felt that the back and forth was slower than ideal and sometimes generated more questions than answers:

'I think sometimes things can get lost in translation and not having that contact whether it be on the phone or face to face sometimes, some things can go a bit astray which requires more emails to go back and forth.' -Student 7

The participants in this study were mature students and it may be that their years of experience as consumers is coming into play here. Wilkins and Burke (2015) discuss how widening participation students sometimes feel more confident from the perspective of a consumer rather than a student in an educational institution which can be intimidating for some. These students may be viewing the 'products' available and determining which ones best fit their needs. This combined with their seeming preference for autonomous support options speaks to a changing method of engagement.

4.4 Am I doing the right thing and do I belong?

As discussed previously, the participants in this research have returned to higher education from lives that involve outside commitments relating to external work and young families. By choosing to return to a degree program they have made a big life changing decision that not only impacts them but also their families which creates pressure to succeed. The students discussed their approaches to studying, how they were managing life and study, the emotions they have experienced and the empowerment of peer to peer catch ups and group chats. One of the most interesting things about this section is this final point as these peer-to-peer catch ups and group chats are not a social encounter but rather something more akin to colleagues discussing 'work'. This one point changed my understanding and perception of the concept that is often included in literature about belonging. I had previously always thought of that as a belonging to a group of friends or to the university, however, this research has provided me with a new perspective on what students may be voicing when they talk about belonging as well as how transitioning may be best managed.

4.4.1 Approaching higher education with a strategy

All of the mature age students spoke of coming into this experience with their eyes open. They discussed the financial impact of having to decrease outside work and increase childcare. The choice of returning to education involved making sacrifices in other parts of

their lives. They did this with the belief that in 5 years they would graduate and join a profession that would provide them with a better standard of living and more job satisfaction than before. However, to sacrifice without a plan was not on their agendas each of them had allocated time in their weeks for study, family, and work. They all mentioned a decrease in social life activities as they could not meet these other priorities and still maintain an active social life. The students had to develop a focused approach:

'You have to set time. I have found setting a timetable that involves a couple of hours per day to study and time to work and do things for myself. After a couple of weeks it became more of a habit. Just like going to class. I found it really advantageous having a timetable to refer back to.' -Student 3

'I have a strict routine but I have to try and manage time management plus also all of the intricacies like term 1 starts the week before week 1 because of all of the pre-reading or all of those little things that you don't account for all of these things that nobody tells you.' -Student 6

They talked of needing to make sure that if they needed something whether it be from the university, the lecturer, the internet that they put their heads down and worked on it until they got it. They felt that they had real world experience that allowed them to work through things independently where possible and would only seek support if they could not resolve their challenges.

Students also felt they had a drive to succeed that may not have been present when they were younger:

'I was well prepared and this was a very calculated decision so I came in off the bat not going 'I hope this works out let's hope for the best' but rather no this is my chosen path and I am going to make this work.' –Student 2

Students mentioned more than once that their own drive had changed from when they first attempted university straight out of high school. They felt that their traditional peers who had enrolled straight out of high school did not have the same drive:

'I found a very very very different experience coming to uni as a mature age student than straight out of high school because I had to completely reorder my brain from the work force.' -Student 4

'It is now about gunning for 6s and 7s to do everything in my power to get in that bracket. Aim for the moon land in the stars where previously when I was just 18,

it was more like a similar approach to school. Ah well I sat in the class so I should get a B.' -Student 7 (For clarity, these participants are studying in Australia where the top GPA is a 7.)

'More interested in knowing and understanding not just here because I want to get a job but because I want this career, I am passion about it. I like the understanding of things and understanding them on a chemical level, just like when we talked about the human body system and the depth. So, it is just more of a motivation for me to excel.' -Student 3

'I need to understand things before I progress. I am not going to move on to next week if I don't understand this week.' -Student 6

This very focused approach to study and desire to excel seemed to be driven by life experience. They knew that their chosen degree was the one for them and a had genuine desire to grasp hold of their new profession to succeed. They are motivated by the sacrifices that they have made to enrol in a degree course at this point in their lives. By focusing academic support services to the needs of these students, who genuinely want to succeed in complex scenarios, but are willing to put the work in could result in higher uptake and engagement.

4.4.2 Managing life and study

The burden to continue to provide for their families both financially and emotionally was heavy for these students, not to mention trying to attend their classes as well. This was demonstrated by some of the student context information provided at the beginning of this chapter. To avoid repetition this subtheme will build upon those earlier provided contexts. They were very much aware of their other commitments and frequently questioned whether they could balance things better and how they were able to stay on top of their studies:

'After the end of last semester, I sort of like also told myself that the second semester I will try to do things a little different and also improve on what I did last semester. I allocate more time to study and set aside time every day because I was only having 4 days to study, I work 3 days per week. I have been spending close to 4 hours 4-6 hours per day studying one subject so by the time the end of the week I have to go through everything else again which takes me an hour or so.' -Student 1

'I think it comes down to my baby is in day-care 4 days per week so I can study that gives me 5-6 hours per day not 8-10. By the time I balance the 10 hours per week that I work as well.' -Student 6

'This is my third attempt at uni… it is so unfortunate that covid happened it is so much different to what I have experienced in the past. This time I am doing it with a child and that has obviously got its own challenges.' –Student 5

They enjoyed the opportunities to use self-assessment tasks to ensure that they were managing their studies and staying on top of the content. If they did poorly on the self-assessment tasks, they knew that they needed to spend some study time focussing on those areas. They found this to be a useful guide on how best to lay out their study time.

In relation to their families and friends, they were very much aware of the sacrifice they were making to be students again. However, their greater belief that in the end this would be worth it kept them pushing on. Student 7 describes his view on the wider situation and his sacrifices in the following quote, which sums up the general feeling among the participants:

'At the end of the day your job is to help and heal people and if you didn't do well you might not be able to. I need to put in as much as I can, it is a sacrifice, I haven't had a social life for most of the year. It isn't just a time and other commitments sacrifice. The study time has to be more defined and more focused because there is so much pressure on my time. I can't just sit and dilly dally around when I am studying, I have to be studying.' -Student 7

The participants in this research were making significant sacrifices to attend and as such had a high commitment level to not only be successful but to excel. They understood that their actions now would impact the type of practitioner they would become later. It seemed that by becoming the best healthcare practitioner they could, the happier they would be when returning to the workforce in a new profession.

Participants also needed to make sure that their sacrifices paid off in the end. Although they were only in the first year - which is arguably the most challenging year - they had a steely determination to successfully manage all of the challenges because the end goal held such promise. The promise of a better future for themselves and their families seems to be a strong driver for mature students. This fits with US Department of Education report written by Cataldi, Bennett and Chen (2018) that states first generation students are less likely to complete their degrees, but if they did complete them, they were then able to close

the gap in terms of salary between themselves and graduates who had a family history of higher education. This opportunity to not only improve their circumstances but also the likelihood of their children also gaining higher education qualifications appears to have been a great motivator. This in turn contributes to the development of their community, the participants are aware of the bigger picture and how their decisions are contributing to it.

4.4.3 Emotions

While the students arrived feeling prepared for the workload, they were surprised by the emotions that they experienced. The self-doubt around their own ability on a number of fronts became overwhelming at times for each of them in a range of different ways:

> *'I expected to be on campus in a classroom sitting with people going through the same things I am going through but instead I am sitting in the house thinking oh my goodness I am never going to pass this, this is so difficult. Sometimes your own mind is your own worst enemy. It isn't until you go back to class and you realise everyone is feeling that way.'* -Student 9

> *'I have spoken to a counsellor which was helpful just to talk to someone. Other than that, I haven't really used any of the services.'* -Student 5

The need to connect with their peers to regulate their experience reappeared here. They were not looking for any profound connections or experiences they just wanted to hear that what they were experiencing was normal: almost like an opportunity to take a deep breath and collect themselves before pushing on. Some struggled more and sought formal counselling from the support services. However, again it was just the need to talk to someone to voice the concerns and challenges.

They worried, and sometimes panicked, if they were behind or if they were struggling to understand a concept within the tight timeframes they had to work with. They were sometimes overwhelmed by the nature of having so many commitments and assignments due at the same time:

> *'I may have had a panic moment or two during the semester but as m said when you are struggling to understand concepts in the midst of that, I am an hour into 5 hours of study and I need to understand that before I move on.'* -Student 4

They had moments where their self-doubt and personal struggle really challenged their commitment to complete the course.

Students seemed to need each other to benchmark their emotions and experiences in order to validate their own experiences. They were not sure if they were feeling the same thing as others in their group. It was only once they returned to campus and heard from others that their nerves began to ease:

> *'The person over there who is getting 90% on the exams but last week was thinking they were going to drop out because they were failing. We're all struggling because we don't know what we are doing because this is year one. It isn't until we all come together that we talk to each other and build each other up and then life gets a bit easier.'* -Student 9

They discussed how important 'knowing' was to them. They found the 'not knowing' what was to come and what it would be like was very emotionally challenging. One of the interesting and beneficial things about yarning circles is that it is a way of learning, so in the example below one student shared their challenge while another student further around the circle shared their solution to the same challenge. This led the students into a discussion about support which will be discussed in more detail in the final theme:

> *'It is the unknowing what to expect has been the most stressful thing for me.'* – Student 7

> *'I was lucky that I had a lot of friends who were in 2nd and 3rd year in other subjects and I was able to talk to them and say 'hey is it normal? I am starting to feel like this or that'. It was really helpful to know it was normal.'* –Student 8

The emotional experience was a big thing for the participants in this study. They were prepared to work hard and prepared to sacrifice things they enjoyed but they were not prepared for the emotional challenges that they faced. The self-doubt experienced as a result of isolation from their peers was greater than they expected. As one student said 'your own mind can be your greatest enemy'. There is a recurrent need for a connection to their peers not to hang out and make friends but to make sense of their experiences and reassure themselves that things are going to be okay. Bok (2010) discusses the importance of students to be aware of the script in other words to know what challenges will come.

4.4.4 Empowerment

In some ways this subtheme follows on from the one above relating to emotions but has some important differences. The students appeared to have developed a peer network for sharing

resources and seeking assistance, and to have a business-like focus on their academic work. The students were able to empower each other through peer-peer group chats and catch ups:

> *'we have a small group of students that we chat quite often, reminding each other when assessments are coming up or anyone has questions… I have found that very very helpful.'* -Student 4

The empowerment gained from face to face catch ups were often casual encounters while waiting for the class to start:

> *'I did sort of enjoy when we're going back to classes and chiropractic and you can meet all your classmates and bounce ideas around. I used to arrive 30-45 mins before class, have a coffee and catch up with classmates, bounce ideas around sort of like a peer study group or a pre-class study to see what we were all up to and see what areas we were struggling in; besides that, I didn't have anything to do with the ALC to be honest it just seemed a bit too hard … to get around and sort out a time.'* -Student 3

While others talked about reaching out to their group chat members when they needed support or equally to share useful resources to assist their peers in areas that they had found difficult:

> *'I also discovered the power of having small groups. We remind each other of assessments and assignments that are due and also just ask each other general questions if we are not understanding certain stuff or if we come across stuff that might be of interest like diagrams or things that will help us remember things we normally share.'* –Student 1

Initially my understanding from previous literature was that students sought friends and social circles to belong to during their transition. I assumed that these peer groups were made up of people who were friendly in the class, however, for this group that proved to not be the case. During one of the yarning circles one participant said to another one 'I think you might be in my WhatsApp group chat' and she responded 'yeah, I think I am'. This was interesting to me as they did not appear to be friends or know each other. Yet, they had somehow ended up in the same group chat where they could reach out when unsure or share things when they had found solutions with their peers:

'I have often leaned on peers, we have a small group of students that we chat quite often, reminding each other when assessments are coming up or anyone has questions…' - Student 4

The approach to higher education that the mature students were taking also appeared to have an impact on their relationships with their peers. One mature student when discussing his experiences 20 years ago commented:

'The internet at school was a classroom and all of the computers were linked to the dial up internet. So things took a long time to load. You could literally click on the page you wanted and then turn and have a conversation with your friend and come back and it still wouldn't be loaded whereas now everything is 'right this is what I need click click click done'' - Student 9

The same mature student when discussing his current experiences did not use the word friend at all. Interestingly, the only mature participant who did use the word 'friend' was referring to his near peers in the 2nd and 3rd years who he knew before he commenced his studies. The participants in my study referred to the other students in their class using terms like: 'cohort', 'peers', 'students' and 'people'.

'I am part of like a study group loosely using that term too. We communicate on facebook messenger, it is kind of a weekly or whatever frequency that different people may ask questions about assessments, dates to be mindful of, so that has also been a really helpful thing for me' – Student 2

'Just a small group of people that we talk to on a regular basis, even if nothing profound comes out of it, it is still good to connect on a peer group level.' – Student 4

The approach these students were taking to the other students in their class appeared to be less about creating a social network and more about the tasks at hand. It seemed that these peer-peer relationships were more like work colleagues discussing projects and happenings around the workplace than a group of friends hanging out. I will explore this more deeply in the discussion where I will define the terms friend, peer and work colleague and relate it back to how my participants described their experiences.

This has changed my understanding of belonging in the student transition experience. I no longer believe for mature students that it is about belonging to a social circle or a university program but rather an internal belonging to the role of a student. Where the

student role is like a job of sorts and they need to work with colleagues to get through by bolstering each other and sharing information. These peer encounters, whether online or in person, serve to empower the participants by reminding them when things are due, sharing information and supporting them when they are struggling.

4.5 Wouldn't it be nice? Student ideas for improving the transition experience and academic support services

The students were able to voice some practical suggestions and ideas that would not take a large amount of work to implement but could potentially meet their needs better than the current services do. Additional research would need to be completed to determine whether these suggestions would also meet the needs of different student demographics. However, they appeared to want earlier access to the wider resources within the university so that they could familiarise themselves before the start of term. After that from the university experience there were two broad things that the students identified which would have made their transitions smoother. The first wish was more encounters with their peers and the second was 'insider' knowledge, tips and tricks identified along the way from the past students. They wanted authentic information that would let them know when things were going to get heavy or difficult, how others traversed the same challenges explaining what worked and what did not. This is in keeping with the literature in particular Jones (2018) who reported students felt the need to 'learn the lingo' and 'play the game' which they felt required insider knowledge.

The first suggestion put forward here is developing an online orientation program that students could register for and start upon acceptance into a program. This wouldn't need to replace the on-campus orientation but would rather introduce them to all of the services and allow them to sign up for or explore the provided resources from the university including scholarships, grants, ALC services, social activities etc., well in advance of term time. This would complement the face-to-face first week orientation and allow the students to ask more meaningful questions at that time.

The second suggestion was increased encounters with year groups and near peer groups. The students showed no preference for whether these would be digital or physical encounters but felt that the opportunity to interact and hear how others were going and what they were up to was helpful. They also felt that the opportunity to speak to second years who had just completed the first year would have greatly assisted their experience especially in relation to the emotional struggles that they faced. This progressed to the idea of mentors

from higher years or a touch point student in the higher years that could serve as a resource for the younger years as and when they needed them.

It was also mentioned that if the ALC-PASS sessions could be integrated into the online learning platform in a way that they just needed to click on it to join the zoom session it would make it more straightforward and would increase the likelihood of them attending and also encountering their peers.

4.5.1 Orientation

As we have seen above, students transitioning to higher education today often have complex lives with many competing factors that make them among other things time poor. They often feel overwhelmed and behind before they even got started:

'Everything is a shock at the moment, I think the first 2-3 weeks are going to be like that as I get my bearings as I get used to the different teaching, expectations and assessment styles. I feel like a deer in headlights trying to get on top of things.' –Student 6

'I think I was in week 6 in term 1 before I found where the library was on the thing. I know there was an introduction thing available however I was in the UK when term 1 started so I flew in the night before day 1 of term 1. So because I didn't have a student number .. loads of different things.. I couldn't log in to the tutorials. I kind of started on the back foot. I probably spent 4 weeks trying to catch up and try to access my course materials and my emails… just little things like that.' -Student 9

Part of being overwhelmed was that they missed opportunities for different support services. By the nature of the delivery of the orientation which is an intense two-day orientation to all things online learning. One academic I know referred to it recently as 'death by powerpoint'.

Students also missed out on information in the emails that followed orientation because there were just so many of them:

'I think it was one of my peer groups that actually sent a screenshot for scholarships, I didn't hear too much about it at orientation, I did hear about the mentor programs. I know you could have signed up for one of those, I don't know if there are many people that do it. I didn't look into it too much but maybe if there was more information about scholarships before you signed up like you go to

class and they say oh you should have signed up a couple of months ago so you have missed out now so it's pretty much... (nervous laugh)' -Student 3

Due to their work commitments and families, they sometimes could not make it to scheduled events because of clashes with work or childcare. As a result of all of these challenges the students felt torn and a little disheartened. However, as a determined group of students who were committed to what they had started they did discuss how they felt this could have been modified to improve their experience. They felt that an online orientation that they could work through earlier and return to as and when they needed it, would have been hugely beneficial to them.

4.5.2 Encounters

Some of the quotes and themes discussed previously help to illustrate the benefits of chance encounters for students to touch base with each other. As they progressed their discussions through the yarning circle; ideas and solutions on how the challenges could have been met were also included in the discussion.

One of the main desires was to have easier access to their peers. Students wanted more frequent opportunities to interact and a less clunky system for doing so. There was no clear preference in relation to whether they wanted these encounters to be face to face or digital, but they remained important for them to be able to benchmark or validate themselves:

'I guess it would be really helpful to just have people there to chat to so for example PASS sessions are great but they have set times only like 8am on a Wednesday which is great but outside that time I have to find other options.' - Student 5

'PASS sessions - maybe if it was in the Moodle, well it kind of is in Moodle but when I go to Moodle I just go to my units. I haven't really looked around in there too much.' –Student 4

'I would have personally liked to have seen underneath the subject with a direct link to the available services and how the services could be beneficial.' –Student 7

'I feel like if being on campus you could talk to other people that are doing the same course who might know what you want to know, yeah that would definitely help.' -Student 11

The need for a simple connection to peers reappears frequently in this chapter, the participants wanted simple straightforward access to others. They had raised issues with following links and ending up on wordy pages that overwhelmed them by taking too much time. They are looking for simple intuitive links or on-campus opportunities.

On Campus opportunities were impacted during the first half of 2020 as a result of COVID-19 however all teaching returned to normal in the second half of Term 2 and 3. My initial data collection took place during the first part of term 2 when students were not yet back to normal delivery. I think the idea remains valid even with the impact from COVID-19 as these first-year students would only normally attend campus twice per week for two hours at a time so their opportunities for encountering their peers in person would under normal circumstances would still be quite limited due to the mixed mode delivery.

4.5.3 The Importance of having a Mentor

While a student above discussed how beneficial he found having friends in older years to reach out to some of the others were not so lucky. They did however feel that having an informal discipline specific mentor or group to access would be beneficial for them:

> *'I don't know if there is a mentor type program if there was, I haven't been made aware of it. I think that would have been more appropriate in my situation where I could ask a question to a 2, 3, 4-year student.'* -Student 4

> *'I can see how having a higher student mentor would be really helpful.'* –Student 2

> *'As far as connecting with an older student. I think if there was a q and a between students, maybe first years could post and the older students could respond would be handy.'* -Student 8

> *'I actually have a couple of mentor students I have a 5th and 3rd year that I talk to now and then. I bounce ideas and concepts off them, it has been very very useful.'* –Student 7

The challenge here is that the students do not necessarily want to commit to anything that may absorb too much time, but they would like something informal that they could draw upon.

How a university could provide this authentically would need further discussion and research. This desire to have a near-peer fits with current literature about student learning experiences. Some students may not be comfortable approaching a lecturer to ask questions.

Many students prefer to seek information from students who have recently completed the same courses. This may be related to the discussions previously about hot information or just that near peers are less intimidating and the fear of looking 'dumb' is less.

4.5.4 Insider knowledge

Frequently in the literature there are references to non-traditional students feeling like they do not belong and that there is insider knowledge that comes with having experience of university. Bok (2010) discusses this lack of insider knowledge amongst non-traditional students by comparing it to actors being asked to perform in a play without giving them the script.

For my participants, there was very much a desire for some of Baker's 'hot communication' where they wanted to hear from past students about their experiences and their tips and tricks for getting through. The final yarning circle allowed the students to really explore this area and I will let them speak for themselves as to how they felt this perceived gap could be filled:

> *'A video describing mid-terms are just around the corner or this is break week and I am still trying to catch up on content is it okay to be panicking? Or a short video or blog or anything just an easy way for past students to portray their experiences and what they were feeling and reassurance that it will be fine or other tips and tricks that they used to get through it. Something to that nature would be good.'* - Student 7

> *'That's an interesting point for me JS, videos reflecting on the different experiences from past students saying if you are experiencing this or feeling like that you aren't alone here is what I did to get through it. I think especially in those moments when you start to feel slammed and there is too much study and not enough hours. It would be good to know you aren't alone.'* -Student 8

There was some desire for some 'warm' information from the lecturer's point of view as well. They wanted to know where the lecturer felt they may need to pay extra attention or perhaps more accurately where the lecturer had seen others struggle in the past.

> *'Maybe in the information of each subject if there was a short 5–10-minute video on ways to find support that could help students and a quick summary of the different avenues of support and where to find them. I know there is a student*

support thing at the top but a quick video summary might make things easier.' - Student 8

'As far as the transition experience goes, maybe even some type of I want to say skill development but that isn't the term. More so on learning ya know what normal feelings are in regards to stress or anxiety and things like that.' -Student 9

The need for insider knowledge is possibly the result of 'your mind being your own worst enemy' in that students start to worry that they are missing out on something or they do not know 'the right' stuff. It may also be associated with the desire to succeed and belong as a student. This desire to know that their feelings are normal and that they are doing fine was a recurrent topic that each participant shared stories about. The need for this type of support was enthusiastically embraced by the participants.

4.6 Conclusion

The findings of this research contribute to understanding the student experience of transitioning to higher education by identifying how students are using available university provided resources, the alternative resources sourced by students and factors that go into deciding which resources to use and when. This research also provides new insight to the role peers play in empowering each other to succeed during the transition experience. Interestingly, these peer encounters were not described as social encounters or friendly catch ups but rather something more independent or akin to colleagues discussing and supporting each other through a work project. This may be as a result of the students being from a mature age group but it has changed my understanding from previous literature that has discussed the need to belong socially at university. These students used each other for support and benchmarking more than anything. Additional research exploring this aspect of the findings would be beneficial to providing more insight.

The other thing that has come out of this research is a clearer understanding of what kind of academic support students want. They do not appear to be looking for formal/traditional academic support as they are spoiled for quick and easy choices on the internet. They want more authentic information about what to expect and what to do when things are getting difficult. Ideally, they want this advice and information to come through the voices of students who have come before them. This ties in with the research by Ball and Vincent (1998), Slack et al (2014) and Baker et al (2018) who talk about the temperature of communication. They want the inside line; they want to know 'what the go is' and they want to know their experiences are normal.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.0 Introduction

This chapter relates the findings of my study to current literature in order to discuss key issues in student transitions to higher education and their use of academic support services. I will detail how the findings of my research contribute to the existing literature and our understanding of the complexities faced by students transitioning to higher education. I will also discuss how students approach the challenges that they face and what solutions have been identified. This discussion will provide useful information to students, staff, higher education institutions, policymakers and other stakeholders looking to better understand in depth this *wicked* experience. I hope that this discussion will provide insight and strategic direction for improving both the transition experience and use of academic support services for first year students.

As discussed in chapter 2, supporting students during the transition to higher education and their use of academic support services is a global challenge. There is increasing pressure from governments around the world to provide increased opportunities to all citizens (see Australian Government report, 2009; Mok and Neubauer, 2016). Loughland and Sriprakash (2016) state that '[t]he Australian education system sees social equity as a high priority'. The motivation behind this drive is to improve the quality of life of citizens who may not have otherwise had the opportunity to attend higher education. It is in many ways a large social innovation project which should be commended. However, it is possible for disconnects between government policymakers and the institutions that have to enact and work within the policies provided to occur (Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews, 2018). This is very much the situation within which my research is taking place. Government policy in 2009 encouraged universities to accept a wider demographic of students but guidance on how to successfully transition this wider demographic who may not engage with the traditional academic support services the same way as traditional students has not been forthcoming.

When I started this research project, the relevance of academic support services provided by universities was never in question in my head. However, as this research project has progressed it has become increasingly clear that not only are my research participants dissatisfied, but the literature is also suggesting that it is time to move on from the traditional models of transitioning new students to higher education. While my project details the experiences of mature students, there should be some consideration of others in this increasingly diversifying context. I have no reason to suspect that these other non-traditional

student groups wouldn't also have individual and important views on the provided academic support services. I see value in further research to better understand the experiences of these other non-traditional groups. This chapter will discuss whether formal academic support services provided by Higher Education Institutions remains relevant in the current age.

Attrition remains a major concern for institutions and governments alike, attrition is often associated with poor transition experiences. Poor transition experiences can be associated with students becoming overwhelmed by the academic workload which results in attrition (Stirling and Rossetto, 2015). Beer and Lawson (2017), Mok and Neubauer (2016) and Tinto (2017), all agree that in spite of efforts being made to reduce attrition, the progress has been limited. It is possible that the current environment and lived experiences of students transitioning to higher education has changed so much that the old model is no longer fit for purpose. In fact, Tinto (2006) argues that institutions have not been implementing research findings in relation to attrition, retention and transitioning experiences. Kahu (2013), Gale and Parker (2014) and Kerby (2015) have all put forward new theoretical models for transitioning students to higher education that move beyond the relatively straightforward student environment in which Spady (1970), Tinto (1975), Pascarella (1980) and Bean (1985) found themselves. This discussion will focus on current transition experiences and the models used to inform them, student perspectives and understanding of the current services and finally on what students want to see in the support services. My research is able to contribute and expand upon the current literature and understanding of these elements of transitioning to higher education.

5.1 Transitioning to higher education –Are we living in the past?

My research findings suggest that universities must re-examine the services and support they are offering to first year students transitioning to higher education. The vast research that exists to describe factors that play a role in the transition to higher education have been discussed previously. However, knowing what impacts transition experiences and understanding how it impacts are not always the same thing. An example of this is the role peer support plays in successfully transitioning students. The discussion that follows will demonstrate how peer support can mean and be described in different ways, with some aspects still not fully understood.

Previous literature discusses the importance of peer support with some suggesting that peer-peer support is more important than support from either parents or lecturers (Purswell et al, 2008; Altermatt, 2019). This supports Tinto's seminal work in 1975 that put forward his

theory on social integration for decreasing attrition. He argued that if students were socially integrated to their surroundings, then they were more likely to persevere with their studies. This basic premise has continued until now as the primary basis of orientation and induction activities for higher education institutions. Universities continue to include social activities to try and encourage the forging of friendships which in theory will then create a sense of belonging. It is important to note that Tinto's (1975) research was performed during an era where students traditionally attended on-campus classes full-time and lived near or on campus (Altermatt, 2019 and Coertjens, 2017). They often did not have outside employment or family obligations. This meant that it was relatively straightforward to organise social integration activities and programs.

The context in which we work and study has long changed, students now may undertake full-time or part-time studies, they may be undertaking online, blended or on campus studies (Coertjens, 2017). In addition, they may also have work commitments and or family commitments to juggle. The complexities that the modern student faces are considerably different to the initial Tinto era. A number of authors including Briggs et al (2012) in a widely cited paper still express an affinity with the factors identified by Tinto in 1975. It seems that modern transition programs still rely on past theories. The participants in my research did not appear to be seeking friends or social integration. It would seem that, even if they were interested in this social aspect, time demands made it difficult to do so. They did appear to want to belong but not in the way it is framed by Tinto as a social belonging. Tinto frames belonging as a form of social integration; having friends on campus, a direct relationship with their lecturers, and feeling part of the institution. This may remain true for traditional students straight out of high school and traditional institutions but the participants in my research were primarily mature students and this model of social integration did not appear to be a good fit for them. This point will be discussed in more depth below. Through the literature, it remains unclear how the orientation and induction strategies of higher education institutions have changed to keep pace with the increasing diversity of the complex scenarios in which staff and students find themselves today (Coertjens, 2017; Altermatt, 2019; Kember, Leung and Prosser, 2021).

The students in my research had varied and complex lives outside of the academic environment that influenced their abilities to engage with services and equally their inclination to do so. The literature already discussed covers the complexities of the lived realities of many higher education students in a time of increased diversification. Burke et al (2017) rather artistically discuss something referred to as timescapes. Timescapes capture

perspectives on time in the same way that scenes are captured in a landscape. The demands on individuals in relation to their time and how that impacts on their realities and availabilities. These can be cultural expectations, personal obligations, or anything in between but importantly they are unique to each individual based on their scenario. The individual timescape in turn influences the owner's perspective or lived experience. My findings contribute to this concept of timescapes by providing additional support and examples of the lived realities of participants. One student spoke of how it was mentally challenging when her work schedule clashed with her classes. There was no possibility that she would miss work as she needed the money to pay for her young family. This meant that she would find herself behind in the classwork, the constant battle for time regularly came up in the discussions.

The concept of timescapes in some ways ties in with Lawson and Beer's (2018) understanding of attrition in that they are 'wicked' challenges as they change from person to person and also year to year. The solution to these types of problems are never straightforward because the challenges are fluid and hard to pinpoint as they are regularly changing. However, later in this chapter, I will further discuss models of transition that have been put forward by Gale and Parker (2014) and expanded upon further by Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) that provide possible solutions to the *wicked* nature of the problem. My research is able to contribute to their assertions by providing voices and lived experiences that support the ideas that they argue would better meet the needs of current students.

Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) argue that we need to shift from trying to make the students fit with what is offered by the institution and instead look to see how institutional support can be dynamic and flexible based on the individual needs. My participants like many non-traditional students were struggling 'against the odds' (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003, p607) to transition into higher education. However, their insights into how the services could be modified provide some ideas for institutions to consider when trying to make the services more dynamic and flexible for their users. Taylor and Harris-Evans (p1256) use words like 'entangled' and 'granularity' to discuss the lived experiences of students coming into university. This is certainly the case with my participants but by exploring their experiences and viewpoints there is the opportunity to begin to untangle some of the challenges.

My research contributes to Gale and Parker's (2014) concept of 'becoming' as the basis for a more viable transition model. My participants described complex and challenging circumstances in which they were studying, working, and raising families. The current services offered did not really address the challenges that the mature student participants

were facing with transitioning to higher education. They reported being capable of finding the answers to questions they had about theoretical concepts and content within the course which is frequently the focus of academic support services. The challenges they discussed were more around the emotional experience and accepting their new 'identity' as a student. This also contributes to work done by Coertjens (2017) and Christie et al (2008) who identify that new students need to develop a student identity in order to successfully transition. My participants appeared to be worried about whether they belonged to the role of a student, it became apparent that they needed to transition into or become a student. This was a mentality shift for many of them as they already had identities such as: mother, father, nurse, carpenter etc. There was a strong desire for reassurance that their feelings and experiences were normal. Interestingly, this did not appear to be a challenge for the traditional school leaver, her only experience to date was as a student, she appeared to feel a bit guilty as she listened to the others discuss how difficult some aspects were for them as she had glided over those things assured in her role as a student. This contrast of experiences between the primarily mature students and the one traditional student also serves to demonstrate the challenging nature of the issues facing the institutions, they must find a way to meet the needs of a wide range of demographics. This was previously highlighted at the beginning of this chapter and additional research into what current traditional students experience would be useful to allow for a more panoramic view of the whole student body transition experience.

Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) expand upon Gale and Parker's work by putting forward their own suggestions for approaching transition in the current age. They recognise the complexities faced by modern students and explore solutions through mathematical and scientific concepts. They put forward two new ways to consider the transition experience in keeping with Gale and Parker's (2014) 'becoming': assemblage and transition as a rhizome. As noted in an earlier chapter, Taylor and Harris-Evans (2018) define 'assemblage' as 'an emergent, temporarily stable yet continually mutating conglomeration of bodies, properties, things, affects and materialities' (p1258). Approaching transition from an assemblage point of view 'invites a rethinking of space and time in transitions' (Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2018, p1259). My research contributes to the concepts and ideas raised by Taylor and Harris-Evans by confirming the complexities of the lived experience of mature students transitioning to higher education. My participants also reported that the current transition experience provided by the university - which is at best a combination of Gale and Parker's 'induction'

and 'development' - does not meet the needs of these mature students during their first-year transition experience.

Transition as a rhizome was defined by Taylor and Harris-Evans as 'forms or beings which can spread in any direction and move through levels and scales' (Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2021, p1260). My research contributes here in much the same way it does to the suggestion of an assemblage. The students are facing challenges that change, whether that is work rosters, childcare needs, or family commitments. As one student said, 'things can get pretty hairy pretty quickly'. Developing a transition experience that supports students in a multitude of ways when things move in different directions would have been welcomed by my participants during their first year. It seems that the more we know about the transition experience the more difficult it becomes to fit experiences into a tidy box where social integration will meet the needs of all of the students all of the time. Kember, Leung and Prosser (2021) seem very on point with their argument that with the increasing diversity in higher education the issues associated with retention and transition are becoming more complex.

The results of my study support the suggestion that it is time to re-envision how to successfully transition new students to higher education, in particular new mature students. My student participants were all managing their experiences as best they could to succeed. They had some awareness of the available academic support resources, however, the complexities of trying to juggle other commitments in order to attend or interact with formal academic support services often proved too much. Students indicated that they often gave up because it was too time consuming to even sign up for the activity never mind attend. This was in contrast to the ease of using free external resources or getting in touch with peers. They often felt exasperation when trying to sort through the university provided information to determine if there was any benefit to them. It also became apparent in this study that mature students were not approaching higher education as a place for social encounters. I along with the authors discussed above argue that a new model that takes into consideration the changes in student body diversity, study modes and approaches to teaching is overdue.

5.2 Approaches and perspectives on transitioning to higher education

As the majority of my participants were mature students, the discussion will be informed by literature relating to mature age transition experiences where possible. I did not intend to focus on mature students at the outset of the study, but with the open selection criteria,

they represented the vast majority of volunteers. This first section will contribute to the understanding of student approaches and perspectives on transitioning to higher education.

5.2.1 Peer-peer support

Peer-peer support was repeatedly discussed in my research, it was something that all participants spoke of and admitted to relying on. However, the type of peer-peer support and what it meant to my participants in some ways was not congruent with the literature. I will discuss this in depth and how a slight shift in perspective has allowed for a new understanding of how mature students use peer-peer support.

Altermatt (2019) states that research suggests peer-peer support as being more significant than support received from parents or higher education institutions. While peer-peer support is not in question, what is actual meant by it is in some ways unclear. There is discussion about whether peer-peer support plays a bigger role when received in a negative vs a positive scenario or when it is perceived to be there versus received support (Altermatt, 2019). Adding to the confusion, the literature frequently uses the words peers and friends interchangeably as though they are one and the same in relation to support (see Tinto, 1975; Palmer, O'Kane and Owens, 2009; Altermatt, 2019). My research does not support these two words being used interchangeably. The students that participated in my study did rely heavily on peer support but there was no suggestion that they were friends. To look further into this, I sought to define the terms peer and friend to understand the differences. The Cambridge dictionary (2021) describes a peer as 'a person who is the same age or has the same social position or the same abilities as other people in the group'. It is also noted that peer means equal in Latin. While the Cambridge dictionary (2021) goes on to define a friend as 'a person who you know well and who you like a lot, but who is usually not a member of your family'. While I am not suggesting here that someone who is a peer cannot also be a friend, I am claiming they are not interchangeable words.

All of the mature students who participated in my study had joined an online group chat (interestingly the traditional student participant was the only one who had not joined one). It is unclear at this point how these group chats were set up; it is assumed that likely each member had met at least one member in order to be added to the group. The group chat members appeared in some cases to hardly know each other. In one of the yarning circles, a participant said to another participant 'I think you might be in my chat group' these groups had been going for over 6 months at the time of the discussion. This was a light bulb moment for me, as I had never questioned the concept in the literature of peers and friends

being used interchangeably in relation to transitioning to higher education. This slight shift in interpretation allows for an entirely different view on how peer support plays a role in transitioning to higher education. It may be that traditional entrants continue to seek to build friendships that also serve the role of peer support as and when they need it. From the one traditional student participant in this research, it did seem as though her perspectives and experience were very different to the others. She acknowledged that she was not under the same pressures as the other participants. She spoke of enjoying classes for the social aspects and getting to know others in the class. Her main struggle was not getting distracted by social media when she was meant to be studying.

The findings of my research shift the lens away from a friends/social nature of peer support for mature students to something different something that may only exist due to lived experiences of my mature participants. As the students continued to talk about the chat groups and how they used them, I began to think that the way they were supporting each other could be described as collegial; it was as if they were approaching study as a job. As I did above when looking at the peer/friend distinction, I thought defining the word colleague would be valuable for this discussion. The Cambridge dictionary (2021) describes a colleague as 'one of a group of people who work together'. Indeed.com (2021) describes a colleague as 'a person you work with that has the same professional end goals as you do, although you may have different roles, skills and rank.' These definitions are aimed at the workplace but they fit with the stories shared by my participants in that they were working together with the same professional end goal of graduating. Reuter, Loschke and Betzler (2020 p998) detail some standard behavioural expectations between work colleagues including 'offering and requesting support in work-related matters'. The participants in my research seemed to rely heavily on their social media chat groups, but the main purpose of the chat groups seemed to be to keep each other on task academically (rather than for social purposes) and all moving in the same direction towards academic goals. They asked each other questions, they shared information they thought would be useful for progression and understanding and kept each other up to date on deadlines. This is in keeping with Reuter, Loschke and Betzler's (2020) assertions about the expected behaviours of work colleagues. There appears to be limited information in the literature about mature students approaching higher education the same way that they would approach a new job, however, that is what I saw in this study. The only literature I could find that mentioned this was in Kember, Leung and Prosser (2021) where they assert that 'background characteristics influence the way in which the student interacts with the college environment' (p261). It may be that this concept is emerging and has not

been fully explored in the literature as yet. In this regard, my research study is able to contribute a new understanding of how mature students may be approaching higher education. In their discussions my participants never mentioned supporting students who were feeling down or celebrating with students who had done well. They also never discussed getting together for a catch up or going out together to celebrate after exams. It was purely the business of studying and touching base on progress.

Another interesting topic from my findings was the idea of informal benchmarking. I have been unable to locate research in the literature that discusses student empowerment through informal benchmarking. There appears to be a paucity in the literature surrounding the act of students informally benchmarking their experiences against others' experiences for the purpose of confidence building in relation to transitioning to higher education. When my participants did mention face to face interactions it was in relation to chance encounters like 'I turn up early to class and just speak to whoever is around'. They appeared to use these encounters as a personal validation or benchmarking activity. They wanted to know if they were experiencing the same emotions, self-doubts, and challenges to those outside their group. There was a strong desire to know they were experiencing normal things. They also felt a large sense of relief or validation when they realised others had also been worrying about some of the same things that they were concerned about. That sense of knowing that it was normal was very important to them throughout the discussions. It appeared to be an empowering experience for them just knowing that they were on track. Tinto (1975) did refer to certain touch points throughout the first year that impact persistence. He did not identify them specifically but here my study provides some insight as to where and how these touch points could be enacted to ease the transition experience or potentially encourage persistence.

Most of the participants in my study were returning for a second attempt at university and were very much aware that things had changed since their first time around. So, at times there was some lingering doubt about being a student again. Having the opportunity to benchmark themselves against peers was important for regulating their experience and helping them to persevere. As discussed above, currently, there seems to be a paucity in the literature around the potential role for benchmarking the transition experience including the emotions and belonging experienced by first year students. Additional research in this area and ways to facilitate students to anonymously benchmark against their peers in relation to how they were feeling at any given time may provide an alternative new form of support for mature students transitioning to higher education.

5.2.2 Belonging and emotion

Emotions and belonging were important to the participants in study. They mentioned them in a range of different ways throughout the data. However, the discussion almost always returned to these two words: belonging and emotions. Wilkins and Burke (2015) discuss how non-traditional students may be intimidated and feel like they do not necessarily belong in academic institutions while Jones (2018) refers to students wanting to know the lingo. This desire for insider knowledge to in some ways 'be part of the club' was very apparent in this research. During this project it became apparent that these two concepts are very much interrelated.

The students were reasonably confident in their abilities to complete the work and find information, but they were less confident in returning to the role of being a student. In previous literature, when I read about 'belonging' I had understood the concept in a Tinto-esque way to mean having a group of friends at university, knowing your lecturers, having a sense of familiarity with the surroundings and so on. However, this research suggested that the belonging the students were seeking was not in fact that, but more belonging to the role of a student. They wanted to know they 'belonged' as a student and fit the role. To do this, they had to face their individual emotional challenges which surprised many of them. They also needed to find a way to benchmark their experience to normalise their emotions. If they were stressed about something, finding out that the others were feeling the same way not only gave them a sense of relief but empowered them to keep going. They just needed to know that they were on track and experiencing normal emotions. Afterall, these students were giving up time with their families, friends, in some cases hours at work to study and they wanted to succeed.

Identity and becoming are challenges faced by first year higher education students as they transition from one role or identity to another. The work of Taylor-Harris-Evans (2018), Ramsay and Brown (2018) and Coertjens (2017) on student identity explores the concept that students need to develop into or become their new identity which takes some time to accept and normalise. My research expands upon this to provide suggestions for how to assist with becoming a student. The act of providing a mechanism for students to normalise their emotions as they transition to higher education by benchmarking their experience as they progress may contribute to a smoother experience. Ramsey and Brown (2018) wrote about imposter syndrome in mature students. They report that non-traditional students are more likely to suffer with imposter syndrome and that they may benefit from regular reminders that 'they are not alone in fighting their feelings of inadequacy and not belonging' (p87).

While my participants did not ever mention feeling like imposters, they did demonstrate and discuss self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. My research contributes to Ramsey and Brown's work by providing additional voices and stories that support their suggestion but also offering expanded understanding how these challenges may be met by institutions. It would seem that a sense of belonging is an important element to successful transition but a definition of what belonging actually means to the different demographics would be valuable to ascertain.

My research provided another lightbulb moment when I realised that there was a mental shift in how the students needed to view themselves, they needed to start seeing themselves as learners or students. They discussed the need to know that what they were experiencing, and feeling was normal. They needed to know that they belonged in the role, and it may be that they had yet to accept themselves in or their new identity of this new role. One student discussed how the emotions he experienced were likely the hardest part of transitioning to higher education. If we remember most of these people already have established work life identities and while those other identities do not disappear, they have to learn how to embrace the new 'student' one. It makes it easier to understand the struggle they are facing and why they each experience it differently. Briggs et al (2012, p4) succinctly state 'transition involves learners creating for themselves a new identity as higher education students'. My research contributes to this work by illustrating the factors that impact the personal experiences and challenges that are faced by mature students in this journey.   It might be that letting the students know this simple fact may ease the transition experience. This understanding provided insight into support that would likely be useful for improving the transition experience.

My student participants struggle with their new identity and learning to accept and fit with the new role that they are undertaking. As many authors suggest (Penn-Edwards and Donnisson, 2011; Gale and Parker, 2014; Stirling and Rossetto, 2015; Heagney and Benson, 2017; Altermatt, 2019; Bell and Benton, 2018) academic support services have a role to play in assisting students to transition to higher education more effectively. It would seem, as suggested by some of these same authors, it is time to evolve the transition experience into something that meets the needs of an increasingly diverse group of students. The Tinto theory of academic social integration has clearly contributed significantly to this area over the years, but it is possible that the guidance institutions are using for the transition experience has fallen into the 'that's the way we have always done it' basket and so innovation has been stifled. It would be interesting to see some support services developed around the challenges identified in the recent literature around peer-peer support, student

identity and the associated emotions that come with that, services that are more tailored allowing for increased self-efficacy and importantly something accessible.

5.2.3 Approach to higher education

This leads to an interesting discussion on the changing dynamics of the university 'scene' from when Tinto published his initial work. At that time, students were still primarily from the elite, they studied full-time and lived on or near campus (Coertjens, 2017). They had likely been envisioning themselves as university students from late childhood onwards and as such were well prepared for the new identity. However, the expansion of higher education to include the masses has increased the diversity of those participating in higher education (Coertjens, 2017). The students today have different realities, they have families, work and other life commitments to juggle alongside their studies (Burke et al 2017 and Kember, Leung and Prosser (2021). The participants in this research already had established lives with friends and family, they do not appear to be looking to expand their circle of friends as they were already notably feeling guilty about not having time for their pre-existing social circles. With a number of them stating that they had 'no social life anymore'. These students were approaching higher education more like a new project at work than anything else.

This approach to study is important because as Coertjens (2017) identified there is not strong research on the effects of transition on approaches to study or the other way around. My findings are able to clearly describe the approach to higher education that these participants were taking. In fact, one of the key things that came out of this research project was the mature student approach to study; all aspects had been considered and planned for, they set aside protected study time, they did not just want to get by but wanted to understand the content in order to excel, they knew what they were sacrificing to study, and they wanted to make sure that the payoff was worth it. Kember, Leung and Prosser (2021) state that background characteristics can influence the ways in which students interact with the college environment. It appears that the past work experiences of these students influenced their approach to study. This idea of approaching study in the same way they would approach a job is interesting as it provides ideas for transitioning students to higher education using potential using transition to work models. This finding can also be related to Tinto's (1975) concept of touch points along the educational journey that impact persistence. When a new staff member is transitioned to work, they too have touchpoints at 30, 90 and 270 days, which would align with the first month of study, and then the first term of study

and the end of the year which could potentially provide some guidance for student touchpoints.

Participants in my study were also highly independent and the idea of relying on others to assist them was not a common thread in any of the discussions. Altermatt (2019, p25) states 'academic self-efficacy is among the strongest predictors of college students' academic outcomes'. My research contributes to Altermatt's (2019) claims around self-efficacy by providing mature student's perspectives and approaches. Erb and Drysdale (2017, p62) states 'mature students possessed significantly higher levels of overall academic self-efficacy'. The high level of self-efficacy of my participants was apparent in the data collected. Students did not want to wait for someone to help them out, they knew that if they wanted something they needed to find it. This ranged from students saying if and when they needed help, they would Google, YouTube or 'crash course' it to find out. One student simply stated it was easier to go searching for information rather than use the provided services. Others were possibly even more proactive and mentioned that in life if you want something you have to dig for it and they felt the same way about their education. If they needed to know something they felt it was up to them to find it out.

Heagney and Benson (2017) put forward some ideas for engaging with the modern mature students suggesting that integrating support into the academic context of each student may have more impact. Having lecturers and tutors guiding students as and when certain services would be useful to them could increase the usage. This could overcome some challenges identified by Bell and Benton (2018) around non-traditional students feeling that the services were not for them and that they needed to prove themselves. It might also assist the students who appear to be getting overwhelmed during the transition process by helping them to navigate the academic support service offerings in this study.

Some participants mentioned that because this was their second time at university, they now wanted to know and understand the information. It was not just about getting a degree for them; it was about preparing for their future career. The students felt that it was imperative to their success that they fully understood a topic before they moved on and that the protected time, they set aside for study was used for study. This meant putting phones away, turning off notifications on computers and maximising their time. They felt this mindset, set them apart from their more traditional peers. My participants had an increased desire to learn and understand the content, this finding better complements the work of Jelfs and Richardson (2013) who argued that mature students often have an increased motivation and a deep approach to study which can lead to success. My research through a number of

students stating they needed to fully understand something before moving on and that they set aside protected time each week for study to ensure they were getting the most out of their studies further supports this argument.

5.3 Approaches to and perspectives on academic support services

5.3.1 Is it hot in here?

In 1998, Ball and Vincent wrote a paper about the temperature of communication, they argued that when selecting an education provider, families preferred 'hot' knowledge which was defined as information that had come from someone, they knew vs the institution itself which was considered 'cold' information. This was followed up by Slack et al (2014) who added the additional category of 'warm' information. They used this concept of information having a temperature to further discuss student decision making in higher education. Baker et al (2018) theorised where refugee students go for assistance at university also using this concept of temperature. They however shifted the lens to the temperature of the support provided. In a similar vein, my research was able to build upon the concept of temperature being used in relation to classifying types of academic support available. My research adds to existing research by illustrating how mature students viewed and valued academic support services. My participants identified three types of academic support services which correlate well with the 'hot', 'warm' and 'cold' discussed in the literature and summarised previously in this paper.

My participants appeared to discuss academic support in one of three ways, formal ('cold'), semi-formal ('warm') and informal ('hot'). The students were least likely to engage with the formal services, enjoyed the semi-formal options but primarily used the informal ones. There is a lot of information available about different support programs available to first year students but as O'Sullivan et al (2019) confirm little is known or understood about the type of students that use foundation year programmes, why they use them, and the impact on their experiences. My research can contribute to this paucity in the literature by describing how mature students use and experience academic support services during their transition to higher education.

Formal services were defined as those provided by the Academic Learning Centre. They did not include individual lectures or unit materials in this section. My participants considered the formal services to be slow, difficult to engage with and lacked clarity on what the exact benefit was likely to be. This meant that students were not engaging in a meaningful way with the services. There were some who did attend but had mixed reviews, one student felt it

was too slow paced for her while another felt guilty for slowing others down. My research provides insight for those trying to understand how and why students do or do not use academic support services. Stirling and Rossetto (2015) discuss how students in the first year start out optimistic and enthusiastic but slowly become overwhelmed. By providing additional insight into the experiences of these first-year students, my research will allow the staff working in those areas to create and develop more user-friendly services. The idea that students who have made the effort to attend academic support services but are then making the decision to cease attendance because they feel they are slowing others down is very worrying. These are exactly the students who need to be supported. It seems that modern academic support services are failing to meet the needs of some students. This may be an area for the support services to explore as ideally activities should be geared at supporting multiple learning levels at one time.

Semi-formal services were defined as those provided within the unit and included things like question and answer sessions with the lecturer, emails, discussion forums and self-paced formative quizzes. The students found a lot of value in the self-paced formative quizzes, they found it allowed them to benchmark their progress and inform their study sessions to ensure that they were on top of everything. They had mixed emotions about emails and discussion forums, with some finding them useful and others finding them archaic and others overwhelming. In speaking to the self-efficacy of students and the associated positive outcomes of studies, it is reasonable to suggest that formative quizzes that allow students to check their own progress serve as an excellent academic support.

The final form of academic support that the students identified was informal, this equates to hot information as per the descriptions given above. These informal support services were not associated with the higher education institution and included peers and external online resources such as Google, YouTube video channels, and Crash Course. The students when prompted stated that they would read or watch multiple websites or videos to confirm that the information they were receiving on a given topic was consistent. The main attraction to the informal services was the speed and variety, the participants stated it was fast and easy to search things up or watch a short video rather than try to find the formal services that may or may not address their particular concern. In addition, because they were often needing to understand something during their protected study time, the idea of waiting until they could meet somebody formally was just unrealistic if they wanted to stay on track.

By identifying that the student perspective on support services can be classified into a temperature model similar to those discussed by Ball and Vincent (1998), Slack et al (2014),

and Baker et al (2018) my research is able to contribute to their previous works by expanding the scope in which it can potentially be applied. My research provides a new way of analysing academic support services by using the work of previous authors to apply the concept of temperature. I am able to put forward a model of temperature for exploring current offerings and identifying areas where resources could be focused or redistributed to meet the needs of more students based on temperature preferences.

Peers as hot support

The role that their peers or colleagues played was also significant. Thompson and Mazer (2009) report that peer-peer support is regularly discussed in the literature but what is not well understood is how exactly students are supporting each other. My research is able to expand the knowledge we have in this area by sharing the experiences of the participants. My research was able to identify an interesting viewpoint on peer support; the students used informal peer support to remind each other of deadlines, ask each other questions about content and assignments and share useful information that they had found related to the content and or assignments. They also shared things like information about scholarships, grants or opportunities offered by the university. While my research contributes to the understanding of informal peer to peer academic support from a mature student perspective. It also presented a new dynamic to how these mature students work together in a way that mimics work-like scenarios as opposed to stereotypical student peer support which would commonly involve a friendly component.

This valuable information on how mature students perceive and prefer to engage with academic support services including their peers can provide additional insight and talking points for those working in this context. Especially, with the growing trend of consumerism in education referred to as the student as a consumer (SAC) approach by Bunce, Baird and Jones (2017). While my research is not about the implications of consumerism in education or the arguments for and against, it is wise to be aware of this shift, as it will likely impact future offerings of academic support services. Indeed, at the university where this research took place during a recent university restructure student services was moved to corporate management of the university away from academic management. This new information on how students prefer to 'consume' services helps to build on previous research and should provide institutions, policy makers, academic and support teams with useful ideas for strategic development.

My research and the literature support that students prefer informal and semi-formal academic support whether that is between peers or external sources. It would be valuable to

gain a better understanding of the types of peer support and whether the university could in some way contribute or promote this form of support in an authentic manner. This is likely easier said than done as discussed university led communication is considered 'cold' and as such some innovative solutions would need to be explored and perhaps the universities could look at facilitating opportunities for peers to make contact as opposed to leading it. It would also need to fit with how people interact in 2021.

I became acutely aware recently that I am out of touch with changes to social interactions. I will provide a small vignette of a recent discussion between a mature student and a lecturer:

> *Student: I am going on a date tonight, I met him online*
> *Lecturer: Really? When online dating first came about, I remember people making up elaborate stories to avoid admitting they met online.*
> *Student: Really? That's weird how did you meet people?*
> *Lecturer: Mostly through friends or when out pubs/clubs.*
> *Student: Wow, I really don't like when strangers speak to me in public, I find it really invasive.*

This vignette serves to show that social interactions no longer occur the way many of us in decision-making positions think they do. It supports what Coates, Kelly and Naylor (2016) and Picton, Kahu and Nelson (2018) argue for, and that is including students as stakeholders in discussions and planning for success.

My research suggests that many of the answers to how and why the transition experience and use of academic support services could be improved upon can be found by listening to the student perspective. It may be that if the university wants to provide and communicate a support service that assists students to successfully transition to higher education and in turn decrease the institution attrition numbers than listening to the student stories may be where some of the answers are.

5.3.2 Making use of services – When?

Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2011 p566) state 'attention should not only be directed to *what* support should be provided, but whether its method of provision (*how*) and timeliness (*when*) coincide with students' needs.' This is a poignant comment as it resonates with the findings of this study and the voices of the participants. However, it is almost 10 years old and seems to not have been heeded by institutions. While Bolham and Dodgson (2003) report that the

retention of mature students was impacted by finance, a lack of preparedness and timetabling. Time seems to always come up as a challenge. Once the participants in this study had eventually become aware of the available formal academic support services, the main limiting factor related to their use of the options was time. The time pressures that these students face has made them very conscious of how they spend their time.

The students in my research had limited time to study each week and viewed any lost time as not only wasted study time but also time that was not spent with family or at work so in some ways was a double loss to them. When discussing the usage of available services, they calculated into the time required to participate, not just the activity but things like trying to find out about offerings, signing up for the offerings, travelling to the activity, and time required to arrange childcare or time off work. The university does provide online opportunities, but these did not seem to be any more user friendly for these students. Each discussion on this topic almost always came back to how much time was going to be spent and what was going to be gained in return. Most of the time formal academic support services did not come out ahead for the participants in this project.

There is a large amount of research into student time management and in particular mature student time management, which is logical given the added complexities that these students face (Kember, Leung and Prosser, 2021). The research suggests that training can be beneficial but many students simply gain the skills during the first term of study through trial and error (see Bolham and Dodgson, 2003 and Heagney and Benson, 2017 for examples). The participants in this research did touch on their time management strategies in relation to their transition experience with higher education which was discussed previously. However, for this section the focus is more on how they could fit academic support services into their weekly schedule. Heagney and Benson (2017) describe reasons that students do not engage with formal academic support services including being time poor and being constrained by location or lack of transport. These are consistent with the findings of this research and possibly provide insight into why so many students prefer to use the informal options to gain the information they need. The participants in this research generally had set aside blocks of time in their week for dedicated study, if the ALC offerings did not fit within those scheduled blocks then it would involve rescheduling other aspects of their life. This would in turn become an internal discussion of risk and reward, was it worth the time involved or could the knowledge or skill be sourced elsewhere. It seemed that the knowledge or skill could almost always be sourced elsewhere.

Returning to the quote above from Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2011), if formal academic support services are going to continue to be offered to all students in the university, it would seem that it is time to look at what is being offered, when it is being offered and how it is being offered in relation to the lived experience of modern students if the desire is to actually engage students. It is perhaps time to re-envisage ALC offerings so that those who need the service can easily find the correct information and sign up. While those who do not so much need academic support as they do support in adopting their new roles can also be served.

5.4 What students want!

When my student participants were discussing their experiences with transitioning to higher education the yarning circle discussions frequently evolved into others commenting on solutions, they had used to deal with any of the challenges raised by others. This was valuable because it was authentic information about the lived experience from one student to another.

In the larger yarning circle, students were requested to reflect on any services or resources that they felt would have assisted them to transition more smoothly. The discussion started with some initial comments followed by others adding their thoughts and perspectives to the initial comments which allowed for quite a deep reflective discussion on what the students would like to be offered in relation to support and resources when transitioning to higher education.

5.4.1 Orientation in their own time

Many of the students felt overwhelmed by the current orientation which involves two full days of being introduced to every service and platform in the university. The sheer amount of content on top of the idea of sitting in one room for the whole day was enough to put anyone off and, as I mentioned in the last chapter, I have heard it called 'death by PowerPoint'. My participants thought there was definitely value in an induction to the university resources and platforms. They suggested that they would have felt better prepared if they had access to the orientation platforms in the months before starting on-campus to work through it in a self-paced way. This they felt would have allowed them to arrive more prepared on-campus in week 1. This speaks to the independence and self-efficacy of the students in this research and also that of the need for innovation.

The students in this study needed to be able to manage their time across weeks and months as opposed to cramming things into already tight calendars. They felt that an online orientation to the university followed by a short on-campus introduction to their chosen course would best prepare them for the initial phases of transition. To draw on the literature, Gale and Parker's (2014) induction phase of transition has value for introducing them to the available services and the platforms from which they will learn. These are inherently university centred as it is an introduction to the available services and also where all of the learning content will be delivered and derived from. The key here is introducing it in a way that allows students time to engage with it and work through the information in a meaningful way. Some students mentioned that they missed the initial orientation and it had taken them six weeks to catch up, while others talked about feeling on the back foot right from the start because they had missed out or forgotten much of what was discussed over the two days of presentations.

5.4.2 Inside contacts

Jones (2018) spoke about non-traditional students wanting to learn the 'lingo' and the 'rules of play' of an institution. Burke and Wilkins (2015) discussed how non-traditional students can be intimidated by academic institutions due to the lack of familiarity with the environment. Bok (2010) talked about non-traditional students entering higher education as the equivalent to being asked to perform a play without the script. These researchers paint a picture of an environment that is foreign to non-traditional students. The mature students in my research discussed how different higher education was from when they first attempted it, for some their first attempts were over 20 years ago. This desire to understand the lay of the land, the expectations, the challenges and the ins and outs of what to expect was something that the students felt they could get from inside contacts.

My participants felt that increased informal academic encounters with peers or near peers would help them to better settle into their new environment. They were not looking for pub crawls, scavenger hunts, or anything along the lines of a fresher's week but rather opportunities to create touch point contacts that they could reach out to when they had questions or concerns. While the university has a student success unit, as discussed previously, students prefer hot encounters whether that is communication with other students or informal academic support. They are not looking for the university to directly provide a specific service, they are looking for the university to provide opportunities for encounters. These encounters included things like discipline specific mentors, discipline specific areas for them to encounter their peers or near peers and any other way for them to

'check-in' to see how they are going in relation to their peers. They were frequently concerned that they might be missing out on some knowledge or information that would help them succeed.

In part, I think this is where the group chats came into play most heavily. They served the role of the grapevine discussed by Vincent and Ball in 1998. If a student found out about something that they felt was relevant to them, they shared it with the group. It seems it may have been their way of generating insider knowledge and combating the fear of not knowing the 'lingo'. It would be wise for universities to consider over the next few years how to facilitate valuable encounters for students.

5.4.3 Reassurance

The idea of reassurance brought a fervour to the discussion in the yarning circles more so than any other topic. All of the students wanted to know that their experiences were within normal parameters. How they wanted it came in different forms and I will discuss each individually but to summarise the key forms of reassurance that they wanted were:

- Lecturer led
- Near peer led
- Peer-peer led

From lecturers they wanted to know what areas of the unit past students had struggled with and how the lecturer felt that they could overcome those challenges; including recommendations for additional reading or videos they could watch. They felt that an introduction video detailing which topics to watch out for and when to put in some extra time would have been valuable. They also thought addressing frequently asked questions from past students would have been useful too. The reason for this was to save them from having to post on the forum and then wait for a response.

From near peers, they wanted to hear about the emotional challenges. This builds upon the research done by Hogan, Fox and Barratt-See (2017) where they discussed using older students as mentors for first years. This was done to address the anxiety experienced by first year students. My research adds to this previous research by supporting the need for this type of encounter for new students experiencing emotional challenges. It expands upon it to suggest that mature students are not looking to commit to a formal mentor-mentee relationship but rather an informal one. A student in my research wanted a near peer touchpoint so he could reach out and ask them questions about the units he was studying in

order to gain some clarity. He did not want a formal mentor type relationship with rules but rather just to know that someone was there if he needed it. This aspect of my research supports what Altermatt (2019) put forward about perceived versus received peer support. In addition, and in some ways as a sidenote, this informal contact is in keeping with modern trends for orientating/transitioning new staff into the workplace. In corporate terms these are called a 'work buddy' and is someone who has worked at the company for some time helping integrate a new staff member. This seems to fit with what the students are describing.

Snowball and McKenna (2015) report that the idea of providing remedial services outside of the curriculum to support non-traditional students has met with little success. They argue, and my research supports this view, that alternative ways of supporting the students are necessary. They put forward the concept of student generated content, which is exactly what one of my participants is seeking. Snowball and McKenna (2015, p604) explain that it 'allows teachers to bring student experiences and voices into the community of practice'. My participant suggested 'speakers' corner' type videos where a student might talk about their first experience with an objective structured clinical examination (OSCE) and how they dealt with the anxiety associated with it. Another thought he would like to hear about someone who had gotten behind and whether he needed to be panicked or not. It seemed that my participants wanted to hear the lived experience of others who went before them to feel more prepared. My research not only supports Snowball and McKenna's work, but it also expands upon it, by providing specific examples of what my participants would like to see. This is beneficial for me and my institution but may also provide insight for others in a similar situation.

As discussed previously, students value peer-peer support. What peer-peer support may mean to different students and the implications of that have been previously discussed. My research supports the importance of peer support especially in the form of group chats where they were able to check in with their peers, be reminded of deadlines and generally kept on track. This form of communication and support appeared to suit the mature students as they did not find it time consuming, as it was short and to the point. My participants valued the opportunity to have peer-peer face to face contact, they also wanted to know how the others were feeling about their progress. They wanted to know that they were not alone in being worried about workload or upcoming exams. They appeared to empower each other by comparing and discussing their experiences.

Picton, Kahu and Nelson (2018) discuss how perceptions of success have implications for students in relation to positive emotions, self-efficacy, belonging and well-being which is supported by the findings of my research. It may be that some sort of emotional benchmark measure that would allow students to see how their peers are feeling at any point may provide reassurance that they are where they are meant to be in the journey to becoming a successful higher education student. I have to date been unable to locate any research that suggests that emotional experiences of transition are being measured and used as a benchmarking tool for students.

5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this research have provided interesting discussion points that at times agree with the current literature and at others provide new and alternative perspectives. The main points from this discussion are that peers and friends were not interchangeable terms in the lives of these mature students. The students did rely on their peers but the relationship was more akin to working colleagues than traditional college friends. They appeared to approach study in the same way that they approached work which may speak to lived experience influencing academic approaches. There was also discussion on the temperatures of academic support and like many authors before have found in varying contexts. Students appear to prefer 'hot' information that they source externally to 'cold' information that is provided internally. These students also grappled with their new identities more so than with the material that they were learning. They found it relatively straightforward to find external resources to help them understand the new content they were covering but harder to work through the emotional transition and acceptance of their new role as a student.

Finally, they discussed what they would have really liked to have had during their transition to higher education. Ideas that could be adopted by universities seeking to smooth the transition and meet the needs of new students to support their becoming as well transitioned students. The discussion provides ideas for future research and useful insights for academic institutions, academic and professional staff seeking to help transition students, policy makers and other stakeholders on how first year mature students approach higher education, their usage of academic support and factors that could facilitate additional engagement.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

6.0 Research questions and answers

This study set out to provide understanding of the experiences of students transitioning to higher education. In particular, I wanted to better understand the first-year experience, engagement with academic support services and how the students felt the experience could be improved. My research was not initially focused on mature students, however, in the end my volunteers were mature students and as such the discussion focuses primarily on the mature student experience. I will begin this concluding chapter by answering my research questions.

What are the students' experiences with using the academic support services available?

My participants initially seemed unfamiliar with the formal academic services available. However, as their discussions progressed it became apparent that they had at times tried to engage with the services, but for various reasons did not find benefit. A few participants mentioned that they did try to engage with the academic support services but reported that often there were too many hurdles to get signed up. In the end they did not participate, they gave up due to the amount of time they were spending trying to get signed up for the activity. While others found that when they did attend, they either felt like the session was focussed below their knowledge level and that made them feel like they were being dragged backwards or alternatively they felt like they were slowing everyone else down. This meant that neither participant gained any benefit, and both stopped attending. Overall, the participants were open to engaging with the academic support services but disappointed that the academic services did not meet their needs. It seems that our academic support services are not heavily used by mature students.

How do they describe/understand/evaluate their transition experience?

It was apparent that the transition to higher education had been challenging for the participants in my study. Their experiences may have been complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated impacts of that on both study and homelife. They reported that they felt academically prepared for higher education, they were approaching with a strategy and drive to succeed. This involved developing study regimes and working in teams via group chats to support each other. The area that the participants in this research were not prepared for was the emotional challenges that they encountered. They felt that their transition challenges were of an emotional nature, in that they had to become or grow into

their new identity as a student. They reported self-doubt and anxiety as frequent emotions that they experienced. This challenge of transitioning was likely unique to non-traditional students as traditional students are generally firmly entrenched in their student identity already.

How do they characterize their use of academic support services?

The mature students demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy when it came to sourcing information to assist them with understanding theoretical course content. This meant that they did not feel the need to use the academic learning centre resources. The majority of my participants preferred semi-formal or informal academic support which they used frequently. When they did discuss their use of the available formal academic services, it was mainly to highlight challenges they had faced with trying to use them.

What are the main barriers and facilitators to accessing these services?

The participants in my research mentioned a number of limiting factors that made the services unworkable with most limiting factors tying back to the limited time that these participants had available to dedicate to finding and using internal support. They also discussed how the university communicated and delivered transition and support services. It was generally felt that the university communication was difficult to decipher and often 'too wordy' while it was unclear to my participants what specific benefits, they would get in return for *spending* time engaging with the service. They did not discuss any facilitators currently in place that they found beneficial for accessing the academic support services.

How might they be encouraged to do so?

It would seem that the current model of academic support services does not really fit with the needs of the mature students, so I am not sure of the value in encouraging them to use them. They were able to find semi-formal and informal resources that met their academic support needs in relation to the theoretical course content. To encourage students to make use of academic services is more complex than I was anticipating. I had expected this part of my paper to consist of a neat list of ways they might be encouraged but, in reality, the answer is much more complex. Encouraging mature participants will involve the academic support services team re-thinking what they offer.

Participants reported wanting something that allowed them to normalise and validate their experiences. They discussed several ideas that would have provided them with confidence and reassurance that they were on track. It was important for them to know that

they were experiencing normal emotions during the first year. My participants were able to achieve this only through chance encounters with other students in the cohort, mostly when waiting for classes to commence. The university's role in academic support could be to facilitate a range of touch point encounters for students across the year. It might be that at certain milestones they facilitate shared experiences: virtual check ins sort of like a temperature check and report the findings, on-campus activities are planned and or video blogs from past students about their experiences are shared. The participants in this study reported feeling empowered by knowing how others were faring. They seemed to just want reassurance that everyone was experiencing the first year as something akin to a rollercoaster. The students in this study spoke at length about what would have helped them to transition in a smoother easier manner. They described the need for near peer encounters, autonomous induction/orientation training earlier and reassurance.

6.1 Professional Learning

There were a number of key points generated from this research that either changed my understanding of a given concept or provided more insight into the lived experience of my participants. This section will touch on the points that have made the biggest impression on me and will inform my future practice and points that could provide valuable insight and perspective to others within the higher education arena.

Peers vs Friends – not necessarily interchangeable

Peer-peer encounters turned out to be something different to what I had previously understood them to be. Prior to conducting this study, from the literature I had understood peer-peer support in higher education as a social interaction, with the words peers and friends being used interchangeably. This was not the case: my mature student participants were not looking to make new friends as they already had friends that they did not have time to socialise with. What they were looking for were others to communicate with about their studies. This understanding changes how we could and should approach transitioning mature students to higher education. Rather than adding more time pressure to make friends and fit in with their classmates, encouraging them to create peer or working groups that are not based on socialising may better serve their needs and keep them focused on their studies.

Relevant support

More relevant support is required for mature students. The importance of supporting mature students as they develop their new student identity was not something I had

anticipated. However, it was discussed in depth by the participants and appeared to be a common struggle that they encountered. The emotional challenges associated with transition was discussed in relation to different transition models in the literature which explored how mature or non-traditional students could be better supported in relation to challenges that they encountered during their transition experience. Understanding and being aware of this challenge will be useful to me in my work and could also be useful for those in decision-making positions seeking to increase retention of mature students. Support services could also look at ways to help students to decrease their self-doubt, anxiety and stress associated with their transition experience.

Work-like approach to study

The way my participants approached higher education was akin to how someone would approach a new job. They set time aside for it, scheduled their lives around it, treated their peers as colleagues and wanted to succeed. They were very dedicated and took the responsibility of study on, in a way that they felt they would not have done when they were younger. Kember, Leung and Prosser (2021) mention in their paper that background characteristics can influence approach to study and while they were not specifically talking about work experience relating to how the students approach their studies, I think that because my participants were mature and all were working or had been up until they enrolled, they brought that experience with them, and it influenced their approach. Knowing that the mature students are approaching higher education from a different perspective and having some insight into what that perspective is will be valuable to me, when planning activities to engage and guide students in my first-year cohort.

Temperature control

Temperature as a concept for explaining types of resources is also interesting and important for universities, staff, students, and policymakers to understand. The mature students in my study preferred what was classed as 'hot' or informal support that came via the internet or their peers. They were least likely to seek 'cold' or formal support due to the perceived lack of specific relevance to them and the time involved. This may provide a lens for future support service developers to analyse future offerings to determine likely use.

6.2 Reflection on the process

I chose to use a yarning circle for this study for several reasons including: the mutualistic nature of the process, the encouragement of active listening, and the opportunity for each

person to share their experiences without being dominated by another participant. I think this method provided an environment that allowed for my participants to delve into their experiences and fully share their thoughts, ideas, challenges, and successes. The to and fro type discussions that could occur in a focus group are not possible in a yarning circle but what is possible is almost like a cyclone type discussion which starts with one person sharing their thoughts and experiences while the others listen and think about their own experience. This develops into a swirling and expanding discussion on a given topic as each person joins in. This allowed for participants to contribute to any given topic of discussion and frequently the discussion would go around the circle two or three times before everyone had shared their contributions and then it would move on to a new thread of discussion and the same swirling discussion would happen until the students had delved as deeply as they could. This data collection tool allowed for a depth of conversation that not only provided me with the information I needed, but afterwards the participants also reported feeling empowered. They mentioned things like this: 'I had never really put much thought into how or what or why I was doing things. I just made sure I was doing them but as a result of this I feel like I am more self-aware than I was before'.

The other part of the yarning circle that was valuable was that the students were able to help each other through different challenges. Once they had discussed a challenge in depth, the conversation generally moved to how others in the circle had dealt with the same problem. This gave the students immediate information that they could act up on even prior to the research being written up and published. I would recommend this data collection tool to other researchers looking to learn about participant experiences.

If I was to undertake this process again, I think I may have implemented different selection criteria. While I have gained a lot of valuable insight into the mature student transition experience and understanding of their use of academic support services, that was not the only thing I set out to do. I have not gained any additional information about traditional students who I had anticipated would also be participants. It may have been useful to have created two streams, one for mature students and one for traditional students as that would have also provided some interesting discussion in relation to comparing and contrasting the findings. However, given the circumstances in which this research took place and the impacts of 2020, I think that the study has provided me with useful information that I will be able to use in practice. Future research could be designed to include traditional students as well.

6.3 Futures

6.3.1 Suggestions for change

Within my university setting, there are a number of things that could be implemented in the learning and teaching environment to assist with the transition experience. I will primarily refer to my new knowledge relating to mature students in this section but will note where I think the changes would likely benefit all students.

Academic support services

I think the presentation of these services needs to be integrated into the individual unit learning platforms. By creating a link with the topic and time for relevant learning activities offered by the academic support services team within the unit's online platform would eliminate the need for students to go looking for information. I think this would help eliminate the sense of becoming overwhelmed trying to find the content and sign up. By placing it in the unit, it would also allow students plenty of time to plan their weekly schedules.

Raising awareness with new students

As discussed the students in this project had a high level of self-efficacy but many found the uncertainty they felt around their emotions the most difficult part of transitioning into higher education. This is a complex matter related to identity and belonging, but I think having a lecturer address it, and confirm that it is normal to have self-doubt and concerns, would be helpful. There may be value introducing periodic yarning circles throughout the term during class to allow students to discuss content and concepts. This is something that is commonly done in primary school in Australia, however, it may also have a place in university.

Facilitating peer support

Creating or facilitating near peer encounters and touch points for students to speak to other students in their discipline could also be done through informal mentors, chat groups that include a student or students from each year of the course, and or on-campus encounters or cross cohort academic activities.

Introduction of mature student mentors

To add on to the above point of peer support but in keeping with the discussion around looking at transition for mature students using a work-based transition model. We could look

at implementing an informal mentoring network using past mature students to mentor new mature students. This may provide our mature students with better internal support that is relevant and useful to their needs.

6.3.2 Suggestions for future research

As I approach the completion of my doctorate, I can reflect on how much it has provided me with in relation to increased knowledge and understanding of my chosen field of interest. However, as with many things, the more you know about something the more you realise how much more there is to know. To that end, I will put forward three future research ideas that I would like to see come to fruition as I believe they would strongly contribute to improving the student transition experience for mature students. There are likely many others that I could recommend or discuss but these three would make the greatest contributions to practical improvements for the students based on my understanding of their experiences at this point.

One of the interesting things that came to light in my study was the understanding of mature students approaching higher education as a they would a new job. There is a paucity in the literature relating to the idea of students approaching a degree course as if it was a job. Specifically, I think there is an interesting research project waiting to be done that explores the suitability of developing a model for transitioning mature students to higher education that mimics corporate models for inducting new staff. Perhaps using the same theories that are used to successfully transition new staff members may be more useful for transitioning mature students than the current higher education models which are heavily based on traditional student needs.

Another area for future research that has come out of this research is exploring the role of touch points across the year for students to check in with others during the transition experience. This could take a number of forms: facilitated encounters, virtual polling as a sort of benchmarking of emotions, or recorded video blogs from past students. The participants discussed milestones across the term that were high stress points and being able to know that others were finding it challenging too was beneficial to them. This could involve a mixed method study where students report both quantitative scores and qualitative comments at various junctions or milestones throughout the first year. It would be worthwhile to know if this type of self-benchmarking provided students with the ability to validate their emotions and reassure them that their experience is on track to allow them to build towards their new identity.

An additional research idea to come out of this project would be to explore new and innovative ways to facilitate students to connect with relevant students. This idea has partly come from a discussion I had with a student who advised me that people do not necessarily make first contact in person anymore but rather they more commonly reach out via apps. My suggestion would be to explore and or develop an app that would allow students to connect with students in the same unit or course for the purposes of creating study groups. This would allow the university to facilitate encounters for support in a way that students prefer to communicate. This may prove to be a better use of resources for the academic support team.

I would like to develop and explore the creation of an app that would allow students to locate peers studying within the same course or units at the university. I envision this as a study buddy type app that would allow them to create group study chats or communities of practice where they could discuss things and support each other without forcing old school social encounters on them. This would be in keeping with how my participants prefer to communicate and could provide those on the outside a pathway to an inside group.

6.4 Concluding thoughts

While I did not set out to change the world with this research project, I did set out to better understand the experiences of my students as they transition to higher education and their use of academic support services. My methods and methodology allowed me to meet the specifications of my framework and to answer my research questions in a meaningful way within my context. After completing this research project, I have an increased understanding of the lived experience of my students, and I like to think that I have presented their stories in a way that will allow others to vividly imagine and understand what it is like to transition to higher education for a mature student in 2020. It was also the aim of this study to provide practical solutions and ideas that higher education institutions, researchers, staff, students, policymakers, and other stakeholders can consider and use when working within the realm of transitioning higher education students. My research has met these goals by contributing to a deeper understanding of the experiences and providing practical ideas for improvement.

Appendix A – Ethics Approval

University *of* Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

College Research Ethics Committee

Request for Amendments - Reviewer Feedback

Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

Application Details

Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application

Student id. Number if applicable: 2215379

Application Number: 400190025

Applicant's Name: Dawn Dane

Project Title: A qualitative study about first year students' experiences of transitioning to higher education and available academic support resources.

Original **Start** Date of Application Approval: 15/03/2020

Original **End** Date of Application Approval: 31/07/2021

Date of Amendments Approved: 11/05/2020

Outcome: Amendments Approved

Reviewer Comments

Given the complications associated with Covid 19 the request to alter the mode of data collection from face to face to remote online access seems perfectly reasonable and the requested amendments are accordingly approved as reflected in the associated documentation.

Please retain this notification for future reference. If you have any enquiries, please email socsci-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk.

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Appendix B – Participant Information Sheet

University *of* Glasgow

College of Social
Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

A qualitative study about first year students' experiences of transitioning to higher education and available academic support resources.

Researchers: Dawn Dane (PGR student) 2215379d@student.gla.ac.uk and Dr. Kirsty Finn (supervisor) Kirsty.finn@glasgow.ac.uk

You are invited to take part in this research study; prior to making a decision it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Please take your time to decide if you wish to participate; please note there is no obligation to do so.

This study will help us better understand student experiences of transitioning to higher education and available academic support resources. A yarning circle will be used to collect your story. A yarning circle involves a group of individuals in a circle sharing in turn experiences and views with a given topic. You will be requested to participate in a virtual (online) yarning circle with other participants. Each of you will be asked to describe your individual experience with both transitioning to higher education and your views or usage of available academic support resources in Term 1 of 2020. You will be requested to speak when it is your turn and to not speak or ask questions when another participant is sharing their experience. The yarning circle will likely last for about 60 minutes and will be video recorded for transcription purposes. While there are no obvious risks related to your participation, there may be a benefit in that you will be given the opportunity to reflect on your experience to date. There are no expectations placed upon you beyond sharing your experience if you decide to participate. You will not be questioned on your responses or judged in anyway. This activity is entirely voluntary and will have no impact on your grades whether you choose to participate or withdraw at any point during the activity. If you decide to withdraw during the yarning circle you will be offered the opportunity to have your comments disregarded during transcription.

Your personal details will be de-identified using ID letters during the transcription process, which means that any quotes or comments you made will not be attributed to you but rather to participant A, B, C and so on. Your personal details will be stored in a secure password protected external hard drive away from the de-identified list of participant ID letters and any information that you provide to ensure that as much as possible your participation will be kept confidential. We ask that, as best you can, you observe and respect the confidentiality of other participants in the yarning circle.

Essential statement on confidentiality as required by University Ethics Committee:

Please note that anonymity may not be guaranteed; due to the limited size of the participant sample.

The data collected from this research study will be used to inform academic staff about student experiences with transitioning and academic support resources. It may also be provided to authenticated researchers on request and with the agreement that confidentiality is maintained. Once the data from the yarning circle has been

transcribed (typed up), it will be analysed to look for themes that emerge from the stories shared. Depending on the outcomes this information may result in changes to how CQU students are supported in during their first year. The analysed data will be used as part of a final dissertation. If you would like a copy of the written results you may email the researcher directly. All personal data will be destroyed as soon as data analysis is complete, no later than 31/07/2021. Prior to being destroyed all personal data will be stored in secure locations to avoid any breach of your privacy.

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow

If you would like further information about this study, please contact Dawn Dane, email: 2215379d@student.gla.ac.uk. If you would like to pursue any complaint, please contact: College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk or CQUniversity's Research Division (Tel: 07 4923 2603; E-mail: ethics@cqu.edu.au; Mailing address: Building 32, CQUniversity, 554-700 Yaamba Road, Norman Gardens QLD 4701)

Appendix C - Participant consent form

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: A qualitative study about first year students' experiences of transitioning to higher education and available academic support resources.

Name of Researcher: Dawn Dane (student)

Dr. Kirsty Finn (supervisor)

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to the yarning circle being video-recorded.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym / initial letter (A, B, C, D…) only in any publications arising from the research.

- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be de-identified.

- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.

- All personal data will be destroyed once the data analysis is completed.

- All de-identified data will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research

- All de-identified data may be used in future publications, both print and online.

- I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

- I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

- I understand that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form

- I understand that if I become distressed at any point during my participation in this research activity, I will be supported by CQUniversity's Wellbeing and Counselling services.

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my grades arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in this research study

Name of Participant …………………………………… Signature …………………………………………………

Date ……………………………………

Name of Researcher ……………………………………………… Signature ……………………………………………

Date ……………………………………

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow and the CQUniversity Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 22237).

If you would like further information about this study, please contact Dawn Dane, email: 2215379d@student.gla.ac.uk. If you would like to pursue any complaint, please contact: College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk or CQUniversity's Research Division (Tel: 07 4923 2603; E-mail: ethics@cqu.edu.au; Mailing address: Building 32, CQUniversity, 554-700 Yaamba Road, Norman Gardens QLD 4701)

Appendix D – Sample of yarning circle transcript

Yarning Circle 1

Student 4-

I entered uni as a mature age student, this is technically my second run at university, I did go to uni straight out of highschool but that was a long time ago. I graduated in 2002 so 2003 I went to uni and now giving it a crack again. I found a very very very different experience coming to uni as a mature age student than straight out of highschool because I had to completely reorder my brain from the work force where you do directly what is in front of you, planning perhaps for the future… whatever job you have got. But in uni you have to simultaneously look ahead while also what's directly in front of you. I also have 3 kids and working part-time so very very full workload so to speak. As for academic learning support, it is not something I have spent a lot of time wondering about. I sort of stuck right in to learning the material before the semester even started and didn't even enquire into what was even available. Whilst there were a few emails they tended to be very wordy and didn't really cut down to the nuts and bolts and didn't seem relevant to my situation anyway. I know there were a bunch on scholarships and stuff that probably would have been helpful but when I quickly looked over them none of them seemed applicable to my situation so I didn't go through them at all. However, I have often leaned on peers, we have a small group of students that we chat quite often, reminding each other when assessments are coming up or anyone has questions… I have found that very very helpful. Just a small group of people that we talk to on a regular basis, even if nothing profound comes out of it, it is still good to connect on a peer group level.

Student 3-

Probably the same situation as J, this is my second attempt at university. As a mature age student, I tried my first time as a mature age student when I was about 24 or 25 doing the same subject. I was just a little bit young, I still had other things on my mind and still wanted to travel. Now that I am a little bit older I was always a sort of a c grade student I sort of just scrapped through and didn't think school was for me… I had bigger plans (laughs) so I did an apprenticeship just realised that the apprencticeship wasn't for me and wanted to go down another sector for work. Ended up at university studying, the first time I went I just found it very difficult. Just not knowing where to find things and find support and kind of scared myself out of it. This second time now I have sort of learned from my mistakes. As J said, I joined a peer group, just a couple of people in a group chat where we keep in touch, if someone sees something from the university about a scholarship or something they will screenshot it and put it up. I found this time I think they have updated all of the material because this time just the study guides they have for each week are very useful as I work away. I print off the study guide and go through them at the start of the work or even before the semester started if they were up early. Really to just have them when watching a lecture, if you don't understand something you can stop the lecture and go back over it a few times. I felt that very very helpful, looking for academic support, same situation as J, I haven't really, I didn't think my situation was applicable for it. Yeah… I didn't even know where to look to be honest. I had a couple of mates that sent me some emails sfor scholarships for low income or transitioning from work to start uni. I have had to move and find a new job. Going online has been really helpful. I feel more online I can concentrate when I want to and not having to stress about taking time off work or losing my job especially during these times as my misses is not

from Australia here so I have had to support her over the covid time, as well as study and try to support myself. It has been a big sort of it has been really helpful going online. Even this semester staying online until the end of the year, that is probably about it.

Student 10-

So basically I just graduated highschool last year so I am kind of recent to uni but the way that things have been going. I mean the online classes. I am used to it but the sametime I am not. I used to have one class that was online studies where all our topics were online it was only one class. I reckon for me the practical classes are more easier for me to be on class because I focus more because with online I get distracted really easily. If I were in class I would get to focus more to the teacher and take notes properly with the like the ALC I haven't much into it and unlike the others I haven't joined a peer group. I have older siblings who attend uni so they help me and guide me through it so yeah but for my studies I think it is my habit of trying not to get distracted to fix it. Other than that I am fine with the transition.

Student 4-

It's more an agreeance with a few things that have been said, I really wanted to agree with. The online learning actually m touched on it too. The online part of it helped because you could go back over it again with content and as I briefly mentioned I have quite a lot going on, M said he does as well. The PASS sessions, I don't know if it was available for chiro I know it was for chem and human body systems but it seemed like it was again another commitment that had to be scheduled at a specific time and often didn't fit in with my schedule ...so I completely avoided it, it was far easier for me if I didn't understand a concept, it was far easier to quickly google how muscle actions work. Hahaha this is taking me back weeks to content that was last semester. Or ask a quick question of a peer than it was to sit through an 60-90 minute study session with others that may or may not be relevant. Again I could go back and revisit the content. I don't know if there is a mentor type program if there was I haven't been made aware of it. I think that would have been more appropriate in my situation where I could ask a question to a 2, 3,4 year student.

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