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Inviting study in: The engagement of mature-aged
distance students in the transition to university

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Mature-aged distance students, who often combine study with complex lives, make up a sixth of New Zealand university students. A high first year attrition rate in this population highlights the need to better understand their transition to university. Past research has tended to take a narrow view of their experiences, identifying specific strengths and challenges. This thesis uses the meta-construct of student engagement, the students' emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to their study, to enable a more holistic understanding.

Three research tools were used: an exploratory study analysing existing survey data; the theoretical re-conceptualisation of the key construct, student engagement; and a prospective qualitative study following students during their first semester. Study 1, the survey, established that mature-aged distance students, while highly satisfied, reported different patterns of engagement to traditional students. However, as the survey takes a limited view of engagement, the next stage of the project was the development of a conceptual framework that clarifies the nature of engagement and clearly distinguishes between engagement, its antecedents, and its consequences. The framework is the theoretical foundation for Study 2, which used family interviews and video diaries to follow 19 mature-aged distance students and their families through their first semester at university. Findings illustrate the individual and varied nature of student engagement, explore the importance of space and time as key influences on the students' transition to university, and theorise the links between academic emotions and student engagement.

Overall, the thesis highlights three overarching features of student engagement. Firstly, engagement is multifaceted with the three dimensions interacting and influencing each other. Secondly, it is contextual, influenced by university and student psychosocial and structural characteristics. Finally, engagement is dynamic, fluctuating throughout the transition to university as the impact of various contextual factors strengthens and diminishes. Central to all three features are the students' emotional experiences.

This thesis makes valuable contributions to both theoretical and practical knowledge of higher education. In particular, the conceptual framework and theorising of the links between emotion and engagement provide valuable insights that will guide future research with this and other student populations. In addition, the findings regarding the particular challenges of the transition period and the critical role of emotions for mature-aged distance students give rise to suggestions as to how these students can be better prepared for, and better supported in, their distance learning.

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Table of contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iii
List of tables	ix
List of figures	xi
Introduction	1
Research aims and questions	3
Structure of the thesis.....	3
1. The research context	5
Rationale for the research	5
Mature-aged student challenges.....	8
Mature-aged student strengths	11
Studying by distance	12
Student engagement	15
Thesis aim	16
2. Study 1: Student engagement survey.....	17
Abstract.....	18
Introduction.....	18
Method.....	21
Results.....	23
Discussion.....	26
Conclusion	30
3. Conceptual framework.....	31
Abstract.....	32
Introduction.....	32
Behavioural perspective.....	33
Psychological perspective	36
Socio-cultural perspective.....	38
Holistic perspective.....	39

Conceptual framework	41
Conclusion	44
4. Introduction to Study 2	47
Rationale and research aims	47
Critical realism	48
Research methods.....	51
Data analysis	60
5. Participant stories.....	63
Alfie	64
Bella	65
Bex	66
Brad.....	67
Charlotte.....	68
Daniel	69
Jeremiah	70
Kaitlyn.....	71
Lexi	72
Maria	73
Marie	74
Melissa	75
Natasha.....	76
Penny.....	77
Samantha.....	78
Sarah.....	79
Scott	80
Toni	81
Vee	82
Illustrating the framework.....	83
6. Case study	85
Abstract	86
Introduction.....	86
The study.....	88
Findings.....	89
Discussion	93
Conclusion	95

7. Finding the space and time to engage.....	97
Abstract.....	98
Introduction.....	98
Method.....	100
Findings.....	103
Discussion.....	110
Conclusion.....	112
8. Linking academic emotions and student engagement.....	115
Abstract.....	116
Introduction.....	116
Method.....	119
Findings and discussion.....	120
Conclusion.....	127
9. Conclusions.....	129
Overview.....	129
Features of student engagement.....	130
Reflections on the research process.....	134
Implications for practice.....	136
Final words.....	138
References.....	141
Appendices.....	161
Appendix A: Statements of contribution to published articles.....	162
Appendix B: List of publications and presentations arising from this thesis.....	165
Appendix C: Consent to use AUSSE data.....	166
Appendix D: Consent to use Massey University students.....	167
Appendix E: Consent to access the student enrolment database.....	168
Appendix F: Student information sheet.....	170
Appendix G: Expression of interest form.....	172
Appendix H: Confidentiality form.....	173
Appendix I: Partner information sheet.....	174
Appendix J: Child information sheet.....	176
Appendix K: Adult consent form.....	178
Appendix L: Child consent form.....	179
Appendix M: Interview trigger questions.....	180

Appendix N: Diary trigger diagram 181
Appendix O: Release of interview summary form..... 182
Appendix P: Release of interview transcripts form..... 183

List of tables

Table 1	Participation data by age for New Zealand tertiary institutions in 2012.....	6
Table 2	Attrition and completion rates for bachelor courses in New Zealand tertiary institutions in 2012.....	7
Table 3	AUSSE engagement and outcome scales with Cronbach alpha coefficients from sample	22
Table 4	Summary of hierarchical regression with satisfaction as the dependent variable	24
Table 5	Summary of hierarchical regression with learning as the dependent variable	25
Table 6	Bivariate correlations (Pearson's) and descriptive statistics for study variables	25
Table 7	Participant details	56
Table 8	Summary of the participants' lifeload and outcomes.....	63
Table 9	Participant details.....	102
Table 10	Taxonomy of academic emotions	117

List of figures

Figure 1	Conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents, and consequences.	42
Figure 2	Online introduction video	54
Figure 3	Conceptual framework of student engagement.....	87
Figure 4	Depicting the impact of interest on engagement.....	94
Figure 5	Modified conceptual framework of student engagement.....	133

Introduction

“To ask the proper question is half of knowing”

Roger Bacon (c. 1214-1294)

My interest in the topic of this thesis, the engagement of mature-aged distance students at university, is grounded in my own experiences. In 1996, as a 33-year-old parent of two young children, I needed a challenge and a change of direction, and so decided to do some part time university study. I lived 40 minutes from a campus, but I thought distance study would be easier because I could study when I wanted without wasting time commuting. I took just one introductory psychology course in that first semester and it was one of the hardest things I had ever done. But I survived, and I went on to complete my degree by distance over a period of eight years. Looking back, there were three things that made it easier: I had fantastic family support, in particular my husband and my mother; I never took more than two courses in a semester; and, while I had been out of education for a long time and I had a lot to learn about being a student, I was smart and had strong foundational language skills.

Four years ago, after going on to complete my Masters in psychology, I was working as a senior tutor at the university and one of my responsibilities was teaching that same first year distance course. The world of distance learning had changed dramatically. When I started, everything was print based: I received a study guide in the mail, ordered books and journal articles from the library with postcards, and my contact with staff and students was limited to two-day optional campus courses. Now, distance study is mostly online: a course website, large electronic databases of journal articles, and discussion forums for contact with staff and students. It is different to my experiences, but in teaching the course and interacting with the students, it struck me that for the mature-aged students coming back into education, many of the challenges and opportunities looked the same. I could see the nervous excitement at the start of the semester, I heard the tales of sick children and the juggle of school holidays, and I marked assignments that showed a lack of core writing skills, but reflected life knowledge. I also saw new challenges and opportunities: the need for technology skills, the extra equipment needed and higher costs of studying, and the benefits and pitfalls of interacting online. And, importantly, I saw what I had not known when I was studying: the high dropout rate of people who do not make it through the early hurdles.

My initial goal for this research, therefore, was to better understand the experiences of this important population of students, so that we can better support them to succeed. My reading

of the literature suggested that while much has been done to explore the barriers to these students' success, there was a lack of research taking a more holistic approach to understanding their experiences. Student engagement, widely considered to be a key indicator of the quality of the student experience (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005), had the potential to fill this gap. A second important element from the literature review that guided my research was the importance of the initial transition period. These two observations led to the specific aim of the thesis: to develop a deeper understanding of the engagement of mature-aged distance students during their transition to university.

I was aware that Massey University used the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) as a tool to measure student engagement and ultimately to improve student outcomes. This existing dataset presented an ideal opportunity for an exploratory study to assess the links between student engagement and student outcomes, and to assess whether mature-aged distance students differed in how they engaged with their studies. Thus, an analysis of the 2010 AUSSE data became the first stage of my research.

However, in working with the survey data it became apparent to me that, while the analysis revealed interesting findings, it represented a limited view of student engagement. In particular, I was concerned that the survey questions did not effectively capture the different experiences of mature-aged students that my literature review had highlighted, and that the survey excluded emotion as an important dimension. These concerns triggered a critical reading of the wider theoretical literature on student engagement, and from this I developed a conceptual framework of student engagement to enable a better understanding of different sub-populations of students, including the mature-aged distance students that I was interested in. The framework clarified how student engagement was related to the overall student experience and, in particular, it distinguished between student engagement and the diverse range of factors that influence engagement. This new understanding of student engagement formed the theoretical basis for Study 2.

In light of this changed view of student engagement, and in order to achieve the deeper understanding of the students' engagement that I was seeking, I felt a different approach to research was required for the second study. Critical realism, with its focus on context and its recognition of open complex systems, aligned well with my developing views on student engagement and thus formed the basis of Study 2. The aims and design of Study 2, a prospective qualitative study following students during their first semester at university, were informed by my initial reading of the literature, the findings from the AUSSE survey in Study 1, and the conceptual framework of student engagement.

The complexity of student engagement as depicted in the framework, and the rich data I gained from my participants in Study 2, meant that I could not explore every idea that arose. I chose, therefore, to conduct in-depth analyses of two important and under-researched aspects:

the impact of time and space on engagement, and the role of emotion. However, I also wanted to give voice to my participants and to illustrate the rich diversity of student experiences and so I summarised each of the 19 participants' stories, and conducted a detailed case study of one student.

Research aims and questions

Thesis aim

The overarching aim of the thesis was to develop a deeper understanding of the engagement of mature-aged distance students during their transition to university.

Study 1

Study 1 was an analysis of existing survey data on the engagement of first year students. The specific research questions addressed were:

1. Which dimensions of student engagement predict satisfaction and learning?
2. How do age and mode of study relate to student engagement and to satisfaction and learning?
3. How do the students who consider leaving the university differ in terms of student engagement or in terms of age and mode of study?

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework was based on a critical review of the literature and aimed to develop a more holistic and contextual theory of student engagement.

Study 2

Study 2 was a prospective qualitative study following a group of 19 students and their families for their first semester at university. The study's specific aims were:

1. To understand how student engagement develops and changes throughout the transition to university in the context of the family.
2. To explore the role of emotion in student engagement during the transition to university.

Structure of the thesis

Following this introduction, the thesis is presented in nine chapters. Five of those chapters are published papers, with the remaining chapters providing the details necessary to create a coherent thesis. The published papers are written in the styles of the journals they have been submitted to; however, referencing and formatting have been modified to match the flow

of the thesis. In addition, these chapters have introductions added that link the papers into the thesis.

The ideas presented in this thesis are mine. Within the bounds of the normal supervisory relationship, my supervisors supported me; for example, by giving statistical advice and helping me to articulate my arguments. For this reason, Dr Christine Stephens, Dr Linda Leach, and Associate Professor Nick Zepke are named as co-authors on three of the publications that form chapters of this thesis. The signed statements of contribution for these articles are in Appendix A and a full list of publications arising from the thesis is included as Appendix B.

Chapter 1 provides a review of existing literature on mature-aged distance students' experiences at university leading to the thesis aim. Chapter 2 presents Study 1. Published as a paper in the *Higher Education Research and Development* journal, the study uses existing survey data to explore whether age and mode of study impact on student engagement, satisfaction, learning, and departure intention. Chapter 3, published as a paper in *Studies in Higher Education*, proposes a conceptual framework of student engagement, which acts as the foundation for the second study.

Chapter 4, a linking chapter, introduces Study 2, a prospective qualitative study following a group of mature-aged distance students and their families through their initial transition to university. The findings from that study are then presented. Chapter 5 tells the participants' stories, outlining each student's circumstances, motivations, expectations, and experiences. Chapter 6 is a case study, examining one student's transition to university, published as a peer reviewed paper in the *Proceedings of the Manawatū Doctoral Research Symposium*. Chapter 7 presents an analysis of the importance of space and time, key structural influences on student engagement. This paper has been published in the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. The final results chapter, Chapter 8, theorises the role of emotion in student engagement and appears in the *Journal of Further and Higher Education*.

The final chapter of the thesis, Chapter 9, draws the threads of the project together. The key findings and contributions to the literature are recapped, and three overarching features of student engagement are presented. Reflections on the research process lead to questions for future research and, finally, implications for practice arising from the findings are suggested.

Chapter 1

The research context

“All teaching and all learning of an intellectual kind
proceed from pre-existent knowledge”

Aristotle (trans. 1994)

This literature review firstly establishes the rationale for the research by highlighting key statistics on participation, attrition, and success rates of mature-aged distance students at university in New Zealand. It then summarises the research findings on the experiences of mature-aged students in general before looking at how the choice to study by distance affects those experiences. The final section introduces student engagement as a key construct that has the potential to enable a more holistic understanding of these students' experiences. The few studies specifically examining the engagement of mature-aged distance students are summarised, leading to the overall aim of the thesis.

Rationale for the research

In the literature on undergraduate older students, definitions of 'mature-aged' vary, with some research focusing on those who are aged 21 and over (Cullity, 2006; Newman-Ford, Lloyd, & Thomas, 2009). This is problematic, however, as most traditional students will turn 21 during their study. Life circumstances are the important point of difference for mature-aged students and so 25 is a more appropriate cut off; by this age students are more likely to have had a gap in their education and are more likely to have their own homes and families with associated financial and time demands (McGivney, 2004; Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009). In addition, in New Zealand, students under the age of 24 are expected to be financially supported by their parents and so are not eligible for government assistance (Ministry of Social Development, 2013c). The definition of mature-aged students used throughout this thesis is therefore aged over 24.

Historically, universities were the domain of young school leavers. However, a widespread political focus on lifelong learning in developed countries has led to more adults enrolling in higher education in many countries including New Zealand (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000). For example, in the United Kingdom the number of first year full time students aged

over 21 increased by over 500% from 1966 until 1992 as compared to an increase of only 150% for students under 21 (Fuller, 2002). Older students represent a substantial percentage of the student population in tertiary institutions in New Zealand. As shown in Table 1, in 2012, 51% of all students, including 32% of students enrolled in bachelor degrees, were over the age of 24 (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Table 1

Participation Data by Age for New Zealand Tertiary Institutions in 2012

Age	Students enrolled	Bachelor degrees only	Percentage of population	Part time	No formal school qualifications	Distance students
Under 18	4%	1%	8%	35%	36%	9%
18-19	17%	25%	49%	14%	7%	6%
20-24	29%	43%	32%	28%	9%	15%
25-39	28%	21%	12%	53%	20%	34%
40 and over	23%	11%	4%	62%	26%	37%

Note: Data compiled from Ministry of Education (2013): <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz>

Important differences in the nature of this population are evident. Firstly, they are more likely to study part time, increasing from a third of those aged 20-24 to nearly two thirds of those aged over 40. Secondly, older students are two to three times more likely than younger students to be starting in tertiary education with no formal school qualifications, and again this increases with age. Finally, and of particular importance to this project, older students are more likely to study extramurally, with more than a third of those over 24 studying by distance compared to only 6% of those aged 18-19 and 15% of those aged 20-24. It is this group, students aged over 24 who study by distance, which is the focus of this thesis.

Comparison of students' performance by age reveals important differences. New Zealand performance data are not broken down by mode of study, and so Table 2 only shows the results by age. It is particularly noteworthy that mature-aged students, especially those who study part time, have higher first year attrition rates than their younger counterparts (Ministry of Education, 2013). More than a quarter of all students aged 25 and over fail to continue their study, with the greatest dropout rate evident in those who are over 40 and part time. The eight-year completion rates also reduce by age; 78% of 18-19 year old students complete their qualification inside eight years, compared to only 43% of those aged 25 and over. While this partly reflects the greater number of part time students in the older age brackets, only 62% of older full time students completed in the eight years. These data demonstrate that the first year for mature-aged students is particularly challenging and that their attrition rate continues to be higher than younger students' rate. Interestingly, course pass rates, at around 85%, are very similar across the age groups, suggesting that differences in completion are due to withdrawal

rather than failure, a finding that is supported by the research into mature-aged student performance.

Table 2

Attrition and Completion Rates for Bachelor Courses in New Zealand Tertiary Institutions in 2012

Age	First year attrition (2011) ^a			Eight year completion rates ^b			Course pass rates ^c
	Full time	Part time	All	Full time	Part time	All	
Under 18	9%	19%	12%	78%	65%	71%	84%
18-19	8%	21%	10%	86%	68%	78%	86%
20-24	17%	29%	22%	63%	44%	51%	86%
25-39	17%	31%	24%	63%	36%	44%	84%
40 and over	19%	35%	28%	61%	37%	42%	86%

Notes: Data compiled from Ministry of Education (2013): <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz>. ^a Percentage of students starting a qualification who were not enrolled at the same level or higher the following year; ^b Percentage of students who started a qualification in 2005 and who have successfully completed the qualification after eight years; ^c A course is a distinct module or paper or unit of study.

Mature-aged students who stay at university generally do well, although findings are mixed with some studies finding that older students are less successful (Jansen, 2004; Omigbodun & Omigbodun, 2003; Van den Berg & Hofman, 2005), and others finding that mature students do as well or better (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Richardson, 1995; Sheard, 2009). The research is complicated by the use of different measures of performance ranging from GPA to degree completion. More detailed analyses have suggested the relationship is an inverted U: Mature-aged students do better than young students up to a certain age, at which point academic performance starts to decline (Houston, Knox, & Rimmer, 2007). McNabb, Pal, and Sloane (2002) found the decline started as young as 35 but Newman-Ford et al. (2009) found that students aged 41-45 had the highest marks. According to Richardson and Woodley (2003), performance does not start to decline until age 50, getting much steeper from age 60. In New Zealand, unadjusted degree completion rates show a decline from aged 19 to 25, steady completion from 25 to 45 and then a further decline after age 45 (Scott & Smart, 2005). However, further analysis demonstrates that these declines are due to other demographic and study related factors such as part time study, family commitments, and external work, rather than age per se and adjusted figures show completion rates increase from age 20 through to late 40s.

These differences in circumstances and outcomes suggest the experiences of mature-aged students at university are very different to the traditional younger students, and that they therefore warrant separate study. As McInnis (2004) argues, “studies of student life ought to commence with a clear sub-group in mind” (p. 392).

Mature-aged student challenges

The high first year attrition rate discussed above has been a particular area of focus of research on mature-aged students and, as a result, findings tend to have a negative slant, concentrating on the extra challenges they face. Studies have identified circumstantial barriers to study such as financial and role pressures, and a lack of skills, as well as less tangible challenges such as a lack of belonging, difficulties with relationship and identity changes, and negative emotions. Differing patterns of interaction with staff and students have also been noted.

Financial pressure is a commonly cited reason for mature-aged students withdrawing from university (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001; Heenan, 2002). Many mature-aged students come from working class backgrounds and are returning to education in hopes of creating a better and more financially secure future for their children (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003). However, returning to study carries both financial cost and financial risk. Students are giving up potential income and taking on additional expenses in the hope of longer-term financial gain. In addition, as Brine and Waller (2004) point out, government policy on student finances is often based on notions of youth. For instance, in New Zealand, student allowances are not available for students aged over 65, students over 40 are only eligible for a student allowance for three years (Ministry of Social Development, 2013a), and students aged over 55 can borrow course fees but not living costs (Ministry of Social Development, 2013b).

A second commonly identified reason for mature-aged students leaving is role pressure (Cantwell et al., 2001; Heenan, 2002). Time management is a concern for most first year students, but it is particularly problematic for older students because of the difficulties of combining study with family commitments (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Research into role conflict and role overload has found that having younger children leads to greater role conflict, and that study and family commitments are more problematic than paid work, possibly because, unlike work, these roles have no fixed hours (Home, 1998). Some studies have identified gender differences, with female mature-aged students expected to continue to take responsibility for domestic life, and therefore more likely to struggle to balance their caregiving responsibilities with their studies (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal, & Kilkey, 2008; Christie, Munro, & Wager, 2005; S. Johnson & Robson, 1999; White, 2008). This is often linked to cultural values that see women torn between the competing discourses of gender equality and good mothering (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008; Zembylas, 2008). Davies and Williams (2001), in contrast, found that both men and women experienced such conflict. Importantly, while family responsibilities are often constructed in research as a burden, many students in fact *want* to spend time with their children – study is important to them but family comes first (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008). In addition, role modelling is important

for many students, so children can be seen as both a motivation and a competing demand (Reay, Ball, & David, 2002).

A third practical challenge for mature-aged students is skills and experience. Firstly, while younger students have come straight from school and so are well versed in the skills of learning, the first year for mature-aged students is often spent learning how to read effectively, take notes, write essays, and sit exams (M. Murphy & Fleming, 2000). Secondly, the increasing use of technology in learning means a lack of experience with computers can act as a barrier for older students (Henderson, Noble, & De George-Walker, 2009; Tones et al., 2009). Finally, researchers have identified a tension between the life experience knowledge that mature-aged students bring and the abstract theoretical knowledge of study (Henderson et al., 2009; M. Murphy & Fleming, 2000). The challenge for students is to recognise that their prior knowledge must be framed in theory and approached in a scholarly manner in order to be valuable in academia (Bamber & Tett, 2000). Mature-aged students also find that some un-learning is required (G. C. Johnson & Watson, 2004; Toynton, 2005).

As well as the practical barriers discussed, mature-aged students face other related but less tangible challenges. Feeling as if they just do not fit at university is a common experience. The university culture is widely considered to be centred on the traditional student who is young, white, male, and middle class (Read et al., 2003). This recognition has triggered a large body of research examining the experience of 'non-traditional' students, who often express feelings of 'otherness' (Kasworm, 2010; E. Moore, 2006), alienated and stigmatised by their difference (Read et al., 2003; Wilson, 1997). For mature-aged students, the lack of belonging often stems from what has been described as institutional ageism, a university culture that does not meet the needs of older students (B. Murphy, 2009). Specific concerns are centred on university marketing materials all featuring young people, lack of childcare or timetable flexibility, and orientation activities being targeted at young students (Henderson et al., 2009; Read et al., 2003). Qualitative research consistently shows that many adult students view universities as places for young people (Gallacher, Crossan, Field, & Merrill, 2002) and are worried about standing out because of their age (S. Johnson & Robson, 1999; Wilson, 1997). This leads to a fear of being isolated (G. C. Johnson & Watson, 2004).

Another less tangible challenge for mature-aged students is the changes in identity and relationships that can be triggered by the return to education. Askham (2008) identifies an inherent contradiction between a mature-aged student's existing identity as autonomous, mature, and independent and the student identity as immature, incomplete, and in deficit. While there are opportunities for personal growth, there are also risks to both identity and relationships (Brine & Waller, 2004; Britton & Baxter, 1999). Family and friends are sometimes threatened or jealous of the changes (Hockings, Cooke, & Bowl, 2007), and traditional gender roles can be unsettled by the return to study (Britton & Baxter, 1999). These risks are less anticipated than

the concrete financial and academic concerns mentioned earlier and therefore potentially have more impact (Brine & Waller, 2004).

Related to the challenges already discussed, are the negative emotions that mature-aged students often experience during the transition to university. The role of emotion in students' experiences is often overlooked, with learning being seen as a purely cognitive process (Christie et al., 2008). Linked to the role pressures mentioned earlier, guilt is a commonly expressed emotion for parents, particularly mothers, who study – guilt for not contributing financially to the family, and guilt for not spending enough time with their children (Christie et al., 2005; Mercer & Saunders, 2004; Reay et al., 2002; White, 2008). In addition, for many adult students, previous bad experiences at school have left them with negative perceptions of themselves as learners (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Brine & Waller, 2004; E. Moore, 2006; Stone, 2008). This combines with the lack of skills mentioned previously to create anxiety and fear of failure (Mercer & Saunders, 2004). While these students often express excitement at the prospect of learning again, this is tempered by the fear of being inadequate – both academically and socially (Read et al., 2003; Stone, 2008; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Studies tend to find more women express nervousness about their own capability (E. Moore, 2006). For example, the men in Stone's (2008) research, while anxious about the financial implications of their decision to return to study, were confident of their capabilities. However, more research is needed in this area; there are considerably fewer studies with male mature-aged students and the role of emotion in the transition to university generally is under researched (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007).

A final area of potential challenge for mature-aged students is social integration. While it is commonly argued that both social and academic connection are important for student success (Tinto, 2000), there are mixed findings as to the importance of social integration for mature-aged students. Older students often maintain separate worlds, partly because of not fitting in as discussed, but also because their busy lives leave less time and desire for social activities (Christie et al., 2005; Wyatt, 2011). While these students may not want the normative student experience and may be quite happy to maintain separate identities, these informal networks are often a source of important information and support that mature-aged students then miss out on (Christie et al., 2005). Lundberg (2003) highlights that there are three distinct types of social interactions: social relationships with other students, involvement in campus social activities, and education-related activities such as study groups. Her research found that older students were less likely to have non-academic peer relationships, but were more likely to be engaged in peer discussions. Donaldson and Graham (1999) suggest that mature-aged students may compensate for their reduced social integration into university life with greater integration into their own personal networks. Others have suggested that a lack of social integration can be compensated for by a greater degree of academic integration (Mannan, 2007), and this may be the case with mature-aged students.

Research findings highlight that these challenges are not faced equally by all mature-aged students. A number of personal factors have been identified that can enable mature-aged students to overcome the identified problems. For instance, good material circumstances, studying by distance, and taking a part time study load all help mitigate role overload (Home, 1998; Tones et al., 2009). Illustrating the importance of social engagement, making friends (B. Murphy, 2009) and having supportive tutor relationships (Gallacher et al., 2002; Smith, 2007) also help increase the success of adult students. Finally, having a supportive partner can mean less stress and more satisfaction (Norton, Thomas, Morgan, Tilley, & Dickins, 1998); however, Baxter and Britton (2001) found that having a supportive husband tended to mean one who does not object to their wife's study rather than one who actively facilitates it.

Mature-aged student strengths

While most of the research into this population has focussed on their difficulties and challenges, other studies have identified areas of strength. These include high levels of motivation and more desirable approaches to learning.

Mature-aged students are often more committed and motivated than their younger counterparts (Kasworm, 2010; H. Murphy & Roopchand, 2003). While some of their reasons for study parallel younger students' reasons such as career goals and qualifications (Leder & Forgasz, 2004), a strong motivator for many mature-aged students, especially women, is to be a role model for their children and to provide a better future for them (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). Reay et al. (2002) point out that for older students with families, the decision to study is not an individual one but strongly connected to their role as parents. Often adults return to study following a critical event in their lives such as divorce, bereavement, or redundancy (Gallacher et al., 2002; Stone, 2008), and personal development and intellectual stimulation are strong reasons for studying (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). Intrinsic motivation is often stronger in mature-aged students (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Hoskins & Hooff, 2005; Justice & Dornan, 2001). Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) suggest one reason for this may be that the self-selection process ensures only mature-aged individuals with a strong motivation to learn make the decision to attend.

A second area of strength is adult students' approaches to learning. Despite starting with a lack of study skills, studies on mature-aged students who are past the initial transition phase suggest they have more desirable approaches to study. Donaldson and Graham (1999) argue that adults compensate for their busy lives by using broader life skills and taking advice more seriously. Others have found adults are more likely to use deep learning strategies than younger students who tend to be more assessment focussed (L. J. Burton, Taylor, Dowling, & Lawrence, 2009; Hoskins & Hooff, 2005). For example, Justice and Dornan (2001) compared meta-cognitive strategies and found mature-aged students elaborate, reorganise, integrate, and hyper-

process material more than younger students. These differences may reflect the different motivations for study as discussed earlier, with adults more likely to be studying for personal interest than qualifications. Greater engagement in the classroom has also been noted, with mature-aged students more likely to ask questions and offer opinions in class (Kasworm, 2010; Wasley, 2006; Wyatt, 2011).

A final positive theme in the literature on mature-aged student experiences is that once the initial transition to university has been successfully negotiated, the rewards can be great. Students gain new language, new cultural capital, and new ways of seeing and understanding the world. In addition, overcoming the challenges of multiple roles and fear of failure represents a chance for personal growth (Mercer & Saunders, 2004); participants describe the change as transformative using words such as stronger, better, and happier (Mercer, 2007). These increases in confidence and self-belief extend into other areas of their lives (Mercer & Saunders, 2004; Stone, 2008). The pride in achievement is evident in one student's description of their graduation: "a proud moment and one of my most significant achievements of my adult life" (Askham, 2008, p. 94). Parents also report positive impacts on the children such as increases in self-sufficiency and independence (Mercer & Saunders, 2004) and greater educational aspirations (Bamber & Tett, 2000).

This review highlights that engaging in higher education for mature-aged students is a complex process, with the first weeks and the first year as critically important times. Mature-aged students have much to learn, both academically and socially. They need to develop strategies for balancing their family and work lives with their study; renegotiate their relationships; learn study and computer skills; overcome any anxieties or fears; and understand and adapt to the culture of academia. It is hardly surprising then that the attrition rate of mature-aged students in the first year is high. As mentioned earlier, one strategy that many mature-aged students use to overcome the challenges and increase their chances of success at university is studying by distance.

Studying by distance

In New Zealand, distance courses, where teacher and students are physically separate, vary considerably with learning materials delivered through a mix of print and online resources, and with differing expectations of student participation: Some courses have compulsory online participation, some have voluntary on-campus sessions, and a few have a compulsory on-campus element. Theoretically, the lack of fixed participation times in distance courses gives flexibility for people who are bound by time and/or place. For mature-aged students, it allows them to schedule their study alongside complex lives with family, work, and community commitments. It can also make more financial sense as it enables them to continue their paid work while studying (Hartman, Moskal, & Dziuban, 2005).

Generally, older students are highly satisfied with online learning (Ke & Xie, 2009) and are better able to handle it than younger students (K. Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner, & Ison, 2002; Ransdell, 2010). However, there are key differences between on-campus learning and distance learning that both benefit mature-aged students and present challenges. These differences include the flexible course design (LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008), the nature of the learning, the need for technical skills (Garcia & Qin, 2007), and the social environment with reduced opportunity for integration and interaction (Tones et al., 2009). Each of these factors affects the experiences of older distance students in different ways.

As mentioned, the key benefit of distance study for mature-aged students is flexibility, enabling them to fit their study around work and family commitments. However, flexibility comes at a price, particularly for women with families who often discover that distance study is not as convenient as they expected (Vryonides, 2008). Gouthro (2004) found that studying by distance positions women's student role as peripheral rather than central to their lives. The time spent studying has to be justified to others in the household and support from partners is contingent on the women continuing to maintain domestic harmony by putting in extremely long hours (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Gouthro, 2004; Stalker, 2001). While other students can commit chunks of focussed time to their study, for women with children, time is often 'squeezed' between (Vryonides, 2008) or 'snatched' from (Moss, 2004) other activities during the day. It is not just time that is the subject of "intense activity and negotiations" (Moss, 2004, p. 290), the physical space for study is also contested and shared with the family. For such women, study is often done late at night leading to increased stress and fatigue (Gouthro, 2004).

The independent nature of distance study is one possible explanation for mature-aged students' success at distance learning. Right from the beginning of the course, the initiative to study must come from the student (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). Andragogy theory suggests that adults are more self-directed in their approach to learning (DiBiase & Kidwai, 2010), and this is supported by the finding that older students have better planning and time management skills (Lundberg, 2003; Stapleton, Wen, Starrett, & Kilburn, 2007). DiBiase and Kidwai (2010), measuring time spent in an online environment, found that older students spent more time on the course. Some of the difference was accounted for by the older students' stronger levels of motivation as discussed earlier. An additional important difference was that more of the mature-aged students were enrolled part time. Expectations of the study time required are also important. Garcia and Qin (2007) found that younger students expected online courses to require less time and Nash (2005) found that the students who dropped out tended to be those who expected distance study to be easier.

The alignment between distance learning and adult approaches to learning may be another reason why mature-aged students cope better than younger students do with the requirements of distance study. Hartman et al. (2005) concluded that mature-aged students are

better able to modify their learning strategies to the requirements of online learning. In particular, a meta-analysis found that, for mature-aged students, online learning was more effective than face-to-face for declarative knowledge (Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006). One possible explanation for this is that distance learning tends to encourage more desirable forms of studying, constructing meaning rather than reproducing (Richardson, Morgan, & Woodley, 1999) and, as discussed earlier, adults are more inclined to use these deeper learning strategies (Ke & Xie, 2009; Quinn, 2011; Ransdell, 2010).

One difference with distance learning that can present a greater challenge for mature-aged students is the increasing reliance on technology as universities shift to web based learning management systems to deliver the curriculum. Previous computer experience and in particular prior experience of online learning is a predictor of greater success at distance study (Sitzmann et al., 2006; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). While previous concerns have centred on access to computers, increasingly the digital divide is about differences in either inclination or ability to use technology (Enoch & Soker, 2006). As mentioned earlier, a lack of familiarity and ability with technology can be a particular problem for older students (Henderson et al., 2009). For example, Garcia and Qin (2007) found that older students were less comfortable with tools such as discussion forums and presentation software, and that higher computer self-efficacy was associated with higher satisfaction with online learning. The need to learn not just course content, but also how to use the various interface tools can lead to cognitive overload, which may partially explain the higher attrition rates in first year distance students (Tyler-Smith, 2006).

A final difference with online learning is the dramatically different forms of interaction with staff and fellow students compared to traditional classroom courses. Social interaction is important for developing a sense of community, which is valuable for all students including distance students (Ke & Xie, 2009; Rovai, 2002). Participation in discussion forums is one way of measuring social interaction, although Chyung (2007) cautions that passive participation is also important and one cannot assume that students who do not post are not there. Older students value interaction with others more (Hartman et al., 2005) and use discussion forums to a greater extent (DiBiase & Kidwai, 2010; Hoskins & Hooff, 2005). DiBiase and Kidwai (2010) also found that older students were more likely to post substantive rather than procedural comments and questions, which links back to the idea that they may be engaging in deeper learning. Stapleton et al. (2007) differentiated between interaction with staff and fellow students and found that, compared with younger students, older students tended to interact more with staff but less with their peers. These findings parallel the research on internal mature-aged students: While they feel they do not fit with their fellow students, they interact more in the classroom setting (Kasworm, 2010; Wyatt, 2011).

These differences between traditional face-to-face learning and distance learning mean that the university experience for mature-aged distance students is qualitatively quite different. Some of the challenges and enablers remain regardless of mode of study: anxiety over past learner experiences and the return to study; guilt over role conflict; the use of deeper, more effective learning strategies; and active involvement in content related discussion. But for other issues, the mode of study changes the experience: the greater flexibility comes with the added challenge of managing the physical and temporal overlap of family and study; the burden of learning new technology skills is increased; and different ways of interacting with fellow students and staff are potentially easier for some, but overwhelming and challenging for others. Together these differences highlight the need to develop a greater understanding of this particular group of students.

Student engagement

The body of literature outlined above highlights the complex array of variables that influence the mature-aged distance students' experiences at university. However, as Bryson and Hand (2008) point out, the problem with focussing narrowly on single aspects of the student experience, such as motivation or anxiety, is that "they are insufficient to describe holistically the full individual experience of learning" (p. 6). An increasingly popular construct that aims to overcome this problem is student engagement. In tracing the evolution of student engagement, Solomonides, Reid, and Petocz (2012) acknowledge Pace's (1982) work on student time and effort, Astin's (1984) contribution of the importance of student involvement, Chickering and Gamson's (1987) classic principles of good practice for higher education, and Tinto's (1975) theories on academic and social integration. These ideas were drawn together by Kuh and associates in the development of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which defines student engagement as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college, and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2009b, p. 683). Positively correlated with a range of student outcomes such as critical thinking, cognitive development, self-esteem, student satisfaction, improved grades, and persistence (Kuh, 2009b; Trowler & Trowler, 2010), student engagement has been described as a meta-construct that weaves together different threads of research explaining student success (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

The NSSE and its Australasian equivalent, the AUSSE, measure engagement on five scales: academic challenge, active learning, student staff interactions, enriching educational experiences, and a supportive learning environment. A sixth scale, work integrated learning, is included in the AUSSE only. Comparisons on such measures by age have found that mature-aged students have different patterns of engagement, scoring higher on some scales and lower on others. For instance, findings from 35 Australian and New Zealand universities show that

older students (aged over 20) reported higher levels of engagement than younger students, particularly in the area of work integrated learning (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010b). Analysis of NSSE data shows small differences with older students scoring higher on active learning but lower on supportive campus environment and enriching educational experiences (Southerland, 2010). Summarising the first year experience in Australia, Krause et al. (2005) found that mature-aged students scored higher on one measure of engagement that showed they skip fewer classes and come to class better prepared. The only study identified that specifically examined mature-aged distance student engagement found that older distance students scored higher on measures of academic challenge and deep learning but lower on scales of active learning and staff student interaction (Chen, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2008). This parallels the findings highlighted earlier about mature-aged students' experiences. No studies were found that explore engagement of mature-aged distance students in depth and, despite the substantial number of mature-aged distance students in New Zealand universities, no local research was found.

Thesis aim

The broad aim of this research project was to address this gap: to develop a deeper understanding of student engagement in mature-aged distance students at a New Zealand university. In addition, the project focussed specifically on students in their first year of study. As this review and the high first year attrition rates demonstrate, the transition to university is a particularly challenging time for all students, including mature-aged distance students.

Chapter 2

Study 1: Student engagement survey

“Nothing has such power to broaden the mind as the ability to investigate systematically and truly all that comes under thy observation in life”

Marcus Aurelius (c. 161-180)

This first study of the thesis aimed to build on the limited research that has looked at the impact of age and mode of study on student engagement. Ethical approval was given by Massey University’s Human Ethics Committee: Southern B (11/45). In addition, consent to access the data was given by the Assistant Vice-Chancellor (Academic and International), Professor Ingrid Day (Appendix C). Using survey data from Massey University, New Zealand’s largest university provider of distance education, the study was informed by the following research questions:

1. Which dimensions of student engagement predict satisfaction and learning?
2. How do age and mode of study relate to student engagement and to satisfaction and learning?
3. How do the students who consider leaving the university differ in terms of student engagement or in terms of age and mode of study?

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The engagement of mature distance students

Abstract

An increasing proportion of tertiary students are aged 25 and over and many of these students choose to study at a distance in order to more easily combine their studies with their family and work commitments. Higher attrition rates and lower course completion rates for this group highlight the need for a greater understanding of their student experience. To explore whether age and mode of study impact on student engagement, satisfaction, learning, and departure intention, data from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) from 1116 first year undergraduate students from a single New Zealand university were analysed. Results confirm the influence of student engagement on both student satisfaction and learning, in particular the importance of a supportive learning environment. The findings suggest that while older and distance students are less likely to engage in active learning strategies with their fellow students, they have a much greater capacity to integrate their learning with their work experience. The finding that these students are as satisfied as the more traditional aged, on-campus students suggests that their experience is different but not second rate. Universities need to build on the strengths of these students as well as provide greater opportunities for them to form collaborative relationships with similar students. Limitations stemming from the timing of the survey and the inherent limitations of cross sectional surveys suggest the need for more in-depth longitudinal work to understand the changing nature of engagement for these students and to explore why they engage differently with their studies.

Keywords: Adult learning; distance learning; student engagement; work integrated learning

Introduction

Mature-aged students represent an increasing proportion of tertiary students in many developed countries. In New Zealand in 2010, 33% of students enrolled in bachelor degrees and 55% of all students were aged over 24 (Ministry of Education, 2011). These students are more likely to study at a distance: 36% of students over the age of 25 study extramurally compared to only 8% of those aged 18-19 and 17% of those aged 20-24 (Ministry of Education, 2011). Of particular concern is the higher attrition rate of mature-aged distance students in New Zealand.

While course pass rates are similar across the different age groups, completion rates show a dramatic decline across the ages: 79% of those under 20, 48% of those aged 20-24, and only 41% of those 25 and over complete their bachelor degrees within eight years (Ministry of Education, 2011). First year attrition rates show a similar pattern, with older students, particularly those who study part time, the most likely to not return to study after their first year.

Student engagement is widely considered to be an important predictor of retention and success in higher education (Kuh, 2009b) and may be a useful explanatory factor in mature-aged distance student attrition. While there are a range of perspectives on student engagement, the dominant approach in tertiary education sees student engagement as “both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to effective educational practices” (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008, p. 542). It is a multifaceted construct incorporating academic challenge, active learning, enriching educational experiences, supportive learning environment, staff and student interaction, and work integrated learning. Engagement theory suggests that both academic and social integration are essential (Tinto, 2006). Engagement is a key indicator of the quality of student experience (Krause et al., 2005) and of institutional performance (Kuh, 2009a), and is positively correlated with a range of student outcomes such as critical thinking, cognitive development, self-esteem, student satisfaction, and improved grades and persistence (Kuh, 2009b; Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010). Trowler and Trowler (2010) go so far as to suggest that the “value of engagement is no longer questioned” (p. 9).

Engagement of mature-aged distance students

Despite their growing numbers, only a few studies have specifically examined the engagement of mature-aged students who study off campus. Studies of mature-aged students have found they are both highly satisfied and highly engaged with their studies (Krause et al., 2005). One American study found that, compared to younger students, mature-aged students scored slightly higher on active learning but slightly lower on enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment (Southerland, 2010). However, distance education is fundamentally different from traditional on-campus learning in terms of course structures, learning approaches, and staff-student interaction (LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008); hence the need for more focussed research. Chen et al. (2008) found distance students to be generally more engaged than campus-based students, except for lower scores on active and collaborative learning. The study compared distance students by age, and found older students engage more in higher order mental activities, but are less likely to work with other students.

With the limited research focussing specifically on student engagement of this population, it is important to examine findings on other related aspects of the student experience for mature-aged and distance students including practical and emotional barriers, skills and

learning styles, and social interaction. Practical problems, such as role and financial pressures, and emotional struggles all contribute to mature-aged student attrition. Family commitments and ongoing gender role expectations create challenges, particularly for women who struggle to balance their caregiving responsibilities with their studies (Christie et al., 2005; White, 2008). Financial stress from the increased costs of study and lost income are also commonly cited challenges for mature-aged students (Reay et al., 2002). In addition to these practical difficulties, adult students often struggle to engage due to feelings of alienation and anxiety. Mature students can feel isolated in a culture that is seen as ageist, not meeting the needs of older students (Gallacher et al., 2002; G. C. Johnson & Watson, 2004). In addition, many have negative perceptions of themselves as learners, which can create a great deal of anxiety and fear of failure (Mercer & Saunders, 2004; Stone, 2008; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007).

Differences in skills and knowledge are likely to impact on mature-aged students' engagement. Firstly, a long absence from education can mean a lack of relevant study skills (M. Murphy & Fleming, 2000), while less experience with technology can also act as a barrier (Henderson et al., 2009). With the shift to web based learning management systems this is particularly problematic for distance students: Previous computer experience and higher computer self-efficacy are associated with higher satisfaction and success with online learning (Sitzmann et al., 2006). The cognitive overload caused by the need to learn course content as well as technology skills may be one of the key reasons for the high attrition of first year distance students (Tyler-Smith, 2006). Secondly, there is a tension between the life experiences and knowledge that mature-aged students bring to their study, and the abstract theory that is often taught at university (Henderson et al., 2009; M. Murphy & Fleming, 2000). At times this results in the need for un-learning (G. C. Johnson & Watson, 2004; Toynton, 2005).

Interactions with staff and students are an important facet of engagement and the findings with mature-aged students are mixed. On the one hand, family and work commitments combined with the potentially alienating culture of universities can mean less time and desire for social activities resulting in less belonging and the loss of important information that is sometimes shared in informal networks (Christie et al., 2005). On the other hand, mature-aged students engage more actively in the classroom, offering more opinions and asking more questions (Kasworm, 2010; Wasley, 2006). Similarly, mature-aged distance students value discussion forums more, use them to a greater extent (Hoskins & Hooff, 2005), and post more substantive comments (DiBiase & Kidwai, 2010), but interact more with staff and less with their fellow students (Rabe-Hemp, Woollen, & Humiston, 2009). However, mature-aged students may compensate for this reduced social integration by either greater integration in their own personal networks (Donaldson & Graham, 1999) or greater academic integration (Mannan, 2007).

Differences in learning style and motivation may enhance the engagement of mature-aged distance students. Once through the initial transition, mature-aged students demonstrate more effective approaches to study, in particular deeper learning strategies (Hoskins & Hooff, 2005; Justice & Dornan, 2001). They find distance study highly satisfying and are better able to manage it than younger students (K. Moore et al., 2002), possibly because online learning encourages more reflective learning strategies, which adult students are more inclined to use (Hartman et al., 2005). In addition, possibly because they tend to be more intrinsically motivated and have made greater sacrifices in order to study, mature-aged students tend to be more committed to their study (Bye et al., 2007; Hoskins & Hooff, 2005; Justice & Dornan, 2001).

Research questions

The construct of student engagement is increasingly recognised as an important lens for examining student experiences. However, as Krause and Coates (2008) point out, there is a need to study how engagement varies across groups of students. Known differences in the experiences at university of mature-aged students and distance students, as summarised above, suggest that these groups of student may differ in their engagement. Little research has specifically examined the student engagement of mature-aged distance students. The present study aims to address this gap with the following research questions:

1. Which dimensions of student engagement predict satisfaction and learning?
2. How do age and mode of study relate to student engagement and to satisfaction and learning?
3. How do the students who consider leaving the university differ in terms of student engagement or in terms of age and mode of study?

Method

Participants

In 2010, first year undergraduate students enrolled at New Zealand's primary provider of university distance education were surveyed by the university. Invitations to complete either a paper or online version of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) were sent to 4042 first year students and completed surveys were received from 1303 (32%). As the focus of this research is domestic students, 57 overseas students were excluded from the sample, as were those cases with missing responses on the independent variables, age and mode of study. This left a sample size of 1131.

Chi-square tests of independence found students who completed the survey were significantly more likely to be aged under 25 ($\chi^2 = 5.67$, $df = 1$, $N = 1131$, $p < .05$), campus-based ($\chi^2 = 43.25$, $df = 1$, $N = 1131$, $p < .001$), female ($\chi^2 = 36.31$, $df = 1$, $N = 1107$, $p < .001$),

and full time ($\chi^2 = 54.01$, $df = 1$, $N = 1108$, $p < .001$) than the student population. However, with the exception of gender where 69.7% of the sample was female compared to only 60.9% of the population, these differences were not substantial. For example, 27.1% of the sample was aged 25 and over compared to 30.4% of the population.

Measures

The AUSSE is based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and includes 102 items measuring student and institution activities related to student engagement, and demographics. Items are scored on various response scales, which for analysis purposes are converted onto a metric scale from 1 to 100.

Student engagement. The six subscales measuring student engagement are shown in Table 3. Eight items were removed from the standard scales, as they measure behaviours not relevant to first year undergraduate students. Four items within the Academic Challenge (AC) subscale assess hours of study and therefore responses are impacted by whether a student is full or part time. Therefore, as recommended by the developers of the NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2011), for these four items, the mean of full time students was divided by the mean of part time students and then part time students' scores were multiplied by this ratio and capped at the maximum score of 100. While not a perfect method of adjustment, it is the best available and is necessary as the scores would reflect poorly on part-time students if left unadjusted. The AUSSE has undergone a range of validation techniques including focus groups, interviews, pilot testing, psychometric modelling, and reliability analyses (Coates, 2010).

Table 3

AUSSE Engagement and Outcome Scales with Cronbach Alpha Coefficients from Sample

Scale	# Items	Cronbach Alpha	Description
Academic Challenge (AC)	10	$\alpha = .72$	Extent to which expectations and assessments challenge students to learn
Active Learning (AL)	5	$\alpha = .68$	Students' collaboration with other students to actively construct their knowledge
Student Staff Interactions (SSI)	4	$\alpha = .63$	Level and nature of students' contact with teaching staff
Enriching Educational Experiences (EEE)	9	$\alpha = .57$	Participation in broadening educational activities
Supportive Learning Environment (SLE)	6	$\alpha = .75$	Extent to which students feel academically and socially supported by staff and fellow students
Work Integrated Learning (WIL)	5	$\alpha = .65$	Integration of employment-focused work experiences into study
Satisfaction	3	$\alpha = .78$	Quality of educational experience; quality of academic advice; would attend same institution again
Learning	15	$\alpha = .88$	Academic skills, such as critical thinking and clear writing; personal skills such as understanding self and others

Outcomes. The two outcome measures, Satisfaction and Learning, and their reliability are also shown in Table 3. According to Gonyea (2005), self-report measures of academic development can be trusted for research purposes providing issues of comprehension, retrieval, judgement, and response are met. The AUSSE's parent survey, the NSSE, was designed to satisfy the conditions by which self-report data are considered valid (Kuh, 2001).

Independent and control variables. The key independent variables are age and mode of study. To counter problems of extreme skewness and kurtosis, age was converted to a dichotomous variable: 'Under 25' and '25 and Over'. Students categorised as mixed mode of study were re-categorised as internal as they were able to access campus facilities and therefore cannot be considered distance students. Gender (Tison, Bateman, & Culver, 2011) and part time attendance (Nelson Laird & Cruce, 2009) have been shown to influence student engagement and are therefore included as control variables.

Analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to establish which dimensions of engagement predict satisfaction and learning (question one). Gender, attendance, age, and mode of study were entered in these models as control variables. Correlations and descriptive statistics were used to answer the second research question. Finally, t-tests were conducted to answer the final question on departure intention.

Results

Prior to analysis, the data were examined for missing values and the assumptions of multivariate analysis. The percentage of missing data on the engagement scales was relatively high, ranging from 13.5% for Enriching Educational Experiences (EEE) to 6.1% for Active Learning (AL). However, *t*-tests demonstrated that the students with missing values on the scales did not differ significantly in terms of the two outcome variables, Satisfaction and Learning. Using a $p < .001$ criterion for Mahalanobis distance, two multivariate outliers were identified and deleted. In addition, analysis of residuals from the regressions on the engagement scales identified six residual outliers for Satisfaction and seven for Learning. Examination of these cases revealed no clear pattern or explanation and these cases were deleted from the dataset. This left 1116 cases for analysis. Examination of the residual scatter plots demonstrated normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity of the residuals.

Educational outcomes

To answer the first research question, Learning and Satisfaction were regressed on the dimensions of engagement, while controlling for gender, age, mode, and attendance. When

Satisfaction was the dependent variable, the control variables accounted for 1.3% of the variance (see Table 4). Gender was a significant predictor indicating females were slightly more satisfied with their university experience than males. In the second model, Engagement explained a further 32.9%. Three engagement scales were significantly related to Satisfaction. Supportive Learning Environment (SLE) and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) were positively related to Satisfaction, while EEE was negatively related.

Table 4

Summary of Hierarchical Regression with Satisfaction as the Dependent Variable

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	β	B	β
Constant	71.18		30.50	
Control variables				
Gender	-4.76	-.11 ^a	-3.77	-.09 ^b
Age group	3.60	.08 ^b	2.32	.05
Attendance type	1.64	.03	3.16	.07
Mode of study	-2.36	-.05	1.07	.02
Engagement subscales				
Academic Challenge			.03	.02
Active Learning			.07	.07
Student Staff Interactions			.00	.00
Enriching Educational Experiences			-.13	-.10 ^b
Supportive Learning Environment			.65	.56 ^a
Work Integrated Learning			.10	.10 ^b
Adjusted R ²	.013 ^b		.34 ^a	

Notes: ^a $p < .001$, ^b $p < .01$

The results for the regression of Learning on the dimensions of engagement are shown in Table 5. The first model accounted for only 3.4% of the variance in Learning while the second model, including the scales of engagement, accounted for 44% of the variance. All six scales of engagement were significant predictors.

Student engagement

As shown in Table 6, students aged 25 and over scored slightly higher on WIL and AC but slightly lower on AL and EEE. There was no relationship between age and either Learning or Satisfaction. Distance students scored significantly lower on all engagement subscales, except for WIL, for which they were slightly higher. The strongest of these relationships was between mode of study and AL. Mode of study had no impact on Satisfaction but distance students scored slightly lower on the Learning scale.

Table 5

Summary of Hierarchical Regression with Learning as the Dependent Variable

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	β	B	β
Constant	51.05		2.00	
Control variables				
Gender	-4.92	-.12 ^a	-2.35	-.06 ^c
Age group	1.99	.05	-1.16	-.03
Attendance type	-2.44	-.05	1.12	.03
Mode of study	-5.74	-.13 ^b	-3.23	-.07 ^c
Engagement subscales				
Academic Challenge			.33	.25 ^a
Active Learning			.11	.12 ^a
Student Staff Interactions			.07	.06 ^c
Enriching Educational Experiences			.11	.09 ^b
Supportive Learning Environment			.28	.26 ^a
Work Integrated Learning			.17	.19 ^a
Adjusted R ²	.034 ^a		.44 ^a	

Notes: ^a $p < .001$, ^b $p < .01$, ^c $p < .05$

Table 6

Bivariate Correlations (Pearson's) and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

	Gender (0=female)	Attendance (0=full time)	Age (0=Under 25)	Mode (0=internal)	Academic Challenge	Active Learning	Student-staff Interactions	Enriching Educational Experiences	Supportive Learning Environment	Work Integrated Learning	Satisfaction	Learning
Attendance	.01											
Age	.03	.45 ^a										
Mode	-.02	.61 ^a	.51 ^a									
Academic Challenge	-.12 ^a	-.06	.10 ^a	.00								
Active Learning	-.09 ^b	-.31 ^a	-.19 ^a	-.32 ^a	.38 ^a							
Student-Staff Interaction	.02	-.13 ^a	-.05	-.15 ^a	.36 ^a	.51 ^a						
Enriching Educational Experiences	-.07 ^c	-.18 ^a	-.08 ^c	-.12 ^a	.36 ^a	.44 ^a	.34 ^a					
Supportive Learning Environment	-.02	-.12 ^a	-.04	-.12 ^a	.30 ^a	.28 ^a	.36 ^a	.38 ^a				
Work Integrated Learning	-.03	.07 ^c	.12 ^a	.11 ^a	.27 ^a	.28 ^a	.26 ^a	.42 ^a	.17 ^a			
Satisfaction	-.10 ^b	.01	.05	.00	.22 ^a	.21 ^a	.22 ^a	.18 ^a	.56 ^a	.19 ^a		
Learning	-.11 ^a	-.14 ^a	-.04	-.14 ^a	.47 ^a	.42 ^a	.38 ^a	.44 ^a	.49 ^a	.38 ^a	.39 ^a	
M					49.25	38.82	26.35	30.12	54.17	41.56	70.51	48.05
SD					13.83	19.75	17.57	15.22	17.28	20.36	19.83	18.79

Notes: ^a $p < .001$, ^b $p < .01$, ^c $p < .05$; Ns range from 924 to 1116

Departure intention

Students who had considered leaving study (27%) did not differ in terms of gender, age, or mode, but were significantly more likely to be full time students ($\chi^2 = 4.45$, $df = 1$, $N = 975$, $p < .05$). Students who had considered leaving scored significantly lower on three subscales of engagement: SLE ($M = 48.09$, $SD = 17.33$ vs. $M = 56.20$, $SD = 16.82$, $t(971) = 6.6$, $p < .000$), WIL ($M = 38.76$, $SD = 20.13$ vs. $M = 42.46$, $SD = 20.23$, $t(958) = 2.5$, $p = .012$), and AC ($M = 47.39$, $SD = 14.56$ vs. $M = 49.62$, $SD = 13.48$, $t(934) = 2.2$, $p = .029$). Students who had considered leaving were substantially less satisfied ($M = 59.08$, $SD = 22.43$) than those who had not ($M = 74.59$, $SD = 17.09$, $t(383) = 10.2$, $p < .000$), and felt they had learned less ($M = 43.60$, $SD = 19.47$ vs. $M = 49.34$, $SD = 18.34$, $t(992) = 4.3$, $p < .000$).

Discussion

Educational outcomes

Student engagement is widely considered to be a critical influence on a diverse range of student outcomes (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). The findings from the present study support the influence of engagement on satisfaction and student learning, with the six dimensions of engagement explaining 44% of the variability of student learning. However, student engagement is a multifaceted construct.

Feeling supported by staff and fellow students is the most important predictor of student satisfaction and an important predictor of student learning. The finding that support is more important for satisfaction than for learning parallels a study by Gordon, Ludlum, and Hoey (2008) of first year students, which found that a supportive campus environment was not predictive of Grade Point Average (GPA), but was a significant contributor to retention. Social support in terms of friendships is potentially particularly important for mature-aged students who often feel they do not fit in the culture of university (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Students need to feel that they have positive relationships with staff and peers and that the institution provides support for success.

Work integrated learning is also an important dimension of engagement, positively predicting both satisfaction and student learning. Developing generic graduate skills and preparing students for the workforce is increasingly seen as a vital function of universities (McLennan & Keating, 2008). Other studies have noted that third year students have greater levels of work integrated learning than first years (Coates, 2010), but the present findings suggest that it is also beneficial for first year students.

A few studies have found that enriching educational experiences have a positive impact on direct measures of learning such as GPA (Campbell & Cabrera, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2010). Here, enriching educational experiences have a very small positive impact on learning

and are negatively related to satisfaction. However, this scale has unacceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .57$), a finding paralleled by others (Campbell & Cabrera, 2011; Gordon et al., 2008; LaNasa, Cabrera, & Trangsrud, 2009). Poor reliability such as this attenuates correlation coefficients (Judd & Kenny, 1981). In addition, the scale has questionable validity, measuring a diverse range of factors. Redevelopment of this scale is needed to improve its reliability and validity.

Student engagement

The second aim was to explore how age and mode of study affect student engagement and student outcomes. Despite the well-documented practical and emotional barriers faced by mature-aged students, students aged 25 and over in this study were as satisfied as younger students and reported similar levels of learning. Their engagement was similar to that of younger students although they reported slightly lower levels of active learning and enriching educational experiences. This finding is in contrast to Southerland (2010) who found that adult students had slightly higher levels of active learning. Older students exceeded younger students in terms of work integrated learning and academic challenge, providing further evidence for the finding that mature-aged students use deeper learning strategies (Hoskins & Hooff, 2005; Justice & Dornan, 2001), an element of engagement that is captured in the academic challenge subscale.

Distance students in this study were as satisfied as campus-based students were but reported slightly less learning. This may be due in part to their lower levels of engagement in all areas except work integrated learning where they were significantly higher. In particular, they reported less active learning. Chen and colleagues (2008) also found distance students experienced less active learning but, in contrast to the present findings, their distance students were more engaged than campus-based students in other areas.

Examination of the Active Learning items reveals that distance students and students aged 25 and over ask questions and discuss ideas at least as much as internal, younger students. However, they work less with other students, both inside and outside class. Past studies have found that mature-aged students actively engage and interact more with staff, both on line and in the classroom, but less with their fellow students (Kasworm, 2010; Krause et al., 2005; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Wasley, 2006). What is unknown is whether it is formal or informal group work they are missing. It may be due in part to course design differences, internal courses potentially incorporate more group-based activities, but it may also be due to contextual differences that inhibit older distance students' opportunities to form friendships. Firstly, older students often feel that they do not fit in well with the young students (G. C. Johnson & Watson, 2004). Secondly, studying at home does not provide the face-to-face opportunities for collaborative learning outside of the classroom. Finally, mature-aged students tend to have more

complex full lives which leave little time, or potentially desire, to work with other students (Christie et al., 2005).

Despite differences in patterns of engagement, the finding that mature-aged distance students are as satisfied as those on campus and feel they are learning at a similar level suggests theirs is not a second rate experience. Others have suggested that adult learners may compensate for the barriers to study with strategies such as applying broader life skills (Donaldson & Graham, 1999), deeper learning strategies (K. Burton, Lloyd, & Griffiths, 2011), or greater academic integration (Mannan, 2007). An important finding from the present study is that both older students and distance students were better able to integrate their learning with their work experiences. While other researchers have noted the conflicts between life experience and academic knowledge and the difficulties this brings for adult students (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Henderson et al., 2009; Toynton, 2005), the current findings highlight the positive. The ability and opportunity to relate their learning to the 'real' world of work may compensate for the reduced opportunity or desire to interact with fellow students. Universities must build on this strength because, as Brookfield (1995) points out, the experiences of adult students are a valuable resource.

The benefits of active learning are supported in the finding that active learning predicted learning. More consideration therefore needs to be given to providing avenues and opportunities for older distance students to work with their peers on collaborative tasks through online learning systems. The sense of isolation that these students sometimes experience (Kasworm, 2010) may also be countered by such connections with peers. However, a limitation of survey findings is the tendency to obscure important individual differences. LaPointe and Reisetter's (2008) qualitative study identified two quite distinct groups of students: those who highly valued the online learning community and those who felt it was a waste of time. This, paralleled with the need for autonomy and self-directed learning that is seen as central to adult learning (Cercone, 2008), suggests that students need to be given choice about participating in collaborative projects and online discussions.

Departure intention

As expected, students who have considered leaving are less satisfied with their university experience and rate their learning as less. Past research on the relationship between student engagement and persistence has had mixed findings: Korzekwa (2007) found no relationship whereas Kuh et al. (2008) found that student engagement did predict persistence. This may reflect the fact that engagement is a multifaceted construct and highlights the need to examine different dimensions. The current findings suggest academic challenge, a supportive environment, and work integrated learning as particularly important aspects of engagement for encouraging persistence.

Looking specifically at mature-aged distance students, the present study found that these students, despite their lower levels of engagement, are no more likely to have considered leaving the university than traditional students. This supports the view that differences in the engagement patterns for this group do not necessarily lead to dissatisfaction and departure. It may be that the reasons they leave are more related to their life outside the university than their experiences within it.

There is considerable evidence that shows older distance students in New Zealand do have higher first year attrition rates than younger students (Ministry of Education, 2011), and so why did this study not find such differences? One possible explanation for this is the timing of the survey: The AUSSE is completed part way through the year's second semester and therefore only includes students who have survived the initial, and often challenging, transition period of the first semester. Unlike traditional students who are transitioning from school, mature-aged students are adding a completely new dimension to their identity and a new, time consuming and challenging activity to their lives. Many of the practical and emotional challenges that mature-aged students face as outlined in the introduction, such as role pressures, lack of skills, anxiety, and feeling alienated within the university, are likely to manifest very early on in their enrolment. It may therefore be that older students drop out much earlier in the year and are not included in the present study. This is an important point if institutions aim to use the AUSSE data to improve the quality of their services and increase retention as is often suggested (Devlin, Coates, & Kinzie, 2007).

Limitations and future research

Although the authors of the NSSE claim it satisfies the conditions by which self-report surveys are valid (Kuh, 2001), there is potential for differing interpretations of questions. Chen et al. (2008) raise the possibility that distance students may interpret the questions differently because of their different context. For example, while on-campus students might see tutorials as "working with students on projects during class", one of the Active Learning items, would distance students see posting in online forums the same way? An additional concern is that students may interpret the response options, "sometimes", "often", and "very often", differently. Porter (2011) points out that this measure of frequency of behaviours is problematic; for example, one study showed that "very often" could be interpreted as meaning anything from 6 to 60 times per year (R. C. Pace & Friedlander, 1982). Further research to establish the validity of these aspects of the AUSSE is required.

Other limitations suggest directions for further research. Firstly, caution must be exercised before generalising these findings. The study focuses on a single New Zealand university and, as mentioned, the sample differed slightly from the population in terms of gender, age, and other demographic factors. However, the findings from the study warrant

further exploration with this population in different settings. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, the timing of the survey creates its own limitation – the findings cannot tell us about the students who drop out in the first few weeks or months of study, an important group. The possibility that these are more likely to be mature-aged students could be tested through analysis of the demographics of students who leave. Thirdly, cross sectional research by its very nature is limited: It cannot capture the important shifting patterns of engagement. There is a need for longitudinal research designs that are better able to measure the complex and changing nature of engagement. Finally, the current study suggests that mature-aged distance students have a different pattern of engagement to traditional younger students. In-depth qualitative research is needed to explore this further and to understand why mature-aged distance students engage differently with their studies.

Conclusion

Student engagement is well established as an important factor contributing to the success and well-being of students. The current study examined the engagement of mature-aged distance students and found that this group faces additional challenges but also exhibits additional strengths. They are a highly satisfied group of students suggesting that while their experiences and engagement may be different to the traditional aged, on-campus model, it is not necessarily a lesser experience. Universities would do well to build on the strengths that this group of students bring to their classes as well as work to provide them with greater opportunities to meet and form collaborative relationships with similar peers.

Chapter 3

Conceptual framework

“What is it but a map of busy life, its fluctuations, and its vast concerns?”

William Cowper (1785)

The analysis of the AUSSE survey data suggests that mature-aged distance students engage with their studies in different ways to traditional aged students. However, two limitations to this approach to student engagement narrow our understanding of the construct and, in particular, limit our view of the unique experiences of mature-aged students.

Firstly, student engagement in the AUSSE is viewed as mostly behavioural with elements of cognition. However, a comprehensive review of student engagement literature concludes that engagement has three dimensions: behaviour, cognition, and emotion (Fredricks et al., 2004). Students see engagement as predominantly affective (Solomonides & Martin, 2008) and students' transition to university has been described as an emotional rollercoaster (Christie et al., 2008). For example, as Chapter 1 showed, for mature-aged students returning to university, negative emotions such as anxiety and guilt can inhibit engagement with their studies (Stone, 2008; White, 2008). Yet this aspect of engagement, how the student feels, is noticeably absent from the AUSSE.

Secondly, the survey was developed as a measure of institutional quality for institutional comparison and improvement (Kuh, 2009a), and this limits its use as a research tool. The survey measures student perceptions of their own behaviours and of the university practices, and while these are important influences on engagement, they are only part of the picture. In particular, the critical importance of contextual factors other than teaching that influence a student's engagement with their studies is omitted. For example, when examining the experiences of mature-aged distance students, the importance of family and work outside of university cannot be underestimated.

This chapter therefore reviews the wider theoretical literature in order to develop a conceptual framework that enables a more holistic and contextual understanding of student engagement. The chapter is published as:

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Framing student engagement in higher education

Abstract

Student engagement is widely recognised as an important influence on achievement and learning in higher education and as such is being widely theorised and researched. This article firstly reviews and critiques the four dominant research perspectives on student engagement: the behavioural perspective, which foregrounds student behaviour and institutional practice; the psychological perspective, which clearly defines engagement as an individual psychosocial process; the socio-cultural perspective, which highlights the critical role of the socio-political context; and finally, the holistic perspective, which takes a broader view of engagement. Key problems are identified, in particular, poor definitions and a lack of distinction between the state of engagement, factors that influence student engagement, and the immediate and longer-term consequences of engagement. The second part of the article presents a conceptual framework that overcomes these problems, incorporating valuable elements from each of the perspectives, to enable a better shared understanding of student engagement to frame future research and improve student outcomes.

Keywords: student engagement, critique, socio-cultural perspective, theoretical framework, teaching and learning

Introduction

Student engagement is a current buzzword in higher education, increasingly researched, theorised, and debated with growing evidence of its critical role in achievement and learning. Trowler and Trowler's (2010) recent review goes so far as to suggest that "the value of engagement is no longer questioned" (p. 9). With governments increasingly interested in measuring student outcomes (Zepke & Leach, 2010a), and suggestions that student engagement can act as a proxy for quality (Kuh, 2009a), a clear understanding of this vital construct is essential. However, engagement is complex and multifaceted, an overarching 'meta-construct' that aims to draw together diverse threads of research contributing to explanations of student success (Fredricks et al., 2004). While all agree it is important, there is debate over the exact nature of the construct; a key problem is a lack of distinction between the state of engagement,

its antecedents, and its consequences. While there is some overlap, four relatively distinct approaches to understanding engagement can be identified in the literature: the behavioural perspective, which focuses on effective teaching practice; the psychological perspective, which views engagement as an internal individual process; the socio-cultural perspective, which considers the critical role of socio-cultural context; and finally a holistic perspective, which strives to draw the strands together. Focussing on higher education, this article describes these four approaches and aims to clarify the construct of engagement and clearly differentiate it from its antecedents and consequences. In order to progress our understanding and improve the value of future research, an overarching conceptual framework is proposed that acknowledges the importance of the student and the institution while recognising the critical influence of the socio-cultural context.

Behavioural perspective

The most widely accepted view of engagement in higher education literature emphasises student behaviour and teaching practice. Following dissatisfaction with college ranking systems and the measurement of quality in higher education in the United States in the late 1990s, a project was set up to develop a new measurement tool (Kuh, 2009a). Student engagement was seen as an evolving construct that captures a range of institutional practices and student behaviours related to student satisfaction and achievement including time on task, social and academic integration, and teaching practices (Kuh, 2009a). The emphasis was on how institutions can affect student engagement, drawing from Chickering and Gamson's (1987) *Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*. Within this perspective, student engagement is defined as the "time and effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities" (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010b, p. 1).

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and its successor the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) are the survey tools used to measure student engagement within the behavioural perspective. The NSSE (2010) has five engagement scales: academic challenge, active learning, interactions, enriching educational experiences, and supportive learning environment, while the AUSSE has a sixth, work integrated learning (Coates, 2010). The items in the AUSSE are also grouped into six educational outcome measures: higher order thinking, general learning outcomes, career readiness, grade, departure intention, and satisfaction. Increasingly, these surveys are becoming the definition of student engagement; for example, in one study it was argued that, "in order to better understand the concept of student engagement, it is important to review NSSE's benchmarks" (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006, p. 151). This assumes the measure has high validity, an area of considerable debate.

According to the developers, the NSSE items and scales are theoretically and empirically derived with good psychometric properties – strong face and construct validity, and good reliability (Kuh, 2001). Others disagree. There is debate over the structure of the instrument, with Porter (2011) suggesting the domain definition is too broad and many items lack theoretical justification. The construction of the five scales has also been questioned. An evaluation of the academic challenge scale, for example, found considerable confusion and disagreement by both staff and students (Payne, Kleine, Purcell, & Carter, 2005). Other scales and dimensions, developed through factor analysis, have been suggested (LaNasa et al., 2009; Pike, 2006).

More importantly, the NSSE's predictive validity is disputed with a relative paucity of research relating the data to objective outcomes such as GPA and retention (Gordon et al., 2008). One such study across 14 institutions found very weak associations between academic success and the NSSE benchmarks (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). Interestingly, the linkages varied by institution and were stronger for lower ability students. Other single institution studies (e.g. Gordon et al., 2008) have found at best only modest contributions of NSSE benchmarks to explaining student outcomes with Korzekwa (2007) concluding “there is little evidence for predictive validity” (p. 45).

Finally, the validity of the student responses is also cause for concern. The survey's authors claim the NSSE satisfies the criteria by which self-report data are most likely to be valid (Kuh, 2001). However, the reliability of student responses regarding the skills they have acquired or used must be questioned in light of research showing students struggle to understand academic terms such as “thinking critically and analytically” (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2010a, p. 3). Porter (2011) points out that even apparently simple items referring to actions such as ‘had serious conversations with students’ are open to interpretation – which conversations are serious? Problems with memory storage and recall, in particular the frequency of events across a year, the context of the question, and social desirability bias are all potential limitations to the validity of the data (Porter, 2011).

The reliance on surveys for measurement is a key limitation of the behavioural perspective. Firstly, a single survey instrument spanning all disciplines is problematic when there is evidence that teaching and learning vary across disciplines (Nelson Laird, Shoup, Kuh, & Schwarz, 2008). For example, how is the number of assigned readings or length of written assignments, both items in the academic challenge scale, relevant to a design or mathematics student? This problem has led to claims that mathematics and science students are less engaged (Ahlfeldt, Mehta, & Sellnow, 2005), while others have argued that engagement is qualitatively different across disciplines (Brint, Cantwell, & Hanneman, 2008). A second limitation of using a survey instrument is that it is a single wide angled snapshot and as such misses much of the complexity of the construct: Engagement is both dynamic and situational. Finally, surveys

obscure the participant voice with no opportunity for a perspective that does not fit the predefined questions (Bryson, Cooper, & Hardy, 2010). Longitudinal, qualitative measures may be more effective tools.

Due to its development as a tool for institutional improvement and comparison (Coates, 2010; Kuh, 2009a), the definition of student engagement within the behavioural perspective is limited and unclear. This restricts its usefulness as a research perspective for understanding student engagement. Blending institutional practices with student behaviour has resulted in a lack of clear distinction between the factors that influence engagement, the measurement of engagement itself, and the consequences of engagement. For example, there is considerable overlap between items included in the active learning engagement scale and the higher order thinking outcome measure. Much of the focus is on institutional practices such as support services; while these are important influences on engagement, they do not represent the psychological state of engagement (Wefald & Downey, 2009). By focussing only on elements the institution can control, a wide range of other explanatory variables is excluded, such as student motivation, expectations, and emotions.

The behavioural approach does incorporate students' thinking processes as well as behaviour, as evidenced by subscales such as level of academic challenge, and active and collaborative learning. However, learning is also emotional (Christie et al., 2008) and, except for a single item assessing overall satisfaction, the students' emotions are not measured. That affect is an important part of engagement is illustrated by the finding that international students, traditionally high scorers on the NSSE, on a Coping and Comprehension scale showed signs of struggle and of being overwhelmed (Krause, 2005). Interestingly, while tutors see engagement as cognitive, students see it as predominantly affective (Solomonides & Martin, 2008). By failing to measure how students are feeling, the behavioural perspective misses valuable information that would give a much richer understanding of the student experience.

This is not to suggest there is no value in the behavioural approach. It explains part of the complex and multidimensional picture of student engagement, in particular the relationships between teaching practice and student behaviour. A particular strength is the inclusion of more distal consequences of engagement with questions about how their time as a student has contributed towards broader life skills such as understanding people of different ethnicities, developing personal values, and contributing to the welfare of the community. A second strength is the popularity of the approach allowing exploration of the impact of a wide range of variables on student engagement such as missions (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006), expenditure (Pike, Smart, Kuh, & Hayek, 2006), and learning communities (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). New models of engagement are also being proposed such as Coates' (2007) four way typology of student engagement styles: intense, collaborative, independent, and passive, linked to the common distinction between social and academic engagement. However, the behavioural perspective's

understanding of engagement is too narrow, a problem that the psychological perspective goes some way towards resolving.

Psychological perspective

The psychological perspective of engagement is particularly dominant in the school literature and views engagement as an internal psychosocial process that evolves over time and varies in intensity. A key strength of this approach, in comparison to the behavioural perspective, is the distinction between engagement and its antecedents. Various overlapping dimensions of engagement have been proposed including behaviour, cognition, emotion, and conation, with earlier work often defining engagement as just one of these, and later theorists suggesting engagement is a combination.

The behaviour dimension, paralleling parts of the behavioural perspective just discussed, has three elements: positive conduct and rule following including attendance; involvement in learning, including time on task and asking questions; and wider participation in extracurricular activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). For example, Finn's (1993) participation-identification model argues that participation in both the classroom and wider school leads to success, which then develops a sense of belonging which, in a perpetual cycle, further increases participation.

The second dimension, cognition, is illustrated by Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn's (1992) definition of engagement as "a student's psychological investment in and effort directed towards learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge skills or crafts" (p. 12). This cognitive dimension most commonly refers to students' self-regulation and effective use of deep learning strategies (Fredricks et al., 2004), as touched on in the behavioural perspective. However, within the psychological perspective, cognition also incorporates individual characteristics such as motivation, self-efficacy, and expectations (Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003).

The affective dimension of engagement is a strength of the psychological approach as "there is an emotional intensity attached to the experience of learning that is often overlooked" (Askham, 2008, p. 94). Some consider engagement to be synonymous with attachment, focussing predominantly on whether students feel they belong (Libbey, 2004). Others consider more immediate emotions such as enjoyment and interest in the task (Furlong et al., 2003). The affective dimension highlights the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic motivation. With the former, the student is motivated to engage cognitively and behaviourally as a means to an end – high grades or a qualification for example. With the latter, the student is motivated by their pleasure and interest in the learning. There is a tendency in the literature to privilege the intrinsic over the instrumental approach. For example, Bryson and Hand (2008) describe the instrumental approach as false engagement, while Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) distinguish

between procedural engagement, the more superficial and often task based activity, and substantive engagement, a more sustained psychological investment in learning.

Drawing on older philosophical constructions of the human mind, a few theorists have suggested that conation, the will to succeed, is a separate dimension of engagement (Corno & Mandinach, 2004; R. Harris, Bolander, Lebrun, Docq, & Bouvy, 2004). A much less researched and theorised concept, conation is considered to have six attributes: belief, courage, energy, commitment, conviction, and change (Riggs & Gholar, 2009). Most theorists however consider the three dimensions of behaviour, cognition, and affect adequately capture the psychological state of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), with recent studies supporting the view that the dimensions are facets of a single meta-construct (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

The key limitations of the psychological perspective centre on a lack of definition and differentiation between the dimensions. Clear definition of the construct of engagement is essential for shared understanding, but a review by Jimerson et al. (2003) shows that, of the 45 articles examined, 31 did not explicitly define the terms. In addition, not only is there considerable overlap with previously studied constructs such as motivation, learning approaches, and values (Fredricks et al., 2004), there is also overlap between the different dimensions (for example effort often appears in both behavioural and cognitive measures). There is also disagreement on the relationships between the dimensions. For example, Newmann et al. (1992) suggest a student can complete their work and learn well without being emotionally engaged in the topic, while Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) argue that both behavioural and emotional engagement are necessary prerequisites for cognitive engagement.

These problems of definition have also led to inconsistencies in measurement. While there is some use of direct observation and teachers' rating scales (Chapman, 2003), like the behavioural perspective, most measures are student surveys, raising concerns over the validity of the responses (Roth & Damico, 1996). It is often unclear which aspects of engagement are being measured, with some surveys focusing on single dimensions and others claiming to be a single general measure of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). In addition, the context of the engagement, for example school, peer, or classroom, is often unspecified (Furlong et al., 2003). More recently developed measures are attempting to overcome some of these limitations by measuring all three dimensions based on clearer operational definitions (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Archambault et al., 2009; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2005). All surveys have the problems discussed earlier of limiting the participants' voices and failing to capture the dynamic nature of engagement.

Despite these issues, the psychological perspective has much to recommend it. Psychology in the past has tended to treat feeling and thinking as if they were entirely separate processes but is more inclined now to see them as "inseparable, interwoven dimensions of

human social life” (Forgas, 2000, p. 4). Viewing student engagement as multidimensional recognises this and enables a rich understanding of the individual’s experience (Fredricks et al., 2004). Moreover, engagement as a psychological process is considered to be malleable, varying in intensity and responsive to the environment, suggesting that there is much that can be done to improve engagement, although more longitudinal and intervention research is needed to support this (Fredricks et al., 2004). The final, and most important, benefit of the psychological perspective is that it does not conflate the state of being engaged with its antecedents or its consequences, a problem that is rife in other perspectives. However, in positioning engagement so clearly within the individual, there is a danger of downplaying the critical importance of the situation. Engagement is fundamentally situational – it arises from the interplay of context and individual.

Socio-cultural perspective

The socio-cultural perspective on student engagement focuses on the impact of the broader social context on student experience. In particular, theorists have explored explanations for the polar opposite to engagement, alienation, “a subjectively undesirable separation from something outside oneself” (Geyer, 2001, p. 390). Mann’s (2001) influential work identifies contextual factors such as disciplinary power, academic culture, and an excessive focus on performativity, which can all lead to the disconnection of students within higher education. Similarly, L. Thomas (2002) argues that institutional habitus results in an inherent social and cultural bias within educational institutions in favour of dominant social groups, leading to poor retention of non-traditional students. The experience of starting university is variously described for some students as a culture shock (Christie et al., 2008), learning shock (D. S. Griffiths, Winstanley, & Gabriel, 2005), and akin to being “a fish out of water” (L. Thomas, 2002, p. 431), illustrating the powerful barrier this cultural difference represents to engagement for many students. This perspective on education is particularly common within feminist literatures examining women’s alienation within the university culture (e.g. Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Stalker, 2001).

A related constructivist approach argues that higher education needs to take an ontological turn and institutions need to “engage the whole person: what they know, how they act, and who they are” (Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2007, p. 689). Solomonides and Reid (2009) have proposed a relational model of student engagement that locates the sense of being, similar but deeper than the affective dimension of engagement discussed previously, at the centre. Barnett and Coate (2005) take the concept of ontological engagement a step further and argue that it entails a project of active citizenship and engagement with the political nature of the world. This ontological approach is well represented in the literature on student identity. The

challenges of renegotiating their identity within a culture where they are positioned as the 'other' has been examined with many groups of non-traditional students such as older students (e.g. Askham, 2008), working class women (e.g. Christie et al., 2005), and ethnic minorities (e.g. D. R. Johnson et al., 2007). These groups are often described as not having the necessary social, cultural, and academic capital to easily fit into the university culture (Lawrence, 2006). While potentially a less challenging process, more traditional students may also experience identity struggles and a sense of being an outsider in the world of academia (Mann, 2001).

The wider socio-political context also influences student engagement. McInnis (2001) asserts that the term disengagement is misleading as it implies a deficit on the part of the students. Instead, he argues that recent declines in academic engagement are due to societal changes such as market driven changes in universities, changes in societal values, increases in flexibility of delivery and online courses, and generational differences. The "commodification of education" (Smith, 2007, p. 684) and, in particular the widening participation initiative and the later introduction of student loans and higher fees, has impacted on non-traditional students in particular (Christie et al., 2005). Krause (2005) also notes that generational changes have meant shifts in the meaning of university study and therefore the nature of student engagement.

The socio-cultural perspective offers important ideas on 'why' students become engaged or alienated at university, with a particular emphasis on non-traditional students. It highlights the need for the institutions to consider not just the student support structures but also the institution's culture and the wider political and social debates impacting on student engagement. It adds therefore a critical and often neglected piece to the task of understanding student engagement.

Holistic perspective

A few authors are striving to draw together these diverse strands of theory and research on student engagement. For example, researchers in the UK have proposed a more holistic definition: "The conception of engagement encompasses the perceptions, expectations and experience of being a student and the construction of being a student" (Bryson, Hardy, & Hand, 2009, p. 1). In line with the constructivist approach discussed earlier, they argue for a wider focus that incorporates the notion of 'becoming', arguing that universities should be about more than getting qualifications (Bryson & Hand, 2008). Engagement in their view is a dynamic continuum with different locations (task, classroom, course, institution), and thus not measurable by surveys but best understood through in-depth qualitative work.

Like the psychological approach, a key strength of this work is the recognition of the importance of emotion. For example, findings highlight the critical importance of the teacher's disposition and in particular the need for warmth and respect to foster a sense of belonging

(Bryson & Hand, 2007; Kember, Lee, & Li, 2001). Bryson and Hand (2007) suggest staff need to consider three levels of engagement – discourse with students, enthusiasm for the subject, and professionalism with the teaching process. However, they also note that while individual staff are important, a wider institutional approach is needed that provides the necessary resources, and supports both students and staff to be engaged (Hand & Bryson, 2008).

In striving to take a more holistic view, this approach makes the same mistake as the behavioural perspective in that it fails to distinguish between engagement and its antecedents. For example, student expectations are included within the definition of engagement, and while this has been found to be an important influence on the student experience (e.g. Christie et al., 2008), to enable a better understanding such antecedents need to be clearly distinguished from the state of being engaged. Bryson et al. (2010) suggest engagement is both a process and an outcome – that the former is what institutions do and should be labelled ‘engaging students’ whereas the latter is what students do and should be labelled ‘students engaging’. A clearer distinction would be to recognise that what is considered to be the process is not engagement, instead it is a cluster of factors that influence student engagement (usually the more immediate institutional factors), whereas the outcome is student engagement – an individual psychological state with the three dimensions discussed earlier of affect, cognition, and behaviour.

In another attempt at integrating the research, Zepke, Leach, and Butler (2010b) have proposed a conceptual organiser for student engagement that identifies six research perspectives: motivation, transactional engagement with teachers and with each other, institutional and non-institutional support, and active citizenship. This organiser successfully draws together many of the influences on student engagement identified in the other perspectives: institutional support and interactions with staff from the behavioural perspective; active learning and academic challenge from the cognitive dimension of the psychological perspective; and the influence of external circumstances, touching on the socio-cultural perspective. Also included is student motivation as expressed by the three needs proposed by Self Determination Theory (SDT): autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The organiser has enabled comparison of the relative strengths of these influences. For example, teachers were found to be a stronger influence than student motivation or external factors (Zepke et al., 2010b), while competence needs were more important than either relatedness or agency (Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2010a). The findings have also been translated into very specific proposals for action by institutions (Zepke & Leach, 2010b).

As with the other perspectives, the limitation of this approach centres on issues of definition, categorisation, and scope. The authors acknowledge the contrasting behavioural and psychological definitions of engagement but leave this issue unresolved. If the organiser aims to clarify what influences student engagement, then a clear definition is essential. There is also some confusion between antecedents and consequences of engagement. While the first five

items are all influences on student engagement, the indicators of the final perspective, active citizenship, suggest this is an outcome of engagement; for example, “students are able to live successfully in the world” (Zepke et al., 2010a, p. 3). Finally, in limiting the consideration of individual characteristics to the needs proposed by SDT, the conceptual organiser excludes other important antecedents such as personality, academic skills, and expectations. Also missing is the critical influence of the wider socio-political culture.

Each of the four perspectives discussed offers useful and relevant insights into this complex construct. The behavioural approach highlights the importance of student behaviour and institutional practice; the psychological approach clearly defines the state of being engaged and acknowledges the essential role of affect; the socio-cultural perspective foregrounds the socio-cultural context in which student engagement takes place; and finally, the holistic approaches recognise the need to consider the student’s own motivations and expectations. However, each only tells part of the story and problems of definition and poor understanding about the relationships between the variables are hampering progress. It is widely acknowledged that a more comprehensive understanding of engagement is necessary if the potential of this important construct is to be realised (Bryson et al., 2010; Fredricks et al., 2004; L. Harris, 2008). The second section of this article proposes a conceptual framework for understanding and researching student engagement that integrates these diverse perspectives and, in particular, more clearly separates the antecedents and consequences of engagement from the psychosocial state of being engaged.

Conceptual framework

The aim of this framework is not to produce what Haggis (2004) calls a “generalised, quasi-deterministic model” (p. 350), and it is certainly not to generalise and view the student as “a member of a stereotyped, homogenous mass” as Bryson and Hand (2008, p. 13) warn. Instead, it is the opposite. By depicting the complex array of factors influencing a student’s engagement and by embedding these phenomena and processes within the wider socio-cultural context, the unique nature of the individual experience becomes clearer and the need for in-depth study of particular student populations self-evident. As well as being valuable for guiding further research, the framework is a useful tool for targeting interventions aimed at increasing student engagement. The framework does not claim to depict all the influences and relationships, but rather to disaggregate and organise the central variables and relationships between them. As shown in Figure 1, there are six elements: the socio-cultural context; the structural and psychosocial influences; engagement; and the proximal and distal consequences.

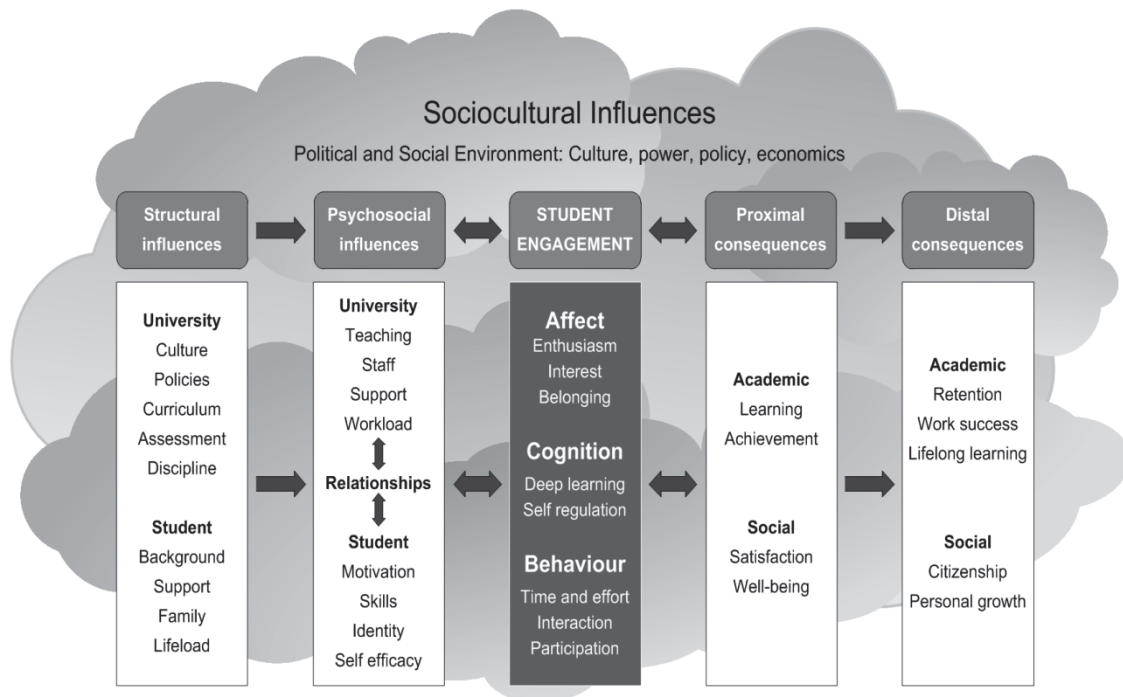


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents, and consequences.

The framework has the student at its centre. The psychological perspective is evident with the inclusion of the three dimensions of engagement, affect, cognition, and behaviour, as recommended by Fredricks et al.'s (2004) comprehensive review. The different facets to the dimensions are also acknowledged; for example, affect is recognised as being both the enthusiasm for the topic and the sense of belonging to the institution. However, in order to highlight that student engagement is more than just an internal static state, this individual experience is embedded within the socio-cultural context and shown as influenced by characteristics of both the student and the institution. A key strength of envisioning engagement in this way is that it both acknowledges the lived reality of the individual while not reducing engagement to just that. This goes some way to addressing Zyngier's (2008) concern that a narrow definition of engagement can lead to the impression that "if the student is engaged then the teacher is responsible but if the student is disengaged then the problem is with the student" (p. 1771).

The immediate psychosocial influences are categorised as university, relationships, and student variables. There is little doubt about the importance of teachers and teaching practice on student engagement with numerous studies demonstrating the link (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Similarly, relationships with staff are considered to be the crux of the learning situation (Smith, 2007) and feeling part of a learning community also positively influences student engagement (Lear, Ansorge, & Steckelberg, 2010; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). The student variables

shown are merely representative of the wide range of factors influencing engagement that have been studied; for example, motivation (Fazey & Fazey, 2001), personality (Poropat, 2009), and self-theories (Yorke & Knight, 2004). Understandably, institutions have tended to focus on teaching and support as targets for improving student engagement, however the framework suggests a further strategy could be to increase student awareness of the range of variables within their own control and the potential impact these factors have on their engagement and success at university. It is important to recognise that engagement is not an outcome of any one of these influences but rather the complex interplay between them as suggested by the arrows within this section of the framework. As Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) point out, engagement “depends on what teachers and students do together... neither can do it alone” (p. 284).

The proximal consequences are divided into academic, learning and achievement, and social, satisfaction and well-being, paralleling earlier work on academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975). An important feature of the framework is the recognition that the influences are bidirectional between engagement and both its immediate antecedents and proximal consequences as illustrated by the two-way arrows in the framework. It is widely recognised that engagement breeds engagement; for example, Llorens, Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2007) found evidence that learners believing they have sufficient resources leads to increases in self-efficacy which leads to increased engagement which then spirals up to greater self-beliefs. Similarly, good relationships foster engagement, which in turn promotes good relationships; and engagement leads to better grades, which in turn motivate students to be more engaged.

Structural influences within the university such as curriculum and assessment have a recognised impact on student engagement (Barnett & Coate, 2005). For example, the culture of academic assessment is an example of Foucault’s (1977/1995) disciplinary power, a process of hierarchical and normalising judgement in a relationship of unequal power that risks alienating students (Mann, 2001). Teaching and learning differ by discipline with a distinction often made between the ‘soft’ disciplines, such as humanities, where there is less consensus of knowledge, and the ‘hard’ disciplines, such as natural sciences and engineering, where there is greater agreement about both content and methods (Brint et al., 2008). These differences manifest in different approaches to learning (Nelson Laird et al., 2008) and different “cultures of engagement” (Brint et al., 2008, p. 383). ‘Lifeload’, the sum of all the pressures a student has in their life including university, is a critical factor influencing student engagement. Employment, needs of dependants, finances, and health have all been noted as prominent (Yorke, 2000). Zepke, Leach, and Butler (2011) suggest that the impact of these external factors may not be continuous but rather only exert influence at times of crisis.

The distal consequences of student engagement include the more obvious academic benefits as well as longer term social impacts. Inclusion of these recognises that student engagement has the potential to have a much more profound influence upon students and

society than merely content learning (Zyngier, 2008). For example, Zepke et al. (2010a) include active citizenship, students' ability to live successfully in the world and have a strong sense of self, as a lens in their conceptual organiser of student engagement. Likewise, Mercer (2007) suggests that academic growth and personal growth are interrelated outcomes of higher education.

Finally, and most importantly, the framework gives prominence to the wider socio-cultural influences. Rather than position the macro influences as simply the first link in the chain, the entire process of student engagement is embedded within these wider social, political, and cultural discourses. It is not just the antecedents that are influenced by this broad context, but every element of the student and institutional experience. Foregrounding the impact of the wider influences goes some way towards addressing McMahon and Portelli's (2004) critique that popular discourses of engagement are too narrowly focused on the procedural and so "fail to address substantive ethical and political issues" (p. 60). Mann (2001) highlights how alienating these socio-cultural conditions and power imbalances can be for students and the framework illustrates the potential to counter these influences through change at more immediate levels. Mann's (2001) suggestions of "solidarity, hospitality, safety and the redistribution of power" (p. 18) are useful examples of using the more immediate antecedents of engagement such as relationships and university culture as pathways of change.

Conclusion

The aim of this review was to disentangle the strands of student engagement and to propose a conceptual framework to guide future research into this important construct. Viewing student engagement as a psychosocial process, influenced by institutional and personal factors, and embedded within a wider social context, integrates the socio-cultural perspective with the psychological and behavioural views discussed. The framework includes not just those elements within an institution's control, thus ensuring a much richer and deeper understanding of the student experience.

However, any attempt to categorise variables risks constraining understanding. It is important to acknowledge that the framework does not include every possible antecedent and consequence of student engagement and there may be some overlap between the structural and psychosocial influences on one side and the proximal and distal consequences on the other. However, as discussed, a lack of distinction between antecedents, engagement, and consequences is the dominant limitation of current theories. This framework clarifies these differences and highlights the primary direction of influence, thus facilitating a shared understanding of the complex process of student engagement and enabling the different research perspectives to be woven together.

Zepke (2011) proposes complexity theory as a tool for understanding student engagement as a “dynamic and non-hierarchical network” (p. 9) in which the factors are distinct and yet connected. This is definitely the case within the psychosocial influences as shown in the framework. For example, how students respond to a teacher’s enthusiastic teaching depends upon their own expectations, background, and personality. Similarly, the motivations and expectations of the student will influence the relationships they form. The network metaphor also works well for considering the central element of the framework, the student experience of being engaged. As previously discussed, the different dimensions of engagement are dependent on each other, interlinked rather than discrete and disconnected. However, to describe the whole framework as an interconnected network fails to recognise that there is a dominant direction of influence from the antecedents to engagement and from engagement to the consequences.

No single research project can possibly examine all facets of this complex construct. However, by starting from a place that acknowledges the multilevel phenomena and processes, and the complex relations between them, the focus can be on developing a greater understanding of one element without denying the existence of the others. The clearer our understanding of student engagement and the influences on it, the better positioned we will be to meet the needs of students, to enhance the student experience, and to improve the educational outcomes. More research is needed to further explore the relationships within the framework to strengthen our understanding of each element. One particular area in need of greater research in higher education is the role of emotion in student engagement. Much of the focus has been on behaviour and cognition and while the importance of relationships and the wider sense of belonging are recognised, little attention has been paid to students’ more immediate emotional responses to their learning. For example, does the anxiety that many first year students experience impact upon the other dimensions of engagement – their behaviour and their cognitive strategies? The framework highlights the need for projects that focus on narrower populations, including single institutions, as it is evident that a broad generalisation of the student experience is ill advised. The use of in-depth qualitative methodologies is recommended to capture the diversity of experience, as well as longitudinal work that examines the dynamic process that is student engagement. Most importantly, the framework highlights that there are numerous avenues for improving student engagement and that the responsibility for this lies with all parties: the student, the teacher, the institution, and the government.

Chapter 4

Introduction to Study 2

“Qualitative, empirical research tends to expose the contradictory, tangled complexity of real life experience”

Gillies and Edwards (2005, “The context for investigating family life”, para. 7)

The conceptual framework presented in the previous chapter highlights the need for research that will provide a more detailed and contextual understanding of the complexity of student engagement. Study 2 therefore was a qualitative project following a group of mature-aged distance students through their first semester at university. Informed by the literature, the conceptual framework of student engagement, and the findings from Study 1, the research took an interpretive approach that studies people in their natural settings, “attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). This chapter introduces the critical realist paradigm that informs the design, and outlines the specific aims of the study. The details of this design, including recruitment of participants, data collection methods, and ethical considerations, are explained.

Rationale and research aims

The analysis of the AUSSE data, presented in Chapter 2, illustrates that there are important differences in how mature-aged distance students engage with their studies. This finding, plus three considerations stemming from the literature and the conceptual framework of student engagement, has driven the study’s aims and design.

Firstly, there is a lack of longitudinal research of student engagement (Trowler & Trowler, 2010) and the transition to university is a dynamic process so engagement is likely to change as the student progresses. As discussed in Chapter 1, approximately a third of older students fail to complete or return from their first year at university. This finding is backed up by research demonstrating that the transition to university is particularly challenging for older students (Askham, 2008; Baxter & Britton, 2001). To enable a deeper understanding of the changing nature of student engagement during that time, this study followed students throughout their critical first semester of study.

Secondly, in using the AUSSE survey data, Study 1 focussed predominantly on student cognition and behaviour as dimensions of engagement but, as highlighted in the conceptual framework of student engagement, emotion plays a critical, and under researched, role. Emotion is increasingly recognised as being central to the learning process (Askham, 2008) and in particular, the transition to university is characterised by extremes of emotion (Christie et al., 2008). As discussed in Chapter 1, previous research with mature-aged students has focussed on the role of negative emotions such as anxiety stemming from a lack of skills (M. Murphy & Fleming, 2000) and a fear of being inadequate often grounded in previous negative learning experiences (Stone, 2008). Also important, but less researched, are positive emotions such as interest and enthusiasm, which are critical elements of engagement and determinants of perseverance (Silvia, 2008). The current study therefore used weekly video diaries to better capture this emotional dimension of the participants' experiences.

Finally, as found in the literature review and depicted in the conceptual framework of student engagement, the student's family is an important influence on motivation and engagement. With children, this can manifest as both a motivating force, wanting to be a good role model (Reay et al., 2002), and as a barrier in terms of the challenges of balancing caregiving and study commitments (Davies & Williams, 2001). In addition, support from partners is recognised as critical to the success of mature-aged students (White, 2008; Zepke et al., 2011). Past studies have been limited to the students' view of support and few have explored the nature of effective support (Castles, 2004). In order to better understand the family role in student engagement, the current study included partners and children in family interviews at the start and end of the semester.

The specific aims of Study 2 were as follows:

1. To understand how student engagement develops and changes throughout the transition to university in the context of the family.
2. To explore the role of emotion in student engagement during the transition to university.

Critical realism

Much of the research into student engagement, including the AUSSE survey in Study 1, has approached the topic from a positivist perspective. Positivism assumes the social world is a closed system with a limited and measurable number of factors that interact in consistent and measurable ways. However, the conceptual framework of student engagement developed in the previous chapter shows that student experience is complex. In addition, the framework highlights the important role of the socio-historical context. This suggests that a critical realist paradigm, which acknowledges the importance of context and views the social world as open

and complex, may be more appropriate for the study of student engagement (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002). Indeed, Shipway (2011) has suggested that critical realism is well suited to the field of education as it is “sensitive to the plurality of student needs” (p. 214). Critical realism also aligns well with qualitative in-depth research methods, and was therefore considered a more appropriate framework to meet the aims of this second study.

According to Willis (2007), different paradigms lead to different questions, methods, analysis, findings, and conclusions. The paradigm encompasses the position research takes on important issues such as the nature of reality, the purpose of research, the methods used, and the way meaning is derived from the data gathered (Willis, 2007). This section clarifies the critical realist position on these issues, explaining why critical realism is appropriate for the study of mature-aged distance students’ engagement.

Critical realism combines a realist ontology with a relativist epistemology (Bhaskar, 1998a). Critical realists agree with postmodern arguments about the complexity and diversity of the social world and the situated nature of knowledge but argue that we can still make progress towards understanding that world (Sayer, 2000). Bhaskar (1998b) distinguishes between three overlapping domains of reality: the real, the actual, and the empirical. The domain of the real consists of the structures and mechanisms that exist and generate phenomena independent of human activity; the domain of the actual refers to events that occur when those mechanisms are activated, whether or not they are experienced; and the domain of the empirical consists only of experiences, events that are observed by people. Therefore the process of research is to describe what we observe and from that propose hypothetical mechanisms that explain what we have observed (Mingers, 2004).

The aim of a critical realist research study therefore is not to seek direct and essential causal chains between variables. Rather it is to identify the mechanisms by which certain factors increase or decrease the chances of something happening: “the nature of the real objects present at a given time constrains and enables what can happen but does not pre-determine what will happen” (Sayer, 2000, p. 12). For instance, effective teaching practices do not cause or guarantee student engagement but they do make it more likely to occur. Context is critical: “the relationship between causal mechanisms and their effects is not fixed” but depends on the context (Pawson & Tilley, 1997, p. 69). This aligns well with the conceptual framework of student engagement and the view that students’ experiences and their engagement with their study are variable and are dependent on their context.

Critical realist researchers argue that the world exists independent of our knowledge of it but that our knowledge is not pure or perfect and that researchers, as social actors, view the world from their fixed position and cannot be objective outsiders (Mingers, 2004; Scott, 2005). Critical realists recognise that observation, and in fact all measurement, is limited, fallible, and socio-historically located (Danermark et al., 2002; Potter & López, 2001). Therefore, an

important stage in a critical realist project is abstraction and conceptualisation, the development of a conceptual framework that encapsulates the researcher's understanding of the phenomena being investigated, including the relationships between individual, events, settings, and processes (Maxwell, 2012; Sayer, 2000). The conceptual framework presented in the previous chapter presents my understanding of student engagement and associated factors.

However, although critical realists acknowledge the influence of the researcher's world view and cultural context, they do not see this as an impossible obstacle, arguing that while perfect objectivity is not an attainable goal, we can still strive for it. Triangulation, using different sources and different measures, is considered a key strategy for increasing the validity of knowledge (Maxwell, 2013), hence the use of multiple data sources in the current study.

These assumptions about the world and the purpose of research lead logically to particular choices of methods. There is a natural alignment between critical realism and qualitative research, which emphasises meaning and processes. Individual factors cannot be separated and studied under isolated controlled conditions (Sayer, 2000), and the goal therefore is explanation rather than quantification (Mingers, 2004). In particular, a critical realist approach lends itself to the in-depth study of a few cases rather than the statistical analysis of many (Maxwell, 2012). As Sayer (2000) says, there is, and there must be, an interpretive element to critical realist research, which fits well with this thesis's goal of *understanding* student engagement. The method was also designed to follow Maxwell's (2012) advice of including repeated interviews and longer term involvement with participants as valuable ways to give a clearer picture of possible mechanisms.

My place in the research

The importance that critical realism accords to context extends logically to recognising the importance of the researcher in two particular ways: what they bring to the research and their role during the research (Maxwell, 2012). Firstly, my values, beliefs, and past experiences have influenced everything including the conceptual framework, research design, interaction with the participants, and analysis of the data. My experiences as a mature-aged distance student and later as a tutor of distance courses triggered my initial interest in the topic, in particular my feeling that the experiences of older students were somehow qualitatively different to those of traditional aged students. In developing the conceptual framework presented in the previous chapter, while not explicitly acknowledged, these experiences informed my reading and interpretation of the literature and the conclusions I drew about the various factors and processes depicted in the framework.

Secondly, the relationship that the researcher has with the participants is a critical part of the social context and therefore has an effect on the results. As Maxwell (2012) remind us, this is true of all research where there is contact with the participants, but it is particularly true of

qualitative work where the relationship is central to the data collection process. In this second study, where I followed a group of students for a semester, the length of the research and the use of repeated interviews as well as weekly video diaries with email responses meant that I did establish a bond with my participants and this will undoubtedly have influenced not just what they chose to share with me, but also potentially their experiences as students. This is explored in more depth in the conclusion to this thesis. At the same time, my insider view allowed me to identify with my participants, particularly those that were in similar circumstances to me when I started studying as a mother of young children. However, for all that I had these things in common with my participants, I remained continually aware of and open to our differences. As MacIntyre (1993) says so well, “the understanding of others is indeed an understanding of difference” (p. 5).

Research methods

The study was a qualitative prospective design, capturing data with family interviews before the semester started and after the semester finished, as well as student video diaries throughout the semester. The study was conducted according to the *Code of ethical conduct for research, teaching and evaluations involving human participants* (Massey University, 2010) and ethical approval was given by Massey University’s Human Ethics Committee: Southern B (11/67). A minor amendment was later approved by the chair of the committee when I decided to summarise the initial interviews rather than fully transcribe them. In describing the research methods here, I also explain how ethical principles informed the research design. Three sources of data were used to address the research aims:

1. Family interviews before the semester started, focussing on motivation, expectations, and preparation for study.
2. Weekly student diaries throughout the semester exploring student engagement and the influences on engagement.
3. Family interviews after the semester, following up on ideas and issues raised in the diaries and initial interviews.

Family interviews

Group interviews can be particularly valuable when the participants form a naturally occurring unit such as a family (Ritchie, 2003), and in the current research, the family forms the context of the study. Engagement is influenced by what happens in the home and is often strongly connected with the family (Duncan, 2000). This is reflected in the conceptual framework of student engagement and aligns with the critical realist view that knowledge is contextual. Such interviews are enhanced by the family’s emotional bonds (Åstedt-Kurki &

Hopia, 1996) and have the potential to reveal shared concerns and issues (Eggenberger & Nelms, 2007).

There is, however, no single definition of family. Given my interest in the family home as the context of the student's experiences, I explicitly included anyone who lived in the same house but rather than make assumptions about a student's living circumstances, I told participants they could invite other people if they wished. No one did. I was particularly interested in hearing the partners' experiences, as they are a recognised influence on students in terms of gender roles and support mechanisms. Asking just one half of a couple about such a shared experience risks getting just one side of the story (Åstedt-Kurki, Paavilainen, & Lehti, 2001), and yet few studies have included partners of students.

I also included children, as mature-aged students often talk about how their study influences their children and how their children influence their study (Reay et al., 2002). I was interested in hearing about this from the children's perspective because, as Darbyshire, MacDougall, and Schiller (2005) point out, research on children's experiences is often based on research 'on children' rather than research 'with children'. Children's ability to respond to research questions depends on their cognitive development: While very young children can answer simple questions such as 'who' or 'what', it is only around school age that they can consistently respond to more complex 'how' and 'why' questions (Greig, MacKay, & Taylor, 2007). I therefore only included children aged five and over. When younger children were present at the interview, their contributions to the conversation were not transcribed.

Video diaries

Diaries were used as a key data collection method as I needed an approach that would adequately capture students' rapidly changing experiences throughout the semester. Other benefits of diaries are that they capture the phenomenon in the natural context (Hyers, Swim, & Mallett, 2006), and their real time nature enables the capture of details that may well be forgotten or viewed differently by the end of the semester (Willig, 2001). Diaries also allow people to participate in the research to the degree that they feel comfortable, choosing how much and how often they share their lives (C. Brown, Costley, Friend, & Varey, 2010).

Videos were selected over written diaries for several related reasons. Firstly, in contrast to written diaries, video diaries are potentially more in depth and, in particular, are well suited to capturing emotions and complexity (Roberts, 2011). Video diaries are also likely to be more honest and open (Clarke, 2009; Quadri & Bullen, 2007), possibly because it is not easy for participants to edit themselves while recording. Finally, video diaries are less time consuming for participants (Clarke, 2009) and thus impose less on the participants. However, while I recommended that the participants' diaries were video recorded, they were given the option of written diaries if this was more comfortable for them. Two participants chose this option. A

limitation of diaries is the reduced researcher control and the inability to probe immediately for more detail (Buchwald, Schantz-Laursen, & Delmar, 2009). I managed this limitation by sending follow up emails with prompts and extending questions.

In planning the diary recording process, I needed to balance issues of cost, quality, ease of use, and access to technology. Handheld cameras, while high quality, are expensive and create challenges in uploading and sending large files, so I opted for cheap and easy to use webcams instead. As I wanted to be able to view the diaries as they were being completed, I also needed to find a secure and easy way for the students to send the digital files to me throughout the semester. I was very aware that these students may not be experienced with technology and I did not want processing the diaries to be stressful for them. Therefore, I opted to use Skype[®], a free, easy to use online video phone software package, coupled with another package called Pamela[®] that was installed on my computer and acted as an answer phone for Skype[®]. Incoming calls were automatically answered with an audio recording of me, and then the caller was able to leave a 20-minute video message. This meant that the student did not have to spend time managing and uploading files, and the files were immediately and securely stored on my computer. However, the system relied on students having high-speed internet access in their homes and as I did not want to exclude any students, I offered the option of a handheld digital camera with the memory card being posted back to me each week. This was not ideal from a security perspective, but no other choice was available. As it happened, only one student who did not have broadband access chose this option and all the posted memory cards arrived safely.

Participants

Sampling was purposive, selecting participants who were most relevant to the conceptual framework and the research aims. While not seeking representativeness per se, I was keen to get a mix of participants in terms of important contextual influences such as age, gender, ethnicity, and family structure. However, as with most studies, practicality meant that convenience was also an important criterion for participant selection.

The primary participants were first year, first time, university students, aged over 24, who were studying by distance. I excluded students who lived outside of New Zealand, as their experiences are likely to differ in important ways such as access to face-to-face orientation and campus courses. Consent to use Massey University students was given by Professor Brigid Heywood, the Assistant Vice Chancellor Research and Enterprise (Appendix D), and consent to access the student enrolment database was granted by Dr Pat Sandbrook, Director National Student Relations (Appendix E). The first family interviews needed to be organised before the start of the semester at the end of February. However, contacting prospective participants through the Christmas and school holiday period was potentially difficult, so I began recruiting

in mid-December. I requested a list of distance students, aged over 24, enrolled in at least one first year course in 2012 and sent these 390 students information sheets (Appendix F) inviting them to take part. To help the students feel more comfortable, I included a link to a short online video where I introduced myself and talked about why I was doing the research and what I was asking of them (see Figure 2). I also provided a toll free phone number to ask me any questions and this remained available throughout the data collection period. If the student was interested in taking part, they returned an expression of interest form (Appendix G), providing me with broad demographic details, in the postage paid envelope supplied.



Figure 2. Online introduction video

If I did not get enough responses, I planned to do a second mail out in mid-January to those students who had subsequently enrolled; however, this proved unnecessary as 75 students replied. I later realised that the database query had not filtered out students who had been to university before and so only 26 of those students were actually eligible to take part. One disadvantage of the single early mail out was that my sample was limited to early enrollers, who may differ in terms of factors such as motivation and preparation.

I initially intended to select 12 participants with the aim of getting a mix of gender, age, family situation, part time/full time status, ethnicity, and geographic location. Twelve is generally considered sufficient semi-structured interviews for thematic data saturation and a good understanding of the phenomenon (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). However, this also depends on factors such as the scope and nature of the investigation (Morse, 2000), and so I later decided that the diversity of experience as represented by the framework of student engagement warranted a larger sample. In addition, I was concerned that the traditionally high

first year attrition rates within this population would mean that too many participants would drop their study during the semester. Therefore, I decided to include as many of the 26 volunteers as possible. I scheduled an extended weekend visit to each of four areas (centred on Christchurch, Wellington, Hamilton, and Auckland) and rang the volunteers to ask if they were available for an interview during that period. Unfortunately, my limited travel budget meant I had to exclude one student in the far north and one in the far south. Interviews were successfully scheduled with 19 students and their families, and this became my final sample (see Table 7).

Coercion can be an ethical concern when recruiting couples and families for research (Bottorff, Kalaw, Johnson, Stewart, & Greaves, 2005). I did not want the student to put pressure on their family, but neither did I want the reluctance of family to prevent the student from participating. Therefore, the decision to invite family was left up to the student and family participation was not a condition of taking part. The students indicated on their expression of interest form which members of their family were interested and it then depended on who was available at the scheduled interview time. In some families, a partner or a child may have participated in one interview but not the other as shown in Table 7.

Procedure

Students were given the choice of being interviewed in their home or at an alternate local venue. All chose home except one whom I met in a café as she was away from home that weekend. As well as being the easiest option for the families, home interviews had three benefits. Firstly, as Adler and Adler (2003) suggest, participants are more comfortable in their own homes and it positions the researcher as a guest and so casts “an aura of friendship” (p. 166) over the interview. This was particularly important for the children. Secondly, the students could show me their physical environment such as where they thought they would study, the desk they had set up, or the wall planner they were using. This allowed me to picture them in their homes when I was watching or reading their diaries and enhanced my understanding of the physical nature of their study experience. Finally, I was able to install and test the technology for the video diaries and the student was able to practice making a call with me there to resolve any concerns or technical problems.

The ethics committee was concerned at the risk to me of going into people’s homes. To mitigate this risk, before each visit, I told my husband, Ty Kahu, the address and projected finish time. I then contacted him after the interview was complete and I had left the home. If he didn’t hear from me within 30 minutes of the projected finish time, he was instructed to try and phone me and then, if he was unable to get hold of me, to call the local police and advise them of the situation and the address. Ty signed a form (Appendix H) agreeing to keep the participants’ details confidential except in such circumstances. This process proved unnecessary as I felt very safe and welcome in all the participants’ homes.

Table 7

Participant Details

Pseudonym	Gender and age	Ethnicity	Family (at home)	Paid work	Discipline and Coursework ^c	Socio-economic status ^d
Alfie ^b	F 33	Māori NZ European	Partner 1 preschool 1 secondary	Casual part time	Social Work Full time	Low
Bella	F 39	Asian	Partner ^a 1 secondary	None	Business Studies Half time	Moderate
Bex	F 27	NZ European Māori	None	Full time	Business Studies Half time	Low
Brad	M 48	NZ European	Partner 1 secondary (part time)	Full time	Business Studies Half time	Moderate
Charlotte	F 25	NZ European	Partner	Full time	Aviation Half time	Moderate
Daniel	M 26	NZ European British	Partner ^a	Full time	History Half time	Moderate
Jeremiah	M 51	NZ European	Partner	None	English Half time	Low
Kaitlyn ^b	F 36	Māori Cook Island	2 primary (1 home schooled) ^a	None	Education Full time	Low
Lexi	F 26	NZ European	Partner 3 preschool 1 primary	None	Accountancy Half time	Moderate
Maria	F 36	NZ European	Partner 1 preschool	None	Science Half time	Moderate
Marie	F 38	NZ European	1 secondary	Full time	Psychology Quarter time	Low
Melissa	F 46	NZ European	1 primary ^b 1 secondary ^{ab}	Part time	Rehabilitation Quarter time	Low
Natasha	F 38	NZ European	None	Full time	Communications Full time	Moderate
Penny	F 59	NZ European	None	Full time	Social Work Half time	Low
Samantha	F 33	NZ European	Partner 1 preschool 1 secondary	Part time (from mid semester)	Social Work Half time	Low
Sarah	F 25	NZ European	Partner 1 preschool 1 primary ^b	None	Psychology Full time	Moderate
Scott	M 38	Māori	Partner ^{ab} 1 preschool 1 primary ^{ab} 1 secondary ^{ab}	Full time	Business Studies Half time	Moderate
Toni	F 52	NZ European Māori	1 adult child ^a	Full time	Health Sciences Half time	Low
Vee	F 37	Asian	Partner 2 secondary	None	Business Studies Quarter time	Moderate

Notes: ^a Did not take part in the first family interview; ^b Did not take part in the second family interview; ^c A full time study load is four courses; ^d Socio-economic status (SES) estimated from family occupations and home ownership.

The interviews were conducted in a friendly and informal manner to help the participants feel at ease. I provided snack food (after checking for preferences or dietary limitations) as I did not want the families to feel they had to provide me with food as a visitor in their home. Before starting the initial interview, we chatted for a while to break the ice and then I gave information sheets to the partners (Appendix I) and the children (Appendix J). I explained what was going to happen and highlighted everyone's rights, taking care to phrase this at an appropriate level for any children. The adults signed consent forms (Appendix K), and I asked the children each of the questions on their consent form (Appendix L) before getting them to write their name if they could, and then asking a parent to sign the form. The participants chose pseudonyms to protect their identity.

The initial interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix M for prompts) allowing me to guide the discussion to the topics I was interested in – in particular the motivations, expectations, and preparations for study – but also allowing the conversation to flow and topics of interest to the family to be covered. At times, questions were specifically directed at the partner, children, or student, and at other times, the discussion was more open. I covered the topics most relevant to the children's experiences at the start so that they did not have to sit with us for too long. In the first round, visits were between 90 and 120 minutes, including the time taken to explain the video diaries, and set up and test the recording equipment. The interviews were audio recorded.

Following the interview, I outlined the diary process to the student. The recommended frequency of the diaries was weekly but the student was able to choose to do more or less. This was important to avoid adding extra pressure, particularly when they had assessments due or when life was busy. I explained that they could talk about anything related to their study experiences – how they were thinking, feeling, and behaving – as well as what was influencing those processes. They were given a diagram (Appendix N) to help stimulate their thinking.

At the end of the visit, I set up any technology required and those planning to do online video diaries made a test call. I had asked students when arranging the interviews what technology they had available (a computer, broadband access, a webcam, and the free Skype® software were needed for the online option) and what method they would prefer: online video, handheld camera, or written. Only one student did not have broadband access and she was provided with a handheld digital camera, several memory cards, and sufficient post-paid courier envelopes to post a card to me each week. One student chose to provide email diaries and a second student started with the video diaries but found the process uncomfortable and so changed to emails after two weeks. The remaining 16 students chose to do Skype® video diaries; five were provided with a webcam.

The students began their diaries the week before the semester started. The video calls came to and were recorded on a laptop in a secure cupboard in my home. The length varied

from two to twenty minutes. I copied off and transcribed each video diary within a few days of receiving it. I read the written diaries as well as the transcripts and made notes of any preliminary thoughts or ideas. I then emailed the student, thanking them for the diary, and at times prompting them for more information or providing other triggers to get them thinking about other aspects of their experiences. The students varied in their ability to reflect and comment on their experiences and so needed different levels of prompts. If I had not heard from a student for a few weeks, I sent a friendly reminder email.

The number of diary entries per student ranged from three to thirteen. Four students withdrew from their study in the first few weeks of the semester and, as it was going to be some time before I travelled around for the follow up interviews, I invited them to do a telephone interview instead. All four agreed and these interviews were between 20 and 40 minutes long and were audio recorded. Four students withdrew from their study later in the semester and were invited to take part in the second round of interviews after the semester was over. Thirteen such follow up family interviews were conducted; two students could not be contacted. The organisation was as with the first round: I arranged a weekend in each area and the students chose a time. All these interviews were conducted in their homes with food again provided by me. These interviews were also semi-structured (see Appendix M for prompts), which allowed me to follow up on comments and experiences that the student had raised in their diaries throughout the semester as well as revisit the family's expectations from the beginning of the semester.

It was important to acknowledge the participants for the time and effort they contributed to the research. To that end, I sent the students a card half way through the semester and then a thank you card at the end. They were also given the choice of a \$40 petrol or supermarket voucher at the end of the project. All the students were asked if they wished to receive copies of the finished thesis and any publications.

I initially planned to transcribe the first round of family interviews in full, but, as the project took shape, it became apparent that these were predominantly background details and full transcription was not necessary. Instead, I summarised each interview under a range of key topics, illustrating with direct quotes as appropriate. The second interviews, including those conducted over the phone, were fully transcribed by me. In all cases, to protect the identity of the family, names were changed to pseudonyms and all other identifying information was removed. The summaries and transcripts were sent back to the participants and they were given the opportunity to amend them (no one did) before signing the release form (Appendix O and Appendix P). As outlined in the information sheet, if the form was not returned in two weeks, I rang to remind them and then if I still did not receive the form, consent was assumed. Forms were received from 11 of the 19 participants following the first interview and 7 of the 17 who

took part in follow up interviews. I also asked the students if they wished to have a copy of the transcribed diaries and all except one requested a copy.

To ensure confidentiality, all data including audio and video recordings, summaries, and transcripts are stored digitally on Massey's shared drives and on a secure virtual drive online and are accessible only by me. All the computers and drives used are password protected. Following the completion of the project, Dr Chris Stephens, research supervisor, will store the data securely in a university office for the minimum five-year period and will take responsibility for disposal at the end of the period.

Protection from harm

A number of potential risks were identified in the planning of the research. There was a slight risk that topics raised during the family interview would raise concerns that the family had not considered and that this could lead to a family disagreement during the interview. If this happens, it is not the role of the researcher to manage any such disagreement and so I planned to take a passive role, being sensitive to the needs of the family. If asked, or if the level of disagreement became uncomfortable, I planned to leave immediately. The other side to this risk was that such a disagreement may prove valuable to the family as it would be better that they identify any such issues early in the process of returning to study so they can be managed. As it happened, no outward disagreements occurred, although it was apparent that my questions at times raised previously unconsidered issues for the family.

An additional risk identified by the ethics committee was that the students would come to rely on me as a support for their study. I planned therefore to maintain a less personal relationship with the students, but as the semester progressed this felt unnecessary. The participants were all very comfortable with me and with the research process and seemed to clearly distinguish my role as researcher rather than support person. There were, however, a few times when a student explicitly asked for my help as discussed below.

Interestingly, what proved more problematic was my desire to help the students. I was there as a researcher, but my own experiences, both as a distance student and a teacher of distance courses, meant that I had knowledge that could potentially help the students. In particular, especially in the initial interviews, a few students said things that were either incorrect or indicated they had misunderstood some aspect of university processes. On each occasion I felt torn between the good of the research, the desire to minimise my influence on their experiences, and the good of the participant, the desire to help them. In general, I erred on the side of the participant's benefit. My solutions varied. Sometimes, if it was a minor issue, I let it pass. At other times, I corrected the misunderstanding; for example, when the student who had no broadband access told me she was enrolled in a course next semester that I knew required considerable online activity. When a student explicitly asked for my opinion or

knowledge about university practices, I either answered or suggested they contact the relevant person or service and at times I explained who that might be, the course co-ordinator or the Student Learning Centre for example. In the second interview, as their participation in the research was over, I felt more able to be open and had interesting discussions with some students where I also talked more about my own experiences. Overall, there is little doubt that being part of the research process did influence their experiences and I explore this in more depth in my conclusion.

Data analysis

As mentioned, I transcribed the interviews and diaries throughout the data collection period. Transcription was simple with pauses represented by commas, full stops, and [pause] for noticeably longer silences. Interjections by either me or other family members were recorded in parentheses. However, when quotations were presented in the findings, these interjections, along with sounds such as ‘um’, were removed unless they added important meaning to the quotation.

The resulting data were analysed thematically, an approach that is suitable for critical realist work as it can acknowledge how the individual makes sense of their experience alongside the impact of the broader social context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was an interpretive process, identifying themes from surface meanings, taking language as a simple and neutral expression of people’s experience, while paying heed to the social context (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The coding and analysis process was supported by the use of the qualitative data analysis package, Atlas-ti®. Portions of text were highlighted and then codes were attached to each quotation. An important tool throughout the analysis was memoing, a technique that enhances the research process, analysis, and outcomes (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). I started memoing during the semester while watching and transcribing the diaries and I continued this process throughout the coding and analysis phases. I used memos to highlight my preliminary thoughts, threads that warranted further consideration and investigation, questions as to the meaning in the data, as well as noting similarities and differences across the participants.

My approach to the analysis was both deductive and inductive in that while I was driven in part by the conceptual framework of student engagement and the specific aims of the research, I also aimed to stay true to the data and be open to other themes and ideas as expressed by the participants. My analysis process was initially similar to that recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the entire dataset through transcription and re-reading while noting ideas, generating codes, and then identifying potential themes from those codes. However, the two aims of the study led to slightly different approaches.

The first aim of Study 2, to understand how student engagement develops and changes throughout the transition to university in the context of the family, was broad. The complexity of student engagement with its multiple antecedents and consequences, as reflected in the conceptual framework and in the data, is such that I felt I could never do the entirety justice. I therefore decided to do an in-depth analysis of one key theme for this thesis. As Braun and Clarke (2006) say, a theme's importance is dependent on whether it "captures something important in relation to the overall research question" (p. 82) and this guided my choice. After the initial coding and theme identification process, it became apparent that 'space and time' was a theme that captured something important about the fluctuating nature of engagement within the context of the family; in addition, it is underexplored in the literature. I decided to make this the focus of the paper and so extracted the relevant quotes and recoded and analysed those data at a more detailed, fine-tuned level. This analysis led to the paper presented in Chapter 7.

I also felt more breadth of understanding would help address the first aim. Plus, the students and their families had been generous with their time and contributions and I wanted to respect that gift by ensuring that they had a strong voice in the thesis. I decided therefore to include brief summaries of each of the 19 stories and these are presented as Chapter 5. The stories illustrate well the complexity of experience as shown in the conceptual framework of student engagement, and the highs and lows students experienced throughout the semester. In addition, I conducted a case study analysis of one student, presented in Chapter 6, which covers in more detail some of the challenges evident in the transition.

The second aim of Study 2 was to explore the role of emotion in student engagement during the transition to university. The decision to focus specifically on emotion, stemming from the literature and theory on student engagement, was reinforced by the data, which were replete with examples of the students' diverse and fluctuating emotions. Because this was the specific focus, I explicitly looked for and coded for emotions and their context. The emotion related data were then extracted and went through a second analysis process where I more finely coded the data and then identified and analysed the themes specifically relating to emotions, including the context, antecedents, and consequences of those emotions. This analysis formed the basis for the results paper presented in Chapter 8. Together these four results chapters paint a picture of the complexity of student engagement and the diversity of experience found in this study.

Chapter 5

Participant stories

“Their copious stories, oftentimes begun, end without audience, and are never done”

William Shakespeare (1593)

This chapter tells the stories of the 19 participants and partially addresses the first aim of Study 2: to understand how student engagement develops and changes in the context of the family. It is impossible to summarise the breadth and depth of each unique experience, but I have tried to capture the essence of their semester: where they started from, their strengths and challenges, and what they gained from the experience. I have occasionally included a quote from the family to add a taste of their experience. A summary is presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Summary of the Participants' Lifeload and Outcomes

Pseudonym	Unexpected challenges	Courses	Children at home	Paid Work	Partner	Grades
Alfie	Health, finances	4	2	Part time	Yes	DNC
Bella	Moving house	3	1	None	Yes	A+ A+ B+
Bex	Health	2	0	Full time	No	DNC
Brad		2	½	Full time	Yes	WD
Charlotte	Pregnancy	2	0	Full time	Yes	B C+
Daniel	Broken wrist	2 (1 double)	0	Full time	Yes	B+
Jeremiah		3 (2 double)	0	None	Yes	B-
Kaitlyn	Family pressure	4 (1 double)	2	Part time	No	E DNC DNC
Lexi		2	4	None	Yes	B B-
Maria		3 (2 double)	1	None	Yes	B-
Marie	New job	1	1	Full time	No	WD
Melissa		1	2	Part time	No	C+
Natasha	House purchase	5 (2 double)	0	Full time	No	B DNC DNC
Penny		2	0	Full time	No	WD
Samantha	New job	2	2	Part time	Yes	DNC
Sarah	Health	4 (1 double)	2	None	Yes	AEG AEG WD
Scott	Marriage breakdown, moving house	2	3	Full time	Yes	WD DNC
Toni	Job stress, health	2	1	Full time	No	C+ D
Vee		1	2	None	Yes	A+

Alfie

Alfie: My family is just as important as my studies, but in saying that, my studies are just as important as well. So I will need to balance the both of them.

Alfie was 33 years old, married to Robert with two children, Jade aged 13 and Richie aged three. They lived in a rented home and both adults were on welfare benefits although Alfie also had casual part time work in a local kitchen. Alfie described herself as a good student until college when she got in with the wrong crowd. She was expelled the following year and since then had done a number of short training courses such as tourism and customer service. Alfie had a history of addiction problems and she was working towards a Bachelor of Social Work so she could help other people in similar situations. She found the online enrolment process frustrating and was surprised when she was accepted by the university. Staff contacted Alfie and advised her on what courses to take. She was enrolled as a full time student doing four courses.

Alfie planned to study while the children were at school and kōhanga (Māori language preschool) and in her breaks at work. She asked to have her work shifts limited to give her more time. At the time of the interview, two weeks prior to the start of the semester, she had received all the course materials, and was initially quite daunted by the amount of reading and the “long technical words”. She was working hard to understand and felt she was making progress. She had made a start on one assignment and was very excited by it.

Life was challenging from the start: Finances meant she had no internet at home, her son was having bad asthma attacks, and she was scheduled for long hours at work. She was initially fitting in study but by week three was starting to slip. She found the course content confusing, and she was exhausted and stressed. The family’s health was not good with Robert needing scans and Alfie having emergency surgery to extract four teeth. She missed some assessment deadlines. By week six, she decided she had taken on too much and was planning to ring the university to find out what her options were for reducing her workload. She ended the semester with DNC grades on all courses and was not available for a follow up interview.

Alfie: Very very full on, draining, tiring... I haven’t had a chance to do any studying, um, part and parcel, work but just a lot of other things on my mind. Robert is going in for a procedure on Monday, so that’s playing havoc with me at the moment... Just very drained.

Bella

Bella: If the lecturer is good and I'm very clear of what, of what I have to learn, I can be very good at it. Otherwise not so, but if the paper requires a lot of writing, like essays, I'm, I might not be that good at it.

Bella was a 39-year-old Malaysian Chinese. She came to New Zealand with her husband, Li, and daughter, Pippa, aged 11. She had been a stay at home mother for the past six years and prior to that worked in statistics, but as there was no local work in that field, she was looking to requalify in accounting. She started studying at a local polytechnic a few years ago and had cross-credited her courses towards the degree she was now aiming for. Bella was motivated solely by the qualification at the end and was not looking forward to studying. She took three courses and was confident of her numerical abilities but not her literacy. She did not like writing essays and felt that studying in her second language was going to be a challenge. She thought her husband would be helpful in that regard. Her strengths were her confidence as a learner and her supportive family.

Bella's husband was very helpful throughout the semester, doing all the cooking, and transporting Pippa when he was home, but his job did take him away some weeks. Bella worked consistently hard and put in many hours – she quit the gym and then her voluntary job and she reduced her time with friends to give more time to her study, but she did miss these things during the semester. She struggled at times and emailed tutors for help but commented that she missed having the opportunity to talk face-to-face. The family had a strong work ethic: you set goals and you work towards them; quitting is not an option. Bella had high expectations of herself and was proud when she did well on her assessments and this increased her motivation to work hard. Noisy neighbours were a problem and so they moved house, but this took a lot of Bella's time and energy and for a while, she was behind on her study. She finished the semester with two A+ grades and a B+. Despite not initially liking the idea of distance learning, she came to enjoy her study and value its flexibility. She felt she learned how better to manage her time and so would not get behind in future.

Bella: Yes, I do feel more confident about studying...I enjoy the achievement.

Li: At the end of the day she can tell Pippa, look see I did, I did get a good mark (laughs). It's an encouragement for her as well.

Bex

Bex: I want to be able to have a good life... I don't want to have to go from job to job, I want to be in a job where I've actually worked for. I want to be able to do things with my kids, I want to be able to go on holiday.

Bex was 27 years old, flatting and working full time in an office job. She was enrolled in two business courses, working towards a graduate diploma. Bex hated school when she was younger and although her parents tried to persuade her to stay, she left so she could work, and party with her friends. In the last six months, however, she had re-evaluated her life. She had given up drinking, lost considerable weight, and now spent her time quietly at home. She was studying to improve her future, to get a better job, and to prove to her family that she could be successful. While at the outset it looked like she had few challenges facing her, for instance she had no other time commitments outside of her job, the semester did not progress well.

Unfortunately, Bex was given poor advice and was taking second year courses despite not having studied before. It quickly becomes apparent that the work was very challenging for her; she did not understand the requirements of the first assignment and was reluctant to seek help. She very quickly got behind and then her epilepsy, which had been well controlled with medication, started to flare up making concentration very difficult. An additional problem for Bex was that she did not enjoy the format of the learning. She was very disconcerted to realise there were no printed resources, and one course expected her to participate in the online discussion forum, which she found daunting; she was worried that she was not as clever as other students. In the end, she felt she was too far behind to recover and so withdrew from study mid semester. She felt strongly that distance study was not for her, that she needed the motivation of a teacher's presence and the opportunity to talk with people and ask questions immediately and in person. At the follow up interview, Bex also talked about how little interest she had in the topics, which she found made it difficult for her to motivate herself to do the work. She chose the business courses solely because they aligned with her current job but she did not love her work and she would prefer to study interior design, a subject that really interested and excited her. It was a disappointing and frustrating semester for Bex.

Bex: It's, it's so hard. Like that's what I think, I would be so much better in a class... just because it's, I could be there to ask questions. I'd be able to just write things down then and there. So just having to focus.

Brad

Brad: In engineering you can only go so far and you get to a glass ceiling. Well it's not a glass ceiling; it's quite a solid ceiling.

Jane: I've just put my foot down and said, right, we're both working full time and we're both studying so we're getting a cleaner.

Brad, aged 48, was a full time engineer. He felt he needed a formal qualification to progress further in his career and to gain management skills. His goal was a Bachelor of Business, majoring in Management, and he estimated that if he took summer courses, it would take him four years. Brad's wife, Jane, was also studying part time and was keen to support Brad. His son, Emile, stayed every second weekend. Brad had a long commute to work and he had to go away for a week at times. He chose what he thought were two easier courses to start with and said that if he felt the workload was too high then he would reduce to one course each semester. His initial approach was pragmatic – for instance, he did not think he would participate in forums and he planned to do only the compulsory readings. He saw Jane's academic skills as a useful resource. While he was studying to get a work related qualification, he admitted that it was also “degree envy” – his wife, siblings, and colleagues all have degrees.

Brad planned to study at the office after work because he felt that home was too full of distractions. At the initial interview, Brad was confident that the university's estimate of the number of hours required was high and that he would not need to put in so much time. Reality did not align with those expectations. As a result, he was spending a full day at work and then staying in the office for two or three more hours and getting home too tired to do more than eat and go to bed. He hated that he was not seeing much of his wife. Another barrier for Brad was the structure of the course. His work often required him to go away but the course assessments were only available between Thursday and Sunday of each week. This meant that he could not get either ahead or behind and did not therefore have the ability to fit the study around his work schedule. After three weeks, he was exhausted from his work and study schedule and decided it was not a price he was willing to pay, so he withdrew from his study.

Brad: I feel like a loser. At work at 7am, not home till 8.30pm. My dog doesn't recognise me, neither does my wife. Dropped one paper which means it will take me eight years. By then I will be 57 years old. I can't remember things. Too tired.

Charlotte

Charlotte: I like to learn. I think it keeps your brain alive and I'm always looking into things and researching things I'm interested in so it's not like, it's not going to be a new thing for me.

Twenty-five year old Charlotte lived with her fiancé, Alberto, in a rented city home. They both worked full time, Charlotte in administration and Alberto in IT. While Charlotte did well at school, she did not enjoy it and her attendance was minimal. She wanted to be a pilot so left school and did a one-year flying training course with both theoretical and practical elements. She could not get work in the industry at the time. However, this was still her goal and so she was doing a Bachelor of Aviation Management. She was able to cross credit some of her previous training and was enrolled in two courses and keen to finish quickly. The degree was only available at a campus in a different city, so distance study was her only option. She was confident she could cope academically and saw finding time as the biggest challenge. Alberto was supportive and happy to take on more household chores to help. Charlotte was pleased to discover a friend was doing the same course and felt they would be good support for each other.

Charlotte started strongly, attending the local academic writing and study skills course. She put in regular hours and worked steadily. She particularly enjoyed one course as it related more directly to flying and her earlier learning, while the generic business course held less interest. As the semester progressed, Charlotte developed a routine and study took top priority as she really wanted to do well. She was disappointed in her first grades but later felt she had had unrealistic expectations. She was particularly frustrated when her friend got a higher grade despite them agreeing that their work was similar. Health problems and fatigue made things difficult for a while and then, near the end of the semester, Charlotte was surprised (but pleased) to discover she was pregnant. The early pregnancy was marked by complications, bad morning sickness, and fatigue. Nevertheless, she stuck with it and sat both exams. She was a little disappointed with her final grades, C+ and B. At the time of the second interview, she was feeling better and was making good progress on her three second-semester courses.

Charlotte: I just wanted to keep up, make sure I didn't get behind because I do have quite a history of procrastinating, so I wanted to keep up with everything and make sure I was a little bit ahead of it, just in case something happened later on, which you know, it did (laughs) so it was probably a good idea.

Daniel

Daniel: Whereas if it was history, I can easily pick up a book and keep going. And I have to rein myself in when I find a topic within a book that's completely off topic; I have to stop myself from reading it because I'll just keep reading it.

Lily: I understand the sacrifice I guess ... and I know that, I understand, because I've done distance study for a long time.

Daniel, 26, was married to Lily and was working full time as a graphic designer. He was keen to change his career and become a teacher and so planned to complete a BA majoring in history before doing postgraduate teacher training. He started with one single and one double semester course. His love of history and therefore his strong interest in the topic of the history course was a key strength and he extended his reading and learning beyond the course materials. In contrast, he lacked motivation on the academic writing course but none-the-less managed to do what was required. He was used to meeting deadlines in his work, a skill that transferred to study well.

Daniel had excellent support from his partner, Lily, not just emotional and practical support, but also useful academic support as she had recently finished her own studies, also by distance. While he had a few life challenges during the semester including a broken hand and some problems at work, Daniel was highly committed, put most of his spare time into his study, and was rewarded with increasingly good marks. He was keen to participate in online discussions and was disappointed when few other students took part. His initial fears around academic writing skills were quickly assuaged, helped by Lily's advice. Daniel finished the semester with a B+, and after experiencing more success in the second semester, he has now decided to give up his paid job so that he can study full time.

Daniel: I got As and stuff and I was super surprised coz I don't think I've ever got an A in my life so, yeah I mean, that just spurred me on to study more and stuff, I didn't sort of go backwards I went forwards which was quite good.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah: I just want to get started. I just want to be, I want to make the first step, make the next step and then that will answer 95% of my doubts and questions and worries will disappear because I'll know what I'm doing.

Jennie: We'll do it together, and we will support each other and provide for each other and we will both have the journey.

After the recent earthquakes and bouts of depression, Jeremiah, aged 51, left his job as a truck driver in Christchurch, moved north, and was planning to complete a BA in English. He was inspired by his interest in the topic and his desire to tell stories but also hoped it would lead to work. Because of his age, Jeremiah was keen to finish his degree before he turns 55 when he will no longer be eligible for a student allowance. His partner, Jennie, was supportive and they both made Jeremiah's study their top priority. Jennie was unemployed and seeking work. Challenges for Jeremiah heading into the semester were his lack of academic skills, his low self-efficacy, and his history of depression. In his favour was his computer literacy, his self-awareness from the counselling he has received, and the time that he had available to dedicate to his study.

During the semester, Jeremiah felt out of his depth at times but he persevered and feedback on his assignments helped to restore his confidence. He worked hard and was always ahead of schedule with assignments. His initial low confidence meant that he was delighted with any passing grades, and each time he passed, his confidence grew. Distance study worked well for Jeremiah because it enabled him to take time out when his depression pulled him down. He also loved that he could get ahead, work when he felt like it, and focus on what interested him that day. Jeremiah's semester was a success. He ended with a B grade on the course he finished, was continuing his two double semester courses, and was starting two more in the second semester. He had gained learning, but also confidence in himself, and was enjoying his new identity as a successful student.

Jeremiah: And being told that you can get 96 and you can get a B+, oh hey, I'm not just an idiot after all, I can achieve something and it did make me feel good.

Kaitlyn

Kaitlyn: I know I can do it because I'm determined. I'm that type of person. If I want to do something, I'll do it and nothing stops me.

Melody: It will be pretty tough for everyone. But I reckon she can do it. But yeah, that just means I'll have to do more stuff around the house.

Kaitlyn was 36 years old, the sole parent of two children aged 15 (Melody) and 10 (Rose). They lived in a rented city home and Kaitlyn was on a benefit while home schooling her younger daughter. Kaitlyn was previously studying psychology at a distance-learning polytechnic and, after working part time as a teacher aide, decided to complete her teacher training. She initially planned to study part time but as that meant she could not borrow her course costs, she enrolled full time. She felt she had good study skills and habits due to her past learning. She was however concerned about writing essays as she said she got "writer's block".

Kaitlyn started well with carefully planned timetables for herself and her daughters. She had a lot of assessments due and was kept very busy meeting all the deadlines. She was happy to seek help and contacted staff when she was finding an essay difficult and was pleased to be given an extension and encouragement to persevere. Her daughters were supportive; a little worried at how hard their mother was working, but cheering when she finished each assignment. Kaitlyn used the online discussion forums a lot, to seek help, and to connect with other people who were struggling. As the semester progressed and she stayed on top of the workload, she felt very proud and commented that her self-esteem had rocketed.

Things started to go downhill about eight weeks into the semester. Several issues influenced Kaitlyn's engagement. Firstly, there were problems within her immediate and extended family, including an expectation that Kaitlyn fix things. Secondly, she received very poor grades on several assignments and found it very difficult to accept the feedback, feeling it undermined her as a student. Finally, the university announced changes to the teacher training programme and she thought that meant she was wasting her time doing the course. When I last heard from Kaitlyn, she was considering dropping one course but was planning to sit the other exams. She ended the semester with a fail grade on one course and DNC on the remainder.

Kaitlyn: Things in the past couple of weeks have been hectic to say the least. There has been so much going on to the point of me feeling absolutely exhausted, emotionally and physically... I can't focus at the moment on studies.

Lexi

Lexi: There will be adjustments to make as we all settle down to the new routine.

With four children aged between one and seven, Lexi (aged 25) already had a busy life before she took on two courses towards a Bachelor of Accountancy. She was studying so that when the children were older she would be able to develop a career for herself. Lexi hated school, particularly the social aspects, and she left early. The children and their rural location meant that distance study was the only option, but Lexi was confident that she would also enjoy the freedom from schedules. Her husband, Michael, managed the farm that they live on. He was supportive of Lexi's decision and took the children out with him on the farm whenever he could. One of their twin daughters had an ongoing heart problem that required regular medical appointments.

Lexi scheduled her time carefully from the very beginning of the semester, including using the baby's nap times and evenings once Michael came in from the farm and could take over the children. She organised a study group of local students that ended up as a Facebook group and was a valuable ongoing support for her. Lexi's study skills developed through the semester and she did well in assessments from the beginning. The family adjusted well to her study and learned when not to interrupt her; she also became adept at multitasking – combining study with different activities, including in an empty room after gym class and at the hospital cafeteria when her daughter was in surgery. The semester was not without its challenges including various childhood illnesses, a broken laptop, and the seasonal demands of a farming lifestyle. However, she worked consistently throughout the semester and at one point commented that it was not as hard as she expected and that she could perhaps manage three courses next time. She finished the semester with a B- and B grade and was continuing with two more courses the next semester.

Michael: It's been quite hard fitting the kids around work while she's studying but I've managed to do that.

Lexi: The knowledge that I can do it and it's not, that hard and that it can be done.

Maria

Maria: I'm going to try my hardest. I'm already on there doing tests that you can access to try and see what my grades are. I want to do well.

Maria was 36 years old, married to John, with a one-year-old son. While Maria did okay at school, she was not interested and so dropped out. She returned to study at age 25 and completed a qualification in outdoor education. Since Leo was born, she has been at home and was studying to prepare herself for a change of career later, and to give herself an interest outside of parenting. She also liked being a role model for her son. She felt she had good knowledge of herself as a learner, which would be valuable. She chose distance study as they live in a rural community and she felt that she would be happy studying solo as she had plenty of people connections in other areas of her life. She was enrolled in three courses towards a degree in environmental science and ecology, a subject she was passionately interested in. John thought Maria studying would help keep her happy and he was keen to support her.

Maria started her course work as soon as she received the materials, three weeks before the official start of the semester. She studied during nap times and every evening once Leo was in bed, a routine she continued throughout the semester. She thoroughly enjoyed the learning, finding it challenging at times but trialling different strategies and approaches whenever she felt stuck. Differences in teaching style as well as her perception that one course had excessive content and assessment meant she enjoyed that course less than the others. She attended compulsory campus courses during the mid-semester break. She was initially terrified about being less smart than the other students, but really enjoyed the classes and opportunity to interact with others. She continued to structure her days very carefully and did well on the various assessments, although she felt that there was too much focus on “memorising and unloading”. Despite feeling very overwhelmed near the end of the semester, with multiple assessments due and exams looming, Maria finished in good spirits with a B- grade. By the follow up interview, she was pregnant and so had decided to finish her two double semester courses but not take on any more at that point. She felt she would return to her study once the baby was a little older.

Maria: Just really enjoying the learning, learning stuff, different stuff. And it's funny, it almost feels like, like it's all stuff I'm interested in, that probably helps but, yeah, it almost feels like it doesn't matter what it is (laughs). I'm just happy to be learning.

Marie

Marie: We just have to adjust really. This first semester, if I do the writing paper only, it will be easier just to slip into it, get a bit of a routine going and see what I can and can't fit in.

Marie was a 38-year-old sole parent. One son lived with his father and the other, 17 year old Tom, lived with Marie in a small rural town. Marie was very involved in her community and unwilling to move, so distance study was her only option. While she would have liked face-to-face learning, she was confident distance study would not be a problem. Marie did well at school although health problems hampered her final years. A particular strength for Marie was her self-efficacy having enjoyed completing two university distance courses four years earlier through her job. She left her previous role because of health issues and as she had no formal qualifications, she was keen to retrain in preparation for a new direction. Initially, Marie enrolled for full time study in psychology, but she was then unexpectedly offered a good job in a nearby town and so decided to continue with just one course in academic writing. Tom was supportive and didn't think his mother studying would affect his life much.

Marie planned to study in the living areas at home and possibly during lunch breaks in the new job. She was anticipating enjoying learning writing skills and felt it would set her up well for the rest of her courses. The new job started in the second week of the semester and she found it very exciting and busy with plenty of challenging opportunities. She managed to fit in the study for the first few weeks and was enjoying the online learning that the course offered, as well as the first assignment. She was concerned however, that she was not able to spend much time with Tom and was a little worried that she would lose the strong connection she had with him. She was also aware that she was not exercising as much as previously, which was important because of her long-term health issues.

Six weeks into the semester, Marie decided to withdraw from her study. As much as she was enjoying the course, her job had long hours plus some travel and she felt that she needed to prioritise the people in her life and her own health and well-being.

Marie: Unfortunately, after some challenging decision making, I have had to withdraw from the study... the people I love and care for and who invest time in me, I also felt were missing out, and they may not be around tomorrow.

Melissa

Melissa: That's why I love learning, because it does immediately have an impact on your life.

Melissa was a 46-year-old mother of two children, Jason aged 14 and Chelsea aged 9. She worked part time running exercise programmes and was taking one course towards a Diploma in Rehabilitation Studies. She was driven by her passionate interest in the topic and her desire to help people through working in the field of rehabilitation. She did well at school and had a certificate from a local polytechnic and so had a positive learner identity. Initially it looked like Melissa's biggest challenge was going to be her lifeload – as well as being a sole parent and working part time, she was a key support for her partner who had had a stroke.

Melissa started her study two weeks early and quickly discovered effective study routines. She was very focussed during the semester, committing all her free time to her study; school holidays proved challenging but she managed the juggle well. She loved the course content and was excited by the parallels with her own experiences and the opportunities to apply the knowledge she was gaining. However, frustration with academic writing expectations, plus difficulties with her low computer skills, were strong barriers. Her high expectations of herself meant she was disappointed with 70% grades for the two essays; in addition, she felt irritated that she was being penalised for what she saw as pedantic details rather than being rewarded for her understanding of the topic. She found the lack of face-to-face contact difficult at times and had some negative experiences with staff. She finished the semester with a C+ grade, which was disappointing for her. While Melissa passed another course in the second semester, she has subsequently decided that university study was not for her, that the learning approach was too "academic". On the plus side, she had a new job in the mental health sector and felt that the study gave her valuable knowledge as well as increased credibility and confidence. Melissa's story is explored in more depth in the case study analysis presented in Chapter 6.

Melissa: So I see the world different as a result of doing that one paper. My world view around rehabilitation is different.

Natasha

Natasha: I'm looking forward to broadening my knowledge base. I don't have a lot of book learning, so for me I'm quite excited about that, to get some real intelligence (laughs) as opposed to the street smarts.

Natasha was 38, single with no children, renting a house with one flatmate. She did shift work, four days on then four days off, and wanted to make better use of her spare time. Her past learning experiences were mostly positive; she enjoyed school and did well, but at university she put her energy into a social life rather than the work, failed some courses and decided not to return after the first year. She did not regret this and felt that now was the right time for study.

A potential challenge for Natasha was a number of chronic health conditions that, while well managed, can flare up with stress. She was enrolled full time in a Bachelor of Communications, which she felt would be useful for her current role as well as potentially lead to other opportunities. Her job meant distance study was the only option and at the start she was worried about the apparent lack of structure and timetables in the courses. She was also aware that she might have taken on too much. She felt writing would be a challenge for her, but she had support available from her work colleagues, many of whom were also studying.

Natasha started well, working steadily through the course materials. Life got more challenging when she decided to buy a house, a considerable distraction from her studies. Her hobby involved working at occasional weekend car rallies, and this took large chunks of her time and energy. The middle of the semester, with many assignments due at once and the move to her new home, was particularly challenging, but determination and hard work got her through and she successfully met all the deadlines. As expected, she struggled with the writing and felt she was penalised unfairly even though her essay content was good. More assignments plus the financial need to work more hours resulted in her struggling to stay on top and she felt she had taken on too much. She got behind and so withdrew from two courses the week before exams so she could focus on the others. Natasha finished the semester with a B and two DNC grades. She was not happy and so was taking fewer courses in the second semester so she could do better.

Natasha: And it has been a good challenge, yeah, okay I've had ups, I've had downs, I've had stumbles, I've lost a grand, nyeh, but at the end of the day I did my first exam in 20 years, I passed my first paper in 20 years, I've written my first essay in 20 years and these are all good things.

Penny

Penny: I'm in a place where I believe I can manage the study, still learn, gain from that and place it in my place of work. So I think it's still a valuable tool for me.

Penny's children were all grown up and she was living with her adult daughter and working full time. In her late 50s, she had left school young as she was expected to get a job and then get married. She completed a diploma in early childhood at a polytechnic 10 years ago, the first in her family to go into any tertiary education. She was working in family support and felt that gaining a qualification in social work could open up new opportunities for her. She was enrolled in two courses towards a Diploma in Social Work. She would have preferred to attend a local institution but her workplace were not supportive and so distance study was the only option. She was very excited to be in formal learning again and was looking forward to making connections between the course content and her work with families. However, she did find the idea of online learning daunting and did not really trust the technology.

It was a short semester for Penny as she withdrew from study after just two weeks. She had what she described as a meltdown, and this triggered a reassessment of her life. Certainly one factor was financial: She took a student loan for the course fees but had not realised repayments would be automatically deducted from her pay starting straight away. At the same time, she had lost access to a work vehicle and so had increased costs. Another factor was the lack of support from her workplace, who said that the training was unnecessary. She was keeping an eye out for other work but increasingly felt she would be unlikely to get another job at her age. She was enjoying the learning but these barriers plus the time the study required being more than she was willing to commit at this time in her life led to her decision to withdraw. She was sad but philosophical about the outcome.

Penny: Oh just that I've made some decisions and so I've had to pull out I think it was about a lot of things... it was about my age and how I was feeling about things and I actually can't count more than two hands to retirement.

Samantha

Samantha: I might feel a bit guilty for taking my time away from them, especially the children, and I suppose you get a wee bit torn when you are doing these things. Should I be studying, should I be spending time with them?

Steven: I don't think it will have much effect on me... probably won't see her as much; probably have to stop annoying her.

Samantha left school at 15, pregnant with her eldest son. She liked school but felt that poor classroom management meant she was not taught well. She was now 33, married to Steven, with three children aged 17, 12, and 4. She had done training courses in hospitality and beauty therapy and now she was the first in her family to go to university. Samantha likes learning and was motivated by the desire to get a good job and to be a positive role model for her children. She was aiming for a social work degree, taking two courses but concerned the workload may be too much. She chose distance study for the flexibility but was worried it would be lonely. Her family did not expect her study to affect them, just that they might see less of her. Her lack of academic skills and finding time around her family were potential challenges at the outset.

Samantha started slowly, delaying getting her textbooks because of financial issues, procrastinating as she found the level of the work daunting, and struggling to find the time as her son was not yet back at kindergarten. Within a few weeks, her husband felt her study was taking too much time. The family were struggling financially and Samantha wondered if she should look for work. She tried to find people to study with but was not successful. The work was challenging and it took her a lot of time to understand the course materials, so she started to slip behind. She did enjoy the learning however, particularly the child development as she could see its relevance to her family. Despite getting extensions on assignments and good support from staff, a continued lack of support from her family, school holidays, and struggles with the level of the work meant she became more discouraged. The final straw was taking a part time job where she was pressured to do longer hours, leaving less time for her study. She finished the semester with two DNC grades after not completing all the assessments.

Samantha: It's been hard going, trying to come home and study, trying to deal with the kids, trying to go to work and trying to get Steven to see that this is important to me. Then I start to doubt myself and think, is this important to me? Am I out of my league? Am I doing something that I was never really capable of?

Sarah

Sarah: When I'm not panicking about how it's going to go, when I can actually stop thinking about the anxiety thoughts related to it, and just go, wow, I'm finally studying psychology! I'm going to love it.

Richard: There will be times when I go, honey, go study, go study. I'm taking the boys to the park. Go study.

Sarah was 25, married to Richard with two children aged five and three, and pregnant with her third. The family were about to move to their own home in the country following renovations. Living in the country as a child, Sarah attended correspondence school but did not go on to university because the idea of leaving home was too terrifying. Sarah was enrolled full time in a BA and her long-term goal was to become a clinical psychologist. She did not consider studying part time, describing herself as not a “half and half” person. Richard was supportive and planned to help with the boys but also talked of the need to maintain his own life. Sarah was fascinated by the topic of psychology and was looking forward to learning more. She was confident about her learning ability but was worried that moving house in the first semester would make things difficult. She had planned her study time carefully around the children but did not start studying before the official start of the semester.

After two weeks, Sarah felt she was doing well despite some issues with the design of one course. By week three, things were not so positive. Moving house plus her son's birthday took time and while she had completed one assessment, she was behind on another. At this point, serious complications with her pregnancy, which continued throughout the semester, meant she was in and out of hospital. She withdrew from one course but persevered with the others. Richard was an excellent support, taking over most of the house care and much of the childcare, as well as helping look after Sarah. Unfortunately, she was unable to sit her exams as she went into labour. She was awarded aegrotat passes on those courses and continued to work on her other double semester course. She withdrew from her planned second semester courses to allow her to focus on her new daughter and was unsure of her plans.

Sarah: [My] advice would be, don't bite off more than you can chew, take what you think you can do, and then half it. And then if you found that to be a breeze, well done, you can take on more next time. Instead of, gee you bit off more than you can chew and now you're not going to be able to do any of it properly.

Scott

Scott: I want to earn more money. I want to better myself.

Scott was a 38 year old father of three children aged 4, 8, and 13. His wife, Sharon, was a full time student. The family were not available to be interviewed. Scott was working full time in sales and felt that he could not progress to the next level without a formal qualification so he was working towards a Bachelor of Business Studies, starting with a single course to see how he went. He would have preferred to study full time as an internal student but the family could not support two full time students and distance learning would allow him to fit study around his job. His work and boss were supportive of his decision. Scott did not like school when he was younger and he saw his English and writing skills as weaknesses but he was looking forward to the challenge of learning.

Scott started reading the course materials well in advance of the semester and organised a desk in a corner of the living areas. He attended a locally run orientation course for new distance students and made good use of the supports and resources that were available. His first few weeks went well, but before long things were challenging at home with the family getting sick and his wife's study needs taking priority. He enjoyed the learning and was putting in as much time as he could but he found juggling family, work, and study very difficult. By the fourth week, he was considering quitting the study and was getting a little behind on the course. The family also decided to move house at this time so looking for a new property was an additional challenge. A few weeks later, when they did move, difficulties with the telecommunications company meant they had no internet access and so Scott slipped further behind. Things were also not going well with his wife and he felt that she was not giving him any support. Eventually he made the difficult decision to withdraw.

By the time of the follow-up interview, Scott's wife and children had moved out. Reflecting on the semester, he said while he had enjoyed the learning and found it interesting and relevant to his work, he had realised that business was not his passion. At that point, he was considering giving up his job and enrolling full time to study aeronautical design.

Scott: If everything was good in the relationship and the internet, everything was in the perfect world I probably would have finished the paper and passed it. But it was just, yeah the catalyst of everything and everything had built up to the point it was like, and then also me going, eeehhh maybe it's not something I wanna do.

Toni

Toni: I'm doing this for me. I don't know what's going to happen next year or the end of this year. I'm just doing it for me. Because I can do it.

Toni, 52, worked full time on contract as an administrator in the health sector. She had raised her four children alone and her youngest was just leaving home to attend university; she was expecting to be home alone, however an older son, in need of support, had recently returned home. For Toni, her children were still her top priority and knowing they are okay was necessary to allow her to focus on her study. She left school young, a decision she regrets, feeling her parents could have pushed her more. She recently completed a certificate in Māori studies and this triggered the desire to continue studying. Toni was taking two courses towards a Health Sciences Diploma. Her fees were paid by an organisation supporting Māori in the health sector, although she was motivated more by the challenge of learning than workplace goals.

Toni attended the local orientation course the weekend before the start of the semester and learned about the support services available, but she did not realise she could have started working on the course earlier. Later she commented that she wished she had started earlier and stronger. She found it very hard initially and for the first few weeks she thought about giving up, but each time she decided to persevere. She enjoyed the learning, in particular the anthropology course, although she found the language challenging at times. She made sure to use all the support services: She attended academic writing courses for distance students and the campus-based session for her course, and she happily contacted staff when she needed help or felt overwhelmed. The staff were supportive and encouraged her to continue, giving extensions as required. She was delighted to get B grades for her first assessments but she was continually frustrated and disappointed by what she saw as her inability to manage her time better and to be more organised. This seemed to get worse as the semester progressed.

Events outside of study proved a big barrier. She faced many challenges during the semester: problems with her son at home, a lot of stress at work, uncertainty over her contract renewal, and finally, a major health scare towards the end. She ended the semester with a C and D grade and decided not to continue as she felt distance study was not for her.

Toni: I've come to the realization, I need to, if I'm going to do any papers or any study like this, I need to be there. I need to do it internally. I need to be with a group of people, I need to be where it's actually happening.

Vee

Vee: I'm not confident also of getting back into the system and also writing all the assignments.

Vee was 37 years old, married to Lewis, and mother of two girls, Arianne and Emma, aged 15 and 17. The family immigrated to New Zealand from the Philippines a year earlier. Since then, Vee had been at home but previously she worked full time as an accountant. When she was unsuccessful getting work here, she decided an up-to-date New Zealand qualification would help. While she had positive past experiences as a learner, it was a long time ago and the shift in language and culture made her worried that she would fail. She took one business course to test the water and thought she may go full time later if she still could not find work.

Vee's family were right behind her decision to study and they provided both emotional and practical support throughout the semester. Doing just one course and having a stable supportive family environment enabled Vee to put in the time that she needed to understand the course materials and she did considerably more than the recommended 12 hours most weeks. She also made good use of the supports and resources available including the assignment pre-reading service and attending the campus course. She enjoyed learning about the New Zealand business world, particularly in comparison to her home country. Vee did well on all her assessments and was rapt to finish the semester with an A+ grade. Her family were very proud and at the time of the follow up interview, she was excited to have an upcoming job interview.

Vee: There is a real sense of purpose. [I am] proud that I am studying and learning more about myself (how I react to pressure and what my weaknesses are). My confidence level is going up.

Lewis: Maybe it's like what, she's saying... we are just adapting

Arianne: Yeah I mean we help each other out when we have to.

Lewis: When there's no food, then we produce it!

Illustrating the framework

These 19 stories, in addition to giving voice to the participants, illustrate well the complex network of antecedents of student engagement and highlight some of the important aspects of the transition to university for this population. Together the stories endorse the validity of the conceptual framework of student engagement as a useful research tool for understanding student experiences. Many examples of each of the components of the framework are evident: the socio-cultural context, university and student antecedents, as well as the short-term academic and social outcomes.

The wider socio-political context affected student engagement in a variety of ways, most obviously by influencing how many courses the students took. For instance, Kaitlyn took on extra courses so that she would be eligible to borrow course costs from the government and Jeremiah felt pressured to complete his degree quickly before he turned 55 when he would no longer be eligible for government allowances.

The effect of university factors was clear. For instance, different disciplines led to different styles of assessment and different expectations of students: Maria, as a science student, was required to attend compulsory on-campus courses, whereas in other disciplines these courses were either non-existent or optional. Course design and delivery issues such as workload, clarity of study materials, and teaching style all affected the students' engagement. Sarah's withdrawal from one course because of her frustration with the course instructions and design illustrates the potential power of these factors.

Even clearer than the influence of university variables was the influence of student factors. Their experiences as learners, their academic skills, and the support they received from family and friends all played a role. Lifeload was critical; the students experienced a wide range of unplanned life events including moving house, health problems for themselves or their families, pregnancy, and changes to their paid work situations. The most obvious impact of events such as these was on their behavioural engagement – it made it more difficult to find the time to study. In addition, at another level, unexpected events affected their cognitive and emotional engagement with the stress sometimes making it difficult to concentrate or even to be interested in their study. There was considerable variation in how the students managed such unexpected events depending on other factors such as family support, finances, and university support, illustrating the interaction between variables. This aligns with the critical realist understanding that the relationship between variables is not fixed but rather is dependent on the context (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

At a psychosocial level, the students' motivations for study, their interest in the topic, and their self-efficacy were all important influences on student engagement. Those with strong

interest such as Daniel with his love of history flourished, while others, such as Bex, who were motivated by work goals rather than interest, often struggled to maintain their engagement.

As this study only covers the students' first semester at university, nothing can be said about the more distal consequences of engagement as shown in the framework. However, more immediate benefits were evident. Students reported not just increased learning and skills but also, importantly, increased confidence and self-esteem. Sadly, the negative consequences of disengagement were also evident: students who withdrew or had poor grades often berated themselves and felt a sense of failure.

This chapter does not claim to be an in-depth analysis of the participants' experiences. Rather the stories are presented as illustrative of the complex and individual nature of student engagement, and as a way of giving voice to the participants. The following three chapters present more focussed analyses that more directly address the research questions, beginning with a detailed case study of one student, Melissa.

Chapter 6

Case study

“The more I’m integrating, the more I’m thinking, the more I’m feeling, the more I’m understanding. The more I’m understanding, the more my behaviour is changing”

Melissa, Study 2 participant

The previous chapter looked across the range of experiences and helped to show the diversity of experiences. In contrast, this chapter takes an in-depth look at a single participant’s experience to further our understanding of how student engagement develops and changes throughout the semester. The case study highlights the tensions between the student’s own motivations and interests and the processes and pressures of academia. This analysis is presented here as illustrative of the richness of the data and the value of the conceptual framework of student engagement to foreground the uniqueness of the students’ experiences. A key theme that arose from this analysis was the importance of emotion and this is explored in more depth in Chapter 8. The chapter is published as:

Kahu, E. R. (2013). From “loving it” to “freaking out” and back again: The engagement of a mature distance student in their first semester at university. *Refereed proceedings of the Manawatū Doctoral Research Symposium, 2*, 59-66. Retrieved from <http://mro.massey.ac.nz/10179/2645>

From “loving it” to “freaking out” and back again: The engagement of a mature-aged distance student in their first semester at university.

Abstract

Student engagement is a student’s emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to their studies. Evidence suggests engagement is vital to both success and satisfaction at university. A conceptual framework of student engagement, developed from research in psychology, sociology, and education, argues that engagement does not occur in isolation; rather it is embedded within a complex network of antecedents and consequences. This paper presents a case study of a 47-year-old solo mother’s first semester at university. Interviews at each end of the semester plus fortnightly video diaries were used to collect rich detailed data about the student’s experiences. An interpretive analysis uses the framework to illuminate how student engagement changes throughout the semester and how the various university and student factors influence that process. The embedded nature of student engagement is apparent, with emotion as a key mechanism by which student and university factors influence engagement. In particular, the student’s interest in the topic triggers a high level of engagement resulting in deep integrated learning. At other times, difficulties with university processes and poor support from staff trigger negative emotions that reduce engagement.

Keywords: student engagement, mature students, distance learning

Introduction

Student engagement has been the focus of considerable research, theory, and debate. While researchers agree about its importance and its positive relationship with student outcomes such as achievement and satisfaction (Trowler & Trowler, 2010), there is less agreement about the exact nature of the construct. Three approaches are evident: the psychological approach, which sees engagement as an internal psychological state incorporating behaviour, thoughts, and feelings (for a review see Fredricks et al., 2004); the behavioural approach, which argues engagement is both student behaviour and effective teaching practice (e.g. Kuh et al., 2008); and the socio-cultural approach, a wider critical view that considers the importance of the socio-

political context (e.g. Mann, 2001). A key limitation of these approaches is their failure to clearly define student engagement and to distinguish between engagement, its antecedents, and its consequences. The conceptual framework presented in Figure 3, developed through a review of this literature, overcomes these limitations by incorporating the strengths of each, and depicting student engagement as an embedded phenomenon (Kahu, 2013).

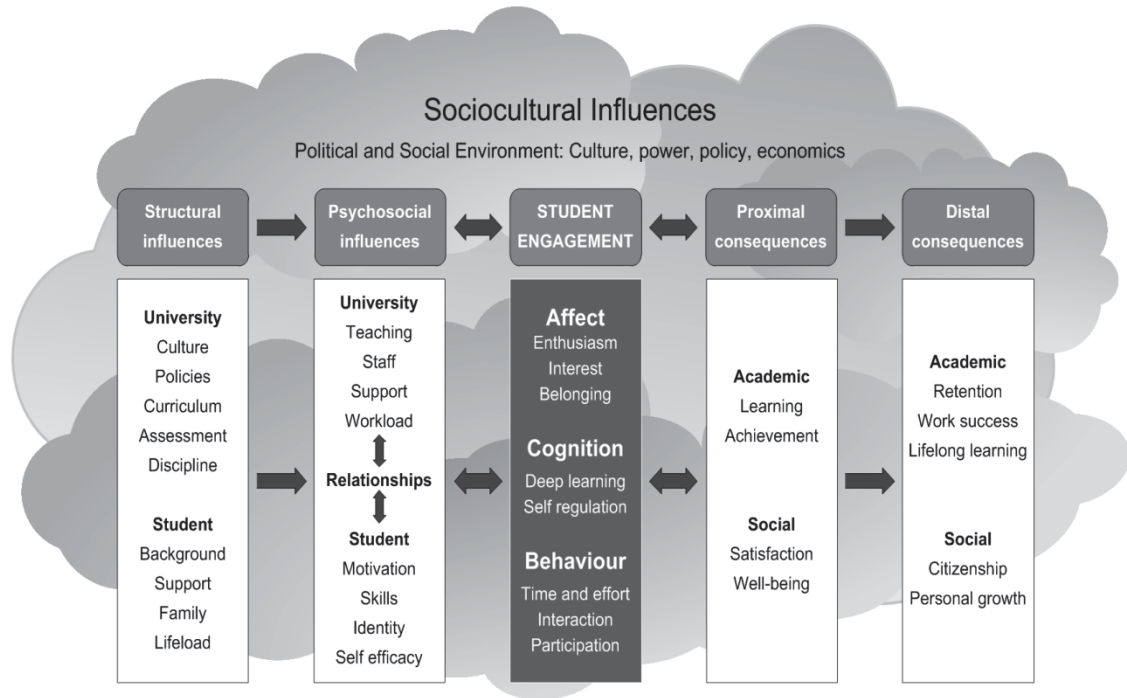


Figure 3. Conceptual framework of student engagement (Kahu, 2013, p. 766)

Kahu's (2013) framework places the student at the centre and argues that student engagement is their emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to study. These three dimensions interact and overlap. But engagement does not happen in isolation, it is influenced by psychosocial and structural influences from both the university and the student. The framework also illustrates the positive academic and personal consequences of engagement. An important feature is the acknowledgement that engagement is not the outcome of any one of these variables but rather the complex interplay between them, as shown by the bidirectional arrows at the heart of the diagram. A second key feature is the prominence the framework gives to the socio-cultural context, highlighting the important role these wider influences play on the university as well as the student.

The framework illustrates the unique nature of the student experience, and therefore the importance of studying sub populations. Mature-aged distance students, who combine study with complex lives, are one such growing population. In New Zealand, one third of all bachelor degree students are aged over 24 and one third of those study at a distance (Ministry of Education, 2011). In terms of the influences on student engagement as depicted in the conceptual framework, past studies have found differences in mature-aged students' motivations

for study (Bye et al., 2007; Hoskins & Hooff, 2005; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009), academic and technology skills (Henderson et al., 2009; M. Murphy & Fleming, 2000), and life load (Alsop et al., 2008; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007; Zembylas, 2008). These students also have a greater capacity to integrate their learning with their work experience, an important influence on student engagement (Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2013). However, the wider university culture, designed to support young school leavers, can lead to a sense of alienation and lack of belonging (Kasworm, 2010; B. Murphy, 2009; Read et al., 2003).

These differences highlight the importance of studying this group separately and taking a holistic approach, as recommended by the framework, to understand their engagement. Engagement in the first year is particularly important because mature-aged students have high first year attrition rates: In New Zealand, 27% of those aged 25-39 and 32% of those aged 40 and over fail to continue after their first year (Ministry of Education, 2011). This paper is a case study of a mature-aged distance student's first semester at university. It uses the conceptual framework to illuminate how student engagement fluctuates throughout the semester and how the various university and student factors influence that process.

The study

The conceptual framework highlights the open and complex nature of the student experience and therefore the relevance of a critical realist approach. Critical realism argues that we cannot isolate components and study them under controlled conditions, and that rather than expect to make concrete predictions about a phenomenon such as student engagement, we must consider potential consequences (Danermark et al., 2002). Different factors within the framework may increase or decrease the chance of a student being engaged depending on other elements at play.

The case study lends itself as a valuable research design, best suited to the study of complex situations such as this (Simons, 2009). As Ragin (1992) describes it, the extensiveness of research with a large number of cases is traded for the intensiveness of the case study, putting the case, in this instance the student, rather than the variables, centre stage. G. Thomas (2011) argues that a case study needs two elements: the case to be studied holistically, and the analytic frame "within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates" (p. 513). For this study, therefore, the experiences of a single student are used to illustrate student engagement as theorised by the conceptual framework.

Participant

Melissa is a 47-year-old solo mother of two children aged 9 and 14 who works part time. Her partner had a stroke two years ago and, while they do not live together, she is his

primary support and advocate. She is taking one first-year extramural course with a longer term aim of completing a diploma.

Data collection and analysis

Prior to the semester, Melissa took part in a semi-structured interview focussed on her preparation, expectations, and motivation for study. She then recorded 5-15 minute video diaries approximately once a fortnight throughout the semester. In the diaries she talked about her study experiences, how she was thinking, feeling, and behaving, and commented on what she felt influenced those experiences. Video diaries have the potential to access a more honest and personal account than an interview or written diary. In addition, their real time nature captures details of the process that may well be forgotten or viewed differently by the end of the semester (Willig, 2001). After the end of the semester, a follow up interview explored in more depth the experiences and influences she raised in the diaries. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

The interviews and diaries were analysed using an interpretive approach that was theoretical, driven by the conceptual framework, and semantic, identifying themes from surface meanings and accepting language as a simple and neutral expression of people's experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This article focuses on the fluctuations of Melissa's engagement.

Findings

As shown in the framework, motivation is a key driver for engagement and in Melissa's case much of that motivation was intrinsic, interest stemming from her experiences with her partner's rehabilitation. She also has extrinsic motivation: a qualification to help her gain a full time job to better support her family. The relevance of the course to her life led quickly to a high level of enthusiasm and passion for the learning. This triggered a strong behavioural engagement and deep learning even before the semester started:

I'm getting to integrate what I'm learning with my life first hand. Almost like on a daily basis. That I find quite fascinating and interesting. Certainly helps me with my learning because my brain is going 'ok I've just read about this'. So I'm making the link between what I am studying and what is actually in front of me, I can almost hear it in my brain, ticking away, when I'm faced with things.

This high level of engagement was sustained for the next two weeks as Melissa developed her study routines, finding that the study absorbed her for hours at a time. The weekend before the semester, Melissa attended a one-day academic preparation course for first-year distance students. Unfortunately, this was not a positive experience:

I went there feeling very confident about what I was doing and I left there feeling very unconfident. And feeling very, um, dumb actually (laughs). Not feeling very intelligent, feeling, yeah not good...I have an understanding about what I'm studying but, I'm really nervous about the technical side of things, you know like academic writing, command words, it's like my gosh, that's like nothing to do with the concept, that I thought that an essay might be.

This is her first low point. Although she understands the material, she now sees herself as “dumb”. This leads to anxiety that impacts negatively on her behaviour: “I'm feeling a little, a lot more nervous about what's ahead of me. I've spent this morning, um, freaking out actually”.

Despite this setback, Melissa continued to work hard, completing her first essay. Once again her interest in the topic leads to a high level of behavioural engagement and her ability to apply the knowledge leads to deep learning:

I am so hungry for knowledge, I'm loving, absolutely loving learning and, instead of it being, I don't know how most people are, whether it's a chore or not, I don't know, but I'm just, I look forward to it ... it's like yay I can study today. It's exciting; it's new; it's stimulating. And it's applicable to my life.

As illustrated in the framework, the benefits of study are both academic and personal. For Melissa, confidence and credibility were important gains:

It's given me more confidence. Definitely given me more confidence. Because I feel like it's given me the credibility, I'm getting the credibility that I need which is going to give me the confidence. Already, I'm able to say I'm studying, not I'm going to study, I'm studying rehabilitation and people's response to me, I was thinking in particular of, I've already rung the Stroke Foundation head office and just being able to say that to them with confidence actually gives them confidence in me and we're already starting to establish a relationship.

At times of high engagement, the three dimensions of engagement influence each other and function together in perfect unison: her emotions of enjoyment and interest, the behaviours of spending the time, and the learning that she is experiencing. The self-perpetuating nature of engagement, as represented by the bidirectional arrows at the centre of the framework, is also clear. High engagement leads to learning, confidence, and well-being. These positive outcomes then increase motivation and self-efficacy, which triggers yet further engagement:

I'm still really enjoying it; in fact that's an understatement, I am absolutely loving my study... I'll be head down and bum up and rather than it being a chore, I just

love it. My brain just needs feeding. The more I learn, the more I want to learn. It's like I'm addicted to it almost.

For all this pleasure, Melissa's engagement dips strongly at times. Only one of those dips relate to Melissa's home life when she reduces her study during the school holidays: "I feel a bit more pressure, on me, than normal, having to juggle, especially the nine year old". The other downturns in her engagement all relate to university assessment processes. After being satisfied with her first essay, she was disappointed with her mark and could not access the feedback:

There was no ticks or anything. It was just like, my essay. And I thought oh that's weird, that's weird. And I didn't pursue it, because I thought, I'm doing something wrong, I'm doing something wrong here or, my old computer isn't going to receive whatever it is ... I was, Oh no I don't want to bug anyone. So I actually didn't get, I didn't, I thought that what I received for the feedback was it.

When the same thing happened with her second assignment she followed it up, and after repeated attempts, the tutor managed to send her the file in a different format that she could access. Her low self-efficacy around university processes is apparent in her tendency to attribute the problem to herself rather than to the university:

I'm feeling really self-conscious at this point that I'm constantly at this man saying, no, haven't got anything. And I'm feeling pretty dumb. I'm feeling pretty dumb. And thinking, what's wrong with me and I can't seem to, what ticks, I can't see the fricking ticks. Maybe it's me, maybe it's me (sigh) you know all this goes through your mind.

Once again, the university processes result in her seeing herself as "dumb". Despite this, she was determined to do better on the second essay and when she was happy with her work she sent it to the university pre-reading service for feedback:

And it came back and it was just like, no, they said, no, you're off topic. I was just gutted. I'm clearly not understanding something ... I just don't know what to do. I'm doing the best I can, and I'm not on track. And it's quite upsetting because I really want to pass this, aside from the money I'm investing in it, I want to pass. I want to do the best I can.

Her low self-efficacy for academic writing is once again reinforced and this leads to frustration and stress. The feedback did not tell her how to fix the problems and so she sought advice from a friend who had completed university study. She received marks of around 70% for both essays and was very disappointed. At the follow up interview, I explained that this was

a B grade and she was very surprised. Two factors influenced her response: her own expectations of herself, but also her lack of knowledge of university processes:

Going back to school days, I'm used to being an A- B student ... it might have helped me if I knew that 70% was a B, that would have psychologically helped me, but 70% I sort of saw as a C anyway. I did see that as a C.

What frustrated her most of all was the feeling that it was the presentation of her work rather than the content that was lacking. She received feedback that related to the double spacing of her assignment and was angry that she should lose marks for this:

I'm green, I'm new, academic writing is new to me and it shows. So that's where I lose my marks ... what I call pedantic things like that and um, if I was marked down for those little things then that, I'm not very happy about that. Because I'm investing a lot of money.

The feedback's focus on writing skills and the difficulties she experienced clearly had a negative impact on her engagement with her study:

I find I'm getting so consumed by the technicalities that the actual reason for being there to like learn and have an understanding of the subject sort of gets pushed aside because the focus is all on these things like this.

Melissa felt good after the final exam: "I think it went really well. I haven't got the results back yet but I was pleased with the information that I knew and what was asked. I was really pleased with that". Her final grade for the course however was C+, a mark she was not happy with: "I feel soooo disappointed because I put so much time, passion and energy into it". She emailed the course coordinator but the response was unhelpful:

She wrote back and said that a C+ was an above average mark and it was just, it was all good for me to carry on with my studies. So I didn't really get an answer, I was looking for some guidance and some, something with a bit of traction that I could hang on to. I said, look this is a big commitment for me, I'm 47 years old and I'm in this place of what do I do? Do I carry on? Am I good enough for this and all that?

The grade impacted severely on her self-efficacy and she concluded that it must be her writing skills: "Clearly I'm not packaging the information effectively for the expected standard". While she did carry on for the next semester, her motivation and therefore her potential engagement had changed:

This next paper I'm not going to put as much into it, I'm going to be more relaxed and see if it makes much difference ...(my guess is it probably won't!)... I won't mind getting a C if it reflects my input.

Discussion

Melissa's engagement is influenced by both student and university factors as illustrated in the conceptual framework. What is evident from Melissa's experience, however, is that these two worlds can have very different and opposing effects: Her own interest and passion lifted her engagement while the university assessment practices dragged it down. The key mechanism through which these influences impacted on Melissa's engagement was emotion. Researchers increasingly argue that consideration of emotion is vital to our understanding of the student experience (Dirkx, 2006; Linnenbrink, 2006) and this is reflected in the framework where student engagement is conceptualised as incorporating cognition, behaviour, and affect. What Melissa's experiences suggest is that not only is positive emotion a key driver of high engagement, negative emotion is a key mechanism by which experiences reduce engagement.

Interest is central to Melissa's high engagement. According to Ainley (2006), interest is the "integration of cognitive, motivational and affective components" (p. 396). The role of interest is to motivate learning and evidence suggests that students who are interested spend more time and effort on their study, and understand and retain more of the course content (Silvia, 2006). Looking at adult students, Bye et al. (2007) found that both interest and intrinsic motivation predicted positive affect. As depicted in Figure 4, this is evident in Melissa's experiences: The relevance of what she is learning motivates her interest, which leads to enthusiasm and passion for the learning. This emotional engagement triggers both increased behavioural engagement in terms of time and effort as well as cognitive engagement in terms of deep learning. This finding, that positive emotions are central to engagement, is matched by Solomonides and Martin (2008). In their study, students saw engagement as emotional and personal involvement resulting in personally meaningful outcomes while staff perceived engagement as a cognitive process.

Mature-aged students often have high levels of intrinsic motivation such as interest (Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009) and one source of that interest is their increased ability to integrate their learning with work (Kahu et al., 2013). The benefits of work integrated learning (WIL) are increasingly recognised: enhanced learning for the student and work-ready graduates for employers (Patrick et al., 2008). What this case study suggests, however, is that WIL may be better conceptualised as life integrated learning to acknowledge that mature-aged students such as Melissa have a wide range of experiences, not just work, that may trigger interest in the course content and thus lead to greater engagement with their studies.

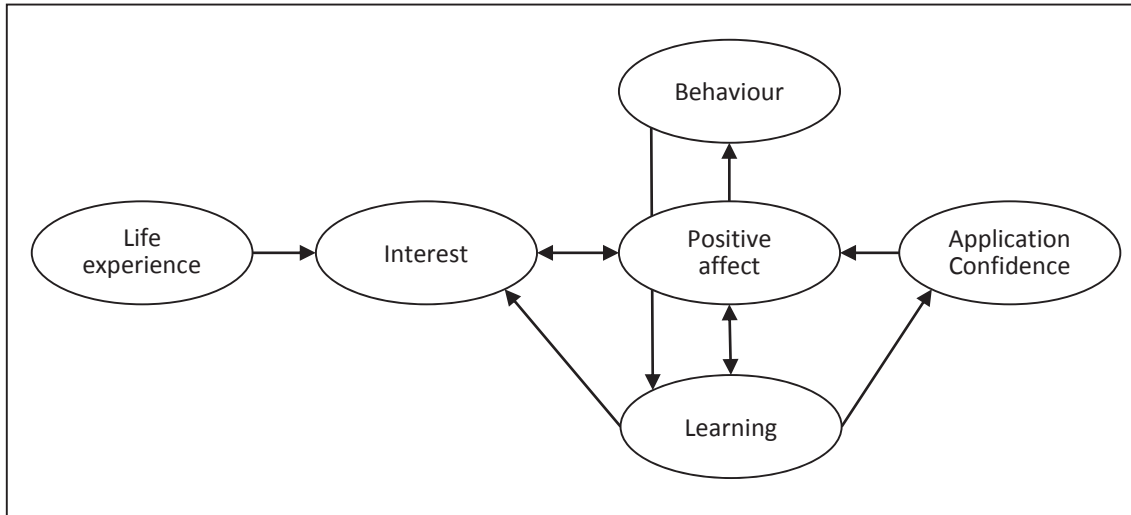


Figure 4. Depicting the impact of interest on engagement

The downturns in Melissa’s engagement are, except for the school holidays, all triggered by university practices relating to assessment. The emphasis on academic writing at orientation followed by the problems she experienced with the feedback and her perception of her grades, led to increased anxiety and stress and a loss of confidence in herself as a student. While she was learning and loving it, she was not getting the grades she felt she deserved. The anxiety associated with a lack of academic skills is well documented with mature-aged students (M. Murphy & Fleming, 2000), but what this research highlights is how powerful those negative emotions can be in terms of their impact on student engagement and ultimately, on learning. Researchers examining the critical role that self-efficacy plays in academic functioning conclude that self-beliefs can have both beneficial or destructive effects; therefore it is vital that educators build both competence and confidence (Pajares, 2003) The university failed to do that with Melissa – she repeatedly received the message that she could not do this, that she was not good enough. Academic writing is without doubt an important skill, but it should not be allowed to override a student’s engagement with the course content in this way.

Her final grade and the staff member’s unhelpful response were the final straws for Melissa. Grades have a powerful impact on students and the importance of valuable feedback and transparency around our assessment practices cannot be overestimated. Students should also be told the value of grades, and care must be taken to ensure they understand university processes – even the simple details such as accessing assignment feedback. This case highlights the importance of open and empathic communication with students. Students do find help seeking difficult and they do feel “dumb” when they do not know things. It is vital that when students do take the step of seeking help that staff respond appropriately. Every time. It is easy when dealing with hundreds of distance students to forget that they are all individuals and that our response to their cry for help may make an important difference to their future student life.

Conclusion

Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) distinguish between procedural engagement, going through the motions, and substantive engagement, genuine sustained and deep engagement with content. Melissa started the semester as the ideal student. When not distracted by anxiety around assessment, Melissa displayed all the signs of the preferred substantive engagement. In addition, she gained many desired outcomes from her study: Her self-confidence increased, she gained academic knowledge of a subject that she already knew much about at an experiential level, and she used that knowledge to improve the lives of people around her and to trigger new work opportunities. So how is it possible that she ended the semester deciding that perhaps a less intensive procedural engagement might be better?

The framework for student engagement illustrates well the complex network of variables that impact on the engagement of mature-aged students such as Melissa. Such students bring with them powerful motivations, skills, and characteristics that serve to strengthen their engagement with their studies: a passion and interest in their chosen topic, a willingness to put in the time and effort needed to be a good student, and the life experience that allows them to integrate their learning. But learning to be a student is not easy. Others have described the process as “a real roller coaster of confidence and emotions” (Christie et al., 2008, p. 567). The current study suggests that many of the dips in that roller coaster ride may be triggered by university practices and processes and we need to ask ourselves what we can do to reduce those negative impacts, so that students such as Melissa can flourish.

Chapter 7

Finding the space and time to engage

“Time and space are not two separate abstractions but are only aspects of one and the same phenomenon”

Skar (1997, p. 32)

The first aim of Study 2 was to understand how student engagement changes and develops through the transition to university in the context of the family. There are many different facets to this process as illustrated in the previous two chapters. In this chapter, a narrower and deeper approach is used to examine one theme. Space and time emerged from the initial analysis as key structural influences that are important to the transition and are closely linked to the family. This then is the focus of this chapter, which is published as follows:

Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C. V., Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2014). Space and time to engage: Mature-aged distance students learn to fit study into their lives. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. doi: 10.1080/02601370.2014.884177

Space and time to engage: Mature-aged distance students learn to fit study into their lives

Abstract

Student engagement, a student's emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to their study, is widely recognised as important for student achievement. Influenced by a wide range of personal, structural, and socio-cultural factors, engagement is both unique and subjective. One important structural factor shown in past research to be a barrier for distance students is access to quality space and time. This qualitative study followed 19 mature-aged distance students and their families, exploring how they learned to manage their space and time throughout their first semester at university. Institutions often claim that distance study and the increased use of technology overcomes barriers of space and time; however, the findings from this study suggest it merely changes the nature of those barriers. The ideal space and time for these students was individual and lay at the intersection of three, sometimes competing, demands: study, self, and family. A critical influence on success is family support, as is access to financial resources. Learning what constitutes ideal space and time for engagement is an important part of the transition to university. The institution has a vital role to play in aiding this process by ensuring flexibility of course design is maintained, providing more flexible advice, and targeting support at this important issue.

Keywords: student engagement, mature students, distance learning, space and time, support

Introduction

Student engagement, a student's emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to their study, is an important construct that is widely recognised as being central to student achievement and satisfaction (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Described as a meta-construct, student engagement draws together diverse threads of research that aim to explain student success (Fredricks et al., 2004). While there is debate in the field over exactly what constitutes engagement, all would agree that student engagement is an embedded phenomenon, influenced by a range of university and student factors, as well as the socio-cultural context, and resulting in both academic and personal gains (Kahu, 2013). The literature has tended to focus predominantly on the influence of university factors, but students come to university with very

different backgrounds and lives and this also influences their engagement with their study. A recent review concluded that there needs to be more holistic research into the student experience that links academic learning with the rest of the student's life (Ertl & Wright, 2008). The current research aimed to do that by exploring one important structural influence on distance students' engagement with their study – access to space and time.

Flexibility is seen as the cornerstone of contemporary higher education (Selwyn, 2011) and the increase in distance education has been hailed as an enabler of lifelong learning (Jarvis, Holford, & Griffin, 2003). More recently, technology has improved the digital delivery of learning materials, which some have claimed makes learning more accessible, an idea that is not without its critics (Gorard, Selwyn, & Madden, 2003). Jarvis et al. (2003) describe traditional education as involving barriers that regulate when and where learning takes place, in terms of timetables and classrooms, and suggest that open and distance learning changes “the fundamental categories of time, place and space in which learning occurs” (p. 116). Others make even stronger claims, suggesting that e-learning has “power in overcoming time and space barriers” (Redecker, Ala-Mutka, Bacigalupo, Ferrari, & Punie, 2009, p. 11), and “allows students to learn without limitations of space and time” (Cheng, Wei, & Chen, 2011, p. 260).

This flexibility appeals particularly to mature-aged students (defined as over 24 years). In New Zealand, a third of all bachelor degree level students are mature-aged and a third of those choose to study extramurally (Ministry of Education, 2013). These students often have very full and complex lives: They have full or part time paid work, and they have partners and/or children and other family and community commitments. Because of this, distance study, with no requirement to attend a campus at specific times, theoretically makes it easier to fit study into their lives. However, while mature-aged students have similar course pass rates to younger students, their first year attrition rate is higher (Ministry of Education, 2013). This reflects the finding that the transition to university is a challenging process, particularly for older students (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Henderson et al., 2009).

It has been suggested that while flexibility can be seen as a virtue, enabling multitasking and fluidity of roles, it can also be seen as a curse, impacting negatively on family life and creating new stress (Servage, 2007). For example, an increasing body of research into work/life balance has examined how technology blurs the boundaries between paid work and the home and the impact this has on the management of space and time (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006). Setting boundaries around paid work becomes necessary to attain a satisfactory work/life balance (Currie & Eveline, 2011). Distance study presents a similar difficulty, the blurring of boundaries between study and home, yet few researchers have examined distance study from this perspective. One notable exception is Moss (2004) who argues that space and time are useful concepts to examine experiences in higher education in order to reveal “the intricate daily action involved in studying” (p. 284).

Traditional on-campus study, for all its inflexibility, provides students with appropriate learning spaces and scheduled time, which enables students to step away from other commitments for sufficient time to facilitate deep engagement with their study (Servage, 2007). Learning at home, on the other hand, is often done alongside people and activities, squeezed into smaller spaces and times (Moss, 2004). As Selwyn (2011) says, the claimed flexibility of distance study is not manifested in the daily struggle of “finding appropriate temporal and physical contexts in which to learn” (p. 378). It can be argued that distance study has not overcome the barriers of space and time; it has merely changed the nature of those barriers. Previous research has identified role overload and time management as key obstacles to successful study for mature-aged students (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). In particular, research has focussed on female students and their struggle to balance their caregiving responsibilities with their study, a dilemma often linked to cultural gender roles (Alsop et al., 2008; Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Christie et al., 2008). While time is widely recognised as a barrier, only a few studies have included space or looked closely at how students manage this process in the transition to university.

Moss's (2006) analysis showed how women “carved out space and time from others' space and time and created different places to study” (p. 202). The women studied in a wide range of places, determined in part by personal preference and in part by circumstances. According to Moss (2006), the availability of space and time is shaped by gender and social position, and women's agency over their activities is critical to their ability to create the necessary space and time for higher education. Lowe and Gayle (2007) looked more specifically at students' strategies and developed a typology of four different approaches based on the degree of blurring between study and work/family and the students' success at managing. From the most to the least successful, the strategies were: separation, study had little impact on other activities; integration, study was fitted into life with negotiation and support; overlap, characterised by ongoing negotiation and imbalance; and finally conflict, instability from conflicting demands and stress. The authors identified support as one of the key influences on students' success at balancing study, work, and family.

The current paper builds on these studies in a New Zealand context. The wider research project followed a group of first time, mature-aged distance students and their families through their first semester at university, exploring student engagement and its influences. This paper asks how the students and their families learned to manage space and time in that first semester.

Method

This qualitative study took an interpretive approach that studies people in their natural settings, “attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). The complexity of the student experience lends

itself to a critical realist perspective, which recognises that the social world is an open and complex system, which cannot be counted or measured but rather must be interpreted and understood (Sayer, 2000).

Participants

Invitations to participate in a study of student engagement were sent to 400 first year distance students over the age of 24 enrolled in the first semester of 2012 at a New Zealand university. Of the 75 who responded, 25 met the criterion of being first time university students and, of those, 19 were available for the scheduled interviews (see Table 9). The four male and fifteen female participants were diverse in terms of age (25 to 59), family structure (single, couples, two parent families, single mothers, and those with adult children), and ethnicity (fifteen New Zealand European, five Māori, two Asian, and one Cook Island; a number identified as multiple ethnicities). All relationships were heterosexual. The majority were taking arts or business courses; three were taking the equivalent of a fulltime workload, thirteen were doing approximately half time, and three were taking a single course. One participant had some experience with distance learning.

Data collection

The participants, along with 11 partners and 10 children aged over five, were interviewed by the first author in the four weeks prior to the semester starting. The semi-structured interviews averaged 90 minutes and focussed on their preparation, expectations, and motivations for study. Participants then kept diaries, approximately weekly, throughout the first semester. Sixteen completed Skype® video diaries from their home computers. Video diaries were used as they potentially access a more personal account of the student experience and the immediacy allows the capture of details that may later be forgotten or seen differently in hindsight (Willig, 2001). One participant who did not have sufficient internet access was given a handheld camera, and two chose to write email diaries. The students talked about their engagement with their study – how they were feeling, behaving, and thinking – and commented on what they felt was influencing those experiences. Each week, the first author listened to the diaries and emailed the student comments and/or prompts for future diary entries. After the semester, follow up interviews were conducted with 13 students and their families drawing in part on data from the diaries. Four students who withdrew from their courses early in the semester had telephone second interviews, and two students were not available for a second interview. The fully transcribed interviews and diaries were returned to the participants for approval.

Table 9

Participant Details

Pseudonym	Gender Age	Ethnicity	Family (at home)	Paid work	Coursework	SES ^a
Alfie	F 33	Māori NZ European	Partner 1 preschool 1 school aged	Casual Part time	Full time	Low
Bella	F 39	Asian	Partner 1 school aged	None	Half time	Moderate
Bex	F 27	NZ European Māori	None	Full time	Half time	Low
Brad	M 48	NZ European	Partner 1 school aged (part time)	Full time	Half time	Moderate
Charlotte	F 25	NZ European	Partner	Full time	Half time	Moderate
Daniel	M 26	NZ European British	Partner	Full time	Half time	Moderate
Jeremiah	M 51	NZ European	Partner	None	Half time	Low
Kaitlyn	F 36	Māori Cook Island	2 school aged	Home schooling	Full time	Low
Lexi	F 26	NZ European	Partner 1 school aged 3 preschool	None	Half time	Moderate
Maria	F 36	NZ European	Partner 1 preschool	None	Half time	Moderate
Marie	F 38	NZ European	1 school aged	Full time	Quarter time	Low
Melissa	F 46	NZ European	1 primary 1 school aged	Part time	Quarter time	Low
Natasha	F 38	NZ European	None	Full time	Full time	Moderate
Penny	F 59	NZ European	None	Full time	Half time	Low
Samantha	F 33	NZ European	Partner 2 school aged 1 preschool	PT (started)	Half time	Low
Sarah	F 25	NZ European	Partner 1 preschool 1 school aged	None	Full time	Moderate
Scott	M 38	Māori	Partner 1 preschool 2 school aged	Full time	Half time	Moderate
Toni	F 52	NZ European Māori	1 adult child	Full time	Half time	Low
Vee	F 37	Asian	Partner 2 school aged	None	Quarter time	Moderate

Note: ^a Socio-economic status based on family occupations and home ownership

Data analysis

The thematic analysis took a theoretical interpretive approach and identified themes from surface meanings, taking language as a simple and neutral expression of people's experience, while paying heed to the social context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the initial data coding phase, aimed at identifying the different influences on the students' engagement, a notable theme that emerged was the students' struggle to find quality space and time.

Findings

The analysis shows that managing space and time is a learned skill: Students had to experiment with different spaces and times to discover what worked best for them. In addition, home is not a dedicated learning space; it is shared with other people and with other roles. The students trialled different strategies to access sufficient space and time that was of the quality they needed to study. Some were successful in this learning while others decided they couldn't or didn't want to make the adjustments necessary. Support was an important influence on their success.

The right time

The university website advises students that distance study "provides the flexibility many students need to fit with today's changing lifestyles. You simply study when, where and how you want to". This flexibility was the key reason the students chose distance study: They had jobs and/or children, or they lived in rural areas and so could not attend a university campus.

Most of the students began the semester believing it was simply a matter of 'finding' the time and setting up a desk. The university recommends 10-12 hours per week for each course and a number of online tools were available for students to assess their lifeload prior to enrolment. However, none of the students had used these tools and their awareness of the workload expectations varied dramatically from Melissa, taking one course after carefully considering her lifeload, to Natasha, taking a full time load while working full time. Some only realised how many hours were expected after they enrolled, while others simply didn't believe the recommendation:

Brad: They say 25 hours for two subjects, which is ridiculous, because a full time student is doing 50 hours which you know they're not. So I think, I'm hoping 8-10 hours will be enough.

While most students took the general demands on their time into account when deciding how much study to take on, lifeload was not stable and most students experienced times during

the semester when finding quality time was particularly challenging due to changing work and family demands, such as school holidays and illness.

As the semester progressed, students learned not just how much time they required for successful study, but also what kind of time they preferred. For some, they found they could study better in larger chunks of several hours, whereas for others regular breaks were critical to their engagement. Time of day was also important for some of the students, finding that they were too tired in the evenings, for example.

The right space

In terms of space, at the start of the semester most of the students felt they should have a separate study space, following the university and common knowledge view that study is best done in isolation. Their ability to do this depended on their living arrangements: three students lived alone, three had a separate study, six set up desks in their bedrooms, six planned to study in shared living spaces, and one planned to study at work after hours.

Increasingly, study resources are digital rather than print, and therefore an important requirement for a quality space was access to a computer and internet. Computers, however, were often shared with other family members, constraining where the study took place and limiting access when others were home. In addition, three students had serious internet connection problems during the semester. The worst affected was Scott who moved house and had no connection for two months: “So, I couldn’t get online except for at work and I can’t exactly study at work”. Studying in public spaces was also constrained at times by the need for internet access.

Importantly, and contrary to university advice, it quickly became apparent that, aside from technology requirements, there was no one right space. The students had to learn what *they* needed for a quality learning space; as Daniel says, “you have to experiment with study to find what works for you”. Some students started the semester with a clear idea of their personal needs and were able to set up their homes accordingly. For example, Jeremiah, who lived with just his partner, had the use of the spare room as a study, while Marie, who had a teenage son, knew she could study at the dining table: “I’m reasonably good at working and ignoring what’s going on around me”.

In contrast, other students experienced a tension between what they thought they should be doing and what worked for them. These students felt isolated in their study or bedroom and found this interfered with their ability to focus on their study: “I felt like a little bit of a manic depressive, holed up in my bedroom” (Samantha). This was a learning process and some fought against their preference:

Charlotte: I had originally planned to do a lot of it in our spare room but I found when I did that, I would look for things to distract myself... So I started doing it

out here [lounge] and I found, with just having the TV on in the background, I ended up getting a lot more study done. It was really weird.

Sarah: I wanted to be here [the lounge] but my study space was in there, but I didn't like it feeling isolated, which it kind of should be for study ...the study space was not working for me. And I wasn't very conscious of that, it was an unconscious struggle between where I wanted to be and where I felt like I was supposed to be.

The preferred noise level in study spaces was another factor that surprised the students and Charlotte was not alone in finding she could engage more effectively with a certain level of background noise. For some, television in the background was useful while for others it was a distraction. Natasha's comment illustrates how the students had to experiment to find their ideal conditions:

Natasha: I've been trying to find ways in which I can concentrate on my study. Tried music, tried noise, tried TV, tried silence, nothing worked. Then one day I had my Nascar going, my motorsport, and sure enough, instant focus, read for hours.

The ideal space and time therefore was personal. What the students needed to effectively engage with their studies depended on their study, their family, and their own preferences.

Shared space and time

A barrier to finding the ideal space and time for study was that home was not a dedicated learning space and the students' time was not dedicated solely to study. As well as being shared with other people, the home was also associated with different roles – parenting, domestic chores, and relaxation – and these roles impacted on study. Parents faced a particular challenge, especially those with young children, finding it very difficult to study while children were home and awake. Even adult children impacted. For example, when Toni's youngest son came home from university she reverted to her parent role: "I just do what I normally do when he's around, for him... that's what I choose to do, is to spend time with him".

Domestic chores also represented a significant distraction for students. While most partners supported the students by taking over a greater share of the chores, studying at home was still made difficult by the presence of undone household chores:

Lexi: I found the gym was a really good place to study because I'm not sitting at home, I'm not looking at the windows going, they need cleaning, I'm not looking at the ceilings going, 'oh god' and I'm not looking at my massive washing pile going,' shit I need to fold that'.

Home was a place of relaxation making it difficult to focus for some students. For example, Natasha, a shift worker, experienced a very clear distinction between what she called her work and home modes and therefore her 'good' work was mostly achieved when she was at work:

Natasha: Whereas quite often you can be sitting at home, like I'll sit here and the birds, oh look at the pretty, oh the pretty clouds (laughs) because you're in that relaxed state, if that makes sense, you're in your, at home, ... so I think that's why, I got probably most of my good work done, actually at work.

Learning space is concrete and measurable; students can mark it out and allocate it, they can physically shut themselves away. Time is less tangible but was made real by the students through the use of metaphor. And, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out, metaphor does more than just describe the world, it structures our understanding of it. The metaphor of time as a valuable and limited resource is widely used and recognised in western culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and this was very evident in the students' talk where time was variously described as precious, limited, squeezed, spent, or wasted. Unlike space, which was shared, time was described as belonging to specific people. Sometimes it was theirs: "I can choose to use my time as I want" (Melissa); and at other times it belonged to the family: "Come three o'clock it's children time" (Melissa).

Time was accordingly described as given or taken. For example, both study and family were described as taking time from the student, paralleling past researchers who have described family and education as 'greedy institutions' (Edwards, 1993; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). For example, Lily, Daniel's partner, was "surprised at the time that it's taking out of his life", while Toni described her son as "taking the time that I was going to use".

Successful strategies

As they progressed through the semester, the students learned what temporal and spatial conditions they needed to study successfully and how to create those conditions. Three key strategies were used: temporal separation, scheduling study when the home was empty; physical separation, either by shutting themselves away within the house or by taking the study elsewhere; and dovetailing, studying alongside other people and roles. Most students used a mix of strategies but tended to have a preferred approach, determined in part by personal preference, but also by lifeload and support.

Temporal separation

For many parents, particularly those not in full time work, a key strategy was temporal separation, studying only when the children were at school or in bed. This gave them a quality

learning space and allowed them to prioritise their parenting role. This was Melissa's preferred approach: "I didn't want them to be disadvantaged. So three o'clock came, all study stopped".

While this approach was ideal for effective engagement, in that it gave blocks of interrupt free time, it was not always easy. It depended on having sufficient hours in the week with no competing roles, and particularly with younger families, balancing everyone's schedules was difficult:

Sarah: I've done a hideously complicated looking schedule which gives me, I think it was 28 to 35 hours a week... so I am not trying to study when they are in the house because that will do my head in.

Physical separation

Sometimes there simply wasn't time available when the home was empty, leading to a strategy of physical separation either by separation in the home or by studying away from home. Most students used this approach when assignments were due and finding ideal space and time was essential for full engagement:

Vee: I know this weekend I'm gonna be, well I better be, locked away somewhere all by myself because I'm gonna need that time just to put everything together.

Brad and Scott used this approach on a more regular basis. Scott and his wife, who was a full time student, went away for alternate weekends to the family's holiday home while Brad opted to stay at work for two to three hours each night: "Because the place will be quiet, because there will be no one there... there is a proper computer to use". In both cases this was a successful strategy in terms of their engagement, they had a quality learning space, but both found it very difficult because they saw less of their families: "It was hard, the first weekend was really hard. To be away from the kids and everything" (Scott).

Dovetailing

While temporal or physical separation can give ideal space and time, the students had busy lives and often could not cleanly separate their study. More time was needed and so the other key strategy was dovetailing, weaving study into smaller spaces and time alongside other roles. Samantha described how studying in the lounge enabled her to parent while studying:

Samantha: Because you know, if the kids are fighting I can see what they're fighting over or you know, what everyone's doing...and I can just flick an eyebrow if I'm out here.

Lexi's children had a range of illnesses throughout the semester and she became an expert at studying in hospital waiting rooms and cafés. The lower level of engagement possible in dovetailed time is evident in her comment that the work she managed to do was not her best:

Lexi: I did manage to sit in the hospital cafe and, I think in the two and a half hours she was in surgery I think I got about 7 or 800 words done. Which, it wasn't that good so quite a lot of it got rewritten but it was still the basic ideas and everything.

Students also made the most of their time by overlapping study with relaxation and with chores. For example, they read or listened to podcasts while in the bath, on family outings, and cooking dinner. Those in paid work also fitted study into lunch hours or quiet times. The quality of the space and time available depended on the nature of their work and on support from colleagues:

Charlotte: I guess my work was pretty supportive of it, like they gave me a room to use during my lunch breaks just so I could get away from everybody, because I sit out at the front desk and if I sit out there during lunchtime I get people interrupting me all the time and it gets really frustrating.

While dovetailing enabled extra study hours, the fact that it was often smaller amounts of time in shared spaces meant it was not ideal and it was therefore harder to engage at a deeper level. As Melissa said: “it’s just winging it, I’m not, it’s not full blown concentrated study”. One way the students compensated for this problem was assigning lower level tasks to dovetail times: “The days when the twins are home they can play quietly so I can do simple tasks like reading and stuff” (Lexi).

Family support for access to space and time

As the student learned what space and time was needed for study, and what they personally needed, partners and children learned to adjust. In talking about what made it better, families emphasised the importance of communication, mutual support, and being flexible. According to Jeremiah’s partner, the most important thing partners could do was: “Just give them all the space they need for their study, support them, you will tend to know and find out when they’re engrossed in their study and not to disturb them” (Jennie). Partners taking on a greater share of chores and childcare to free up time was also important: “It was a given that when I got my books out he pretty much cooked dinner and washed the dishes and stuff” (Charlotte).

One measure of support was how much control students felt they had. While all the students expressed themselves as being in control of their time sometimes and not in control at other times, some stood out as having particularly strong agency, able to manage the people in their lives in order to get what they needed. This was linked to lifeload but also to effective partner support, and for these students, space and time were more readily available. For example, Lexi, despite living on a farm with her husband and four young children, told her

family they could not interrupt when the door was closed and said: “It wasn’t that hard, you just sort of, you know, set aside your time and say right, I need to get this, this, and this done today”. Jeremiah too, with no children at home, no paid work, and a very supportive partner, had complete control over his time: “My study doesn’t necessarily interfere with anything that we do, and she doesn’t interfere with my study”.

Others had noticeably less support and therefore less control. Their study had a lower priority within the family and they did not have the power necessary to ‘find’ or ‘make’ the needed space and time. For example, Scott worked full time and in the evenings the children were his responsibility: “It’s just there is so much going on and it is difficult to do it when Sharon is doing it [studying] as well and you know obviously one of us has to look after the kids”.

At times, a number of partners expressed frustration that their own activities were limited by study taking space and time:

Lily (Daniel’s partner): One, I feel that the dining room table is taken up by things that don’t belong on the dining table and two, it does kind of restrict that I can’t just go to the piano and play because I know that he finds noise distracting.

Tolerating this kind of impact was a key support. Despite her annoyance, Lily didn’t pressure Daniel to take his study to the spare room. In contrast, Samantha’s partner pressured her to reduce her study time because of its impact on his life:

Samantha: I think that Steven is starting to struggle with the fact that it’s taking time away from him when he gets home from work and um, he sort of had suggested that I was doing a little too much.

Once Samantha’s husband gets home from work, time belonged to him and therefore study was ‘taking’ it from him. Samantha had little agency in the relationship. She commented that Steven didn’t appreciate the value of what she was doing and eventually, on his suggestion, she took on part time work. This of course further reduced the time she had available for her study.

If time belongs to other people, then guilt for taking it can be seen as a logical consequence. Samantha and other mothers expressed guilt for spending time with their study rather than their children, and in Samantha’s case, her husband. Maria was asked what the most important influence on her study was:

Maria: Having the ability to um, organise our lives in such a way that I can have a small block of time in the day to make it happen...having time that didn’t make me feel guilty that I was taking time away from [my son] or family.

This suggests Maria feels she has control not just over her own life but others in the family too. But alongside this apparent control, is the idea that at least some of her time belongs, by default, to her family and that if she ‘takes’ that time then she will feel guilty and therefore be unable to study as effectively.

Developing and trialling these strategies was part of the first semester’s learning. For some students, the journey was short and unsuccessful. They decided quickly they were not willing or able to make the changes necessary and they withdrew in the first few weeks. For others, the result was success. They learned how to juggle and negotiate with their families to carve out sufficient space and time. These students passed and most are continuing with their study. And for some students, the semester was a long and drawn out battle. They persevered, but a lack of control over their lives, poor support from family, and unexpected life events meant that they were unable to find the space and time necessary. These students withdrew late in the semester or failed.

Discussion

These findings shed light on key issues facing first year mature-aged distance students in their first semester of university. The students start the semester with fixed ideas about space and time, taking on board university messages that they can ‘simply study when, where and how you want to’. The reality, however, is that they have complex lives and a major challenge they face is learning how to find the space and time necessary. There is no one correct approach and each student must experiment – trialling different ways of studying and gradually learning what works for them, what works for their study, and what works for their family.

The ideal spatial and temporal conditions for engagement lie at the intersection of these three, sometimes competing, demands. Firstly, other than university advice of 12 hours per course and a separate desk, students do not know at the start what study needs in terms of space and time. As the semester progresses, however, they begin to learn more, including distinguishing between those study tasks that require ideal conditions and those tasks that can be done when the conditions are less than ideal. An important aspect of study’s requirements is a space with internet access and, as Kirkwood (2000) also found, technology is often located in shared spaces and shared by other family members. This finding supports Rye’s (2007) conclusion that technology, rather than contributing to flexibility as is often claimed, can actually reduce it.

Secondly, these students are often new to study and do not yet know what conditions make it easier or harder for them to engage with the course. They must experiment with variables such as physical spaces, times of day, and length of study sessions to learn how these factors affect their engagement. Finally, the students must decide what priority they give to their

family and to their study, and they must work with the family to negotiate spaces and times from everyone's home and lives.

As the students came to appreciate the requirements of study, their own preferences, and their family routines, they developed strategies to enable as much ideal space and time as possible. Temporal separation, studying at home while the family are out, is a useful strategy because it enables blocks of time in an empty home, a high quality environment that enables students to engage deeply with their study. This approach requires less adjustment by the family, but it relies on there being times when the home is empty. Other research has found this to be the commonest strategy for mothers (Brooks, 2012; Christie et al., 2005). Physical separation, either by shutting oneself away in the home or by studying elsewhere, was used by all the students at times, particularly approaching assessments. However, this approach is highly dependent on other people's support: taking on tasks of parenting and chores, respecting the space by not interrupting, and accepting the absence of the student at traditional home times of evenings and weekends. When neither temporal nor physical separation could enable sufficient time, students resorted to dovetailing, weaving study into smaller spaces and times alongside other tasks and roles. Research into women's experiences as mature-aged students highlights the common use of this strategy (Moss, 2006; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). While dovetailing relies less on other people, the space and time it creates are often less than ideal for effective engagement. This time is therefore better used for less demanding study tasks. This finding aligns with Lowe and Gayle's (2007) research, which found that compartmentalisation, keeping study separate from other roles, was the most successful strategy, and overlapping approaches, requiring negotiation with others, were generally less successful.

Support from family is a key influence on the quality and quantity of space and time a student has and therefore their choice of strategy. Others have noted that family support is important for mature-aged students (Kember, 1999; White, 2008; Zepke et al., 2011), but few studies have defined support or explored how it impacts on student success (Castles, 2004). Kember (1999) describes a supportive family as one that willingly adapts its lifestyle to facilitate study and this is evident in the current findings. In addition, the findings suggest an important mechanism by which support aids student success is by giving the student control so they don't need to ask the family for time or space; instead it is theirs to allocate. This parallels Moss's (2006) finding that agency is critical. In families characterised by this type of support, study is given a high priority and it is assumed that the partner will take on a greater load of the domestic work. The student, therefore, does not need to ask for time when they need it. It was notable that while all the partners said at the start that they intended to support the student, some were unsure what support would entail, and others failed to put that intention into action. Bird and Morgan (2003) argue that it is difficult for students to envisage the impact of study on their families and that the sooner they begin the process of negotiation with the family, the better.

As Moss (2006) points out, access to space and time is influenced by broader social issues such as gender and class. In particular, past findings have highlighted the difficulties women have fitting in study because of the cultural assumption that they are the primary caregivers (Alsop et al., 2008; Christie et al., 2005). In the current study, the women were usually the primary caregivers; however, this generally only limited their access to space and time when they were sole parents or had lower socio-economic status. While past studies have commented on women students receiving inadequate support from husbands (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Zembylas, 2008), in this study it was interesting to note that, in two parent families and couples without children, the degree of support offered by partners varied as much within genders as it did between genders. One area where gender difference was apparent, however, was the expression of guilt; only the mothers expressed guilt for not spending sufficient time with the children, a finding paralleled in other research (White, 2008). Unfortunately, with only four male participants, and only one of those with children full time, it is difficult to comment further on gender differences. Further research with more male participants would be valuable.

Particularly for students with children, socio-economic status was an important contextual variable that influenced access to space and time in multiple ways. Firstly, when the family were on government benefits or in low wage jobs, the student felt the need to complete a qualification as quickly as possible. This meant they tended to take on more courses and consequently struggled to find sufficient time. Secondly, in low-income families, both single mothers and two-parent families, the pressure for parents to take on more paid work limited access to study time. In contrast, families with sufficient financial resources, usually from the father being in full time work, were able to 'buy' both time and space; for example, by organising child care or housekeeping support. Finally, financial circumstances also played into the quality of the space in terms of access to technology, both the number and quality of computers in the family and the ability to pay for higher quality internet access. More research is needed in New Zealand to explore the impact of these broader socio-cultural contexts and in particular, to examine the intersections between socio-economic status, gender, and family structure.

Conclusion

Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) argue that "we should not settle for notions of engagement that fail to reflect the complicated lives of adult students" (p. 173). In highlighting the importance of space and time as a structural influence on mature-aged students' engagement, the findings from the current study support this view. The quality of the space and time a student can access impacts on their behaviour, cognition, and emotion: the three dimensions of student engagement (Kahu, 2013). Insufficient time hinders the student from putting in the

effort and behaviours necessary. Poor quality learning spaces, with interruptions from the family for example, make it difficult to achieve the levels of focus and concentration needed for deeper learning. Finally, stress and guilt stemming from other lifeload issues inhibit the students' ability to sustain interest and enthusiasm for their studies.

Trowler and Trowler (2010) argue that engagement requires a successful transition to university. The findings from this study suggest a critical element of that transition is learning to manage space and time. It has been suggested that one reason for the high drop out of first year distance students may be the cognitive overload of needing to learn technology skills as well as course content (Tyler-Smith, 2006). The current findings suggest there is a third load: learning to manage the space and time necessary for effective engagement. Importantly, while the task of integrating study with their other commitments is the student's responsibility (Kember, 1999), the university can help.

Three areas for improvement are suggested by the findings. Firstly, it is critical that course designers take into consideration the complexity of these students' lives and provide the flexibility they need. Higher education has been described as temporally rigid (Moss, 2006) and there is a very real risk that the increasing use of technology is eroding the flexibility that is historically central to distance study (Kirkwood, 2000). For example, Brad, who often had to go away for work, commented that one course had a test every week: "You can't get ahead, you can't fall behind. You've got a test that's only available from Thursday 5 o'clock till 5 o'clock Sunday so, it doesn't make for very flexible studying". Convenience for the university should not be prioritised above flexibility for distance students.

The second way the institution can assist is by revising the advice given to new students. Current advice tends to be too simplistic. It is not just a matter of allocating x hours and setting up a desk. Instead, students need to be told this is a learning process and that they will need to trial different strategies to see what works for them and, importantly, what works for their family. The university in the current study provides a number of online tools to help students assess their time and lifeload prior to enrolment. However, none of these students had seen these tools and many were unaware of the workload expectations, suggesting more is needed. For example, use of such tools could be a compulsory part of the online enrolment process for distance students.

Finally, university support targeted at this particular aspect of the transition to university could be implemented. Orientation programmes tend to focus on academic preparedness and social integration. These findings suggest that for mature-aged students, distance in particular, there is also a need to address the challenges that students will face in finding the necessary space and time in their lives. A related idea comes from V. Griffiths (2002) who set up a successful support group for students with family responsibilities, giving them an opportunity to

discuss and share ideas. For distance students, this could be translated into the digital environment.

Although this research was conducted within a single university and its small sample size limits generalisability, qualitative work of this nature enables a richness of understanding that illuminates the complexity of the student experience. However, socio-cultural context is important and so the experiences of these students may differ from those in other institutions and countries. Further research in New Zealand to more explicitly explore how gender, socio-economic status, family structure, and ethnicity impact on access to space and time is needed. Of particular interest would be Māori research into this topic. Different cultural perspectives on family and community roles may lead to different challenges. Nevertheless, the issues raised will resonate to some degree with other mature-aged distance students, if not with younger and internal students as well. All students have lives outside of university and will therefore experience conflicting demands at times.

Taking part in the research may have influenced these students' engagement with their study. While care was taken during the research not to directly influence their behaviour, reactivity, changes in participants' behaviour as a result of being part of a study, is a recognised threat to the validity of qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). In the present study, not only were the participants observed, they were encouraged to reflect on their experiences and this may have helped them to resolve any problems they faced. However, while this may have made the transition a little easier for some participants, the challenges they faced and strategies they developed for managing their space and time as outlined in this paper are unlikely to be different to other students.

Study needs space and time. Successfully creating and managing space and time within complex lives is a difficult process for new students but one that is an important influence on the students' ability to engage with their studies. It is also therefore an important influence on student achievement and retention. Retaining flexibility, improving the messages students receive, and providing greater support for this learning process are three institution strategies that address this issue and will potentially reduce the high first year attrition rates in mature-aged students.

Chapter 8

Linking academic emotions and student engagement

“One cannot separate emotion from action; they are part of the same flow of events, one leading to the other”

Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 7)

The second key aim of Study 2 was to explore the role of emotion in student engagement during the transition to university. The case study presented in Chapter 6 touched on the critical importance of emotion during the transition and this idea is developed in more depth in this chapter. The chapter is published as follows:

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Linking academic emotions and student engagement: Mature-aged distance students' transition to university

Abstract

Research into both student engagement and student emotions is increasing with widespread agreement that both are critical determinants of student success in higher education. Less researched are the complex, reciprocal relationships between these important influences. Two theoretical frameworks inform this paper: Pekrun's (2011) taxonomy of academic emotions and Kahu's (2013) conceptual framework of student engagement. The prospective qualitative design aims to allow a rich understanding of the fluctuating and diverse emotions that students experience during the transition to university and to explore the relationships between academic emotions and student engagement. The study follows 19 mature-aged (aged 24 and over) distance students throughout their first semester at university using video diaries to collect data on their emotional experiences and their engagement with their study. Pre- and post-semester interviews were also conducted. Findings highlight that different emotions have different links to engagement: as important elements in emotional engagement, as inhibitors of engagement, and as outcomes that reciprocally influence engagement. Two key conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, student emotions are the point of intersection between the university factors such as course design, and student variables such as motivation and background. Secondly, the flow of influence between emotions, engagement, and learning is reciprocal and complex and can spiral upwards towards ideal engagement or downwards towards disengagement and withdrawal.

Keywords: student engagement, academic emotions, transition, mature, distance

Introduction

Student engagement is widely recognised as important in higher education. A growing body of research shows engagement is positively associated with desirable student outcomes such as achievement, satisfaction, and retention (Kuh, 2009b; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Equally, increased theorising and researching of emotion in education means its importance for

learning is no longer disputed. Little has been done, however, to explore connections between these two fields. The current study aims to contribute to this gap. Focussing on mature-aged (aged 24 and over) distance students, the project follows students throughout their first semester at university and aims to create a better understanding of the antecedents of academic emotions and to understand how different emotions influence student engagement.

Emotion

Research on emotion in education has grown exponentially in the past decade. As Askham (2008) points out, there is an “emotional intensity attached to the experience of learning that is often overlooked” (p. 94). The current research takes a component process view, defining an emotion as a multifaceted phenomenon with coordinated changes in most or all of five subsystems: physiological, cognitive, subjective feeling, expression, and action tendency (Scherer, 2005). According to Reisenzein and Döring (2009), emotions have three properties: immediate awareness, a phenomenal quality, and intentionality. Importantly, emotions are subjective, stemming from the individual appraisal, conscious or unconscious, of the situation (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008).

The current study focuses on academic emotions (see Table 10), those linked to learning, instruction, and achievement (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002), that influence all stages of the learning process (Efklides & Volet, 2005). In particular, the transition to university is recognised as an emotional time for students (Christie et al., 2008). Early research on emotions and learning was largely limited to negative emotions, in particular, test anxiety (Pekrun et al., 2002). More recently, recognising how critical other emotions are to learning, researchers have explored a wider range, including positive emotions such as interest and enjoyment (Ainley, 2007; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

Table 10

Taxonomy of Academic Emotions (Pekrun, 2011, p. 25)

	Positive		Negative	
	Activating	Deactivating	Activating	Deactivating
Task/Activity	Enjoyment	Relaxation	Anger Frustration	Boredom
Outcome	Hope Pride	Contentment Relief	Anxiety Anger Shame	Hopelessness Disappointment

Pekrun (2011) summarises the ways that emotions affect learning, through attention, memory, motivation, and self-regulation. Drawing together the diverse range of academic emotions, his taxonomy, as shown in Table 10, has three dimensions: valence (positive or

negative), physiological activation (high or low), and object (task or outcome). Different categories impact on learning in different ways; for example, while pleasant activating emotions such as enjoyment and pride may have a positive impact on motivation and performance, pleasant deactivating emotions such as relief and relaxation have a potentially negative effect (Linnenbrink, 2007).

Emotion and engagement

A range of understandings of engagement are evident in the literature: a behavioural perspective defining engagement as student behaviour and effective teaching practices (Kuh et al., 2008); a psychological perspective depicting engagement as a multidimensional individual state (Fredricks et al., 2004); a socio-cultural perspective highlighting the socio-political context (Mann, 2001; Zyngier, 2008); and finally, a constructivist approach focussing on student identity and perceptions as well as the educational context (Bryson & Hardy, 2012). Kahu's (2013) framework of student engagement draws these perspectives together, embedding student engagement within the socio-cultural context and aiming to more clearly distinguish between student engagement, its antecedents, and its consequences.

Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012) suggest that engagement mediates the relationship between emotions and learning, and Kahu's (2013) framework enables a clearer understanding of how these relationships might function. Reflecting the ways that different emotions impact on learning, the framework shows how different emotions play different roles in student engagement. Firstly, positive task-focussed emotions of enjoyment and interest are vital elements of emotional engagement, one of the three dimensions of engagement along with behaviour and cognition. Secondly, student engagement has both academic and social consequences, including positive outcome-focussed emotions such as pride and satisfaction. Outcome-focussed emotions also have a reciprocal relationship with engagement, for example, pride can increase the student's engagement with the next task. Finally, the framework recognises that engagement is influenced by a wide range of both structural and psychosocial variables stemming from the university, for example policies and teaching practices, as well as the student, for example their background, skills, and self-efficacy. Task focussed emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and boredom play a central role here.

Mature-aged students at university

The conceptual framework highlights the diversity of student experience and the need to study sub populations. One important population is mature-aged (over age 24) students who study by distance, who make up approximately a sixth of bachelor degree students in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2013). These students tend to be highly engaged but have different patterns of engagement compared to younger students (Chen et al., 2008; Southerland,

2010). For example, a study of first year students found older distance students worked less with other students, but had a greater capacity to integrate their learning with work experience (Kahu et al., 2013).

However, despite their high engagement, older students have higher first year attrition rates (Ministry of Education, 2013). This may be because studies tend to use a measure of engagement that omits the emotional dimension and research into mature-aged students' transition to university has highlighted its challenging and emotional nature (Askham, 2008; Baxter & Britton, 2001). In particular, emotions such as anxiety and fear of failure are common, triggered by previous negative learning experiences (Stone, 2008), a lack of study and technology skills (M. Murphy & Fleming, 2000; Tones et al., 2009), and a sense of alienation in the predominantly young environment (E. Moore, 2006; Read et al., 2003). The present study explores the emotional experiences of mature-aged distance students in New Zealand during their transition to university and examines how those emotions relate to their engagement.

While a few researchers have theorised the relationships between academic emotions and student engagement, few empirical studies have explicitly explored those links. In addition, much of the past research into academic emotions has been correlational, using survey tools such as the Academic Emotions Questionnaire (Pekrun et al., 2002). While this snapshot approach enables the identification of potentially causal relationships between emotions and learning outcomes, it is less effective for understanding the nature of the emotional experience for students: how their emotions change throughout the semester, what situations elicit different emotions, and how those emotions are related to their behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The present study aims, therefore, to complement and add depth to our current knowledge by using a prospective qualitative design to better understand the links between academic emotions and student engagement.

Method

Participants

Nineteen first year students participated in a semester long project on student engagement. With the exception of gender (males were underrepresented) the sample was broadly representative of the population. There were four male and fifteen female participants aged between 25 and 59. Fifteen were European New Zealanders, five were Māori, two Asian, and one was a Cook Islander (some participants recorded multiple ethnicities). Participants were diverse in terms of family structure, occupation, and geographical location. Four were taking a full time student workload (four courses), twelve were enrolled in two or three courses, and three were taking one course. The students were enrolled in a variety of first year distance courses, including education, business, humanities, science, and social science subjects. Most

courses consisted of a mix of print and digital resources supported by a Moodle® based learning management system including asynchronous discussion boards. Use of the discussion boards varied; for example, some were closely monitored by staff, some were well used, some were very quiet. A few of the courses had a short (two to four days) on-campus component and others a few synchronous webinars. All the students had online access to the learning environment at home for most of the semester, although one had just dial-up access.

Data collection and analysis

Before the semester, semi-structured interviews focussing on preparation, expectations, and motivations were conducted with participants and their families (11 partners and 10 children aged over five). Participants then recorded weekly video diaries: 16 used Skype® from their home computers, while the student without broadband access used a handheld camera. Diaries are a useful tool for exploring student emotions (Hascher, 2008) and video diaries in particular have the potential to provide a more immediate and personal account of the student experience (Willig, 2001). Two students chose to complete written diaries. The participants were asked to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, and about what influenced their engagement with their study. To encourage deeper reflection, the first author listened to each diary and responded by email with prompts for the next entry. Four students withdrew from study early in the semester and were subsequently interviewed by telephone. At the end of the semester, 13 students and their families took part in follow up interviews; two were unavailable.

The data from all the participants, including those who dropped out of their study, were analysed with a thematic interpretive approach that takes language as a neutral expression of participants' experiences, but takes account of social context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The emotions the students experienced were coded as were the context, focus, and effects of the emotion.

Findings and discussion

The findings illustrate the complex relations between academic emotions and student engagement. While the students talked about emotions in relation to other events in their lives (for example, guilt for not spending more time with children) this analysis is limited to academic emotions, those directly related to study. Students experienced the full range of emotions, fluctuating rapidly, as was evident in the use of spatial metaphors such as a rollercoaster and a seesaw: "I have had the highest of highs and then the lowest of lows" (Natasha). This parallels previous work on the 'emotional rollercoaster' that is the transition to university (Christie et al., 2008).

Some emotions within Pekrun's taxonomy of academic emotions, such as enjoyment and anxiety, were common while others, such as hopelessness and relief, were rare. As per the taxonomy, academic emotions focussed on study tasks or study outcomes and were positive or negative. The distinction between activating and deactivating positive emotions, however, was much less clear. For example, when Scott says: "I got 67%, which I was reasonably happy about", is this activating pride or deactivating contentment? One of the difficulties of emotion research is the hundreds of emotion words that make categorising participant emotions challenging (Saldaña, 2013).

The findings highlight that the students link their different emotions to engagement in different ways. Enjoyment and interest were strongly evident and were central to emotional engagement and seen as an important influence on behavioural and cognitive engagement. Also commonly experienced were the negative emotions of boredom, anxiety, and frustration, which at times inhibited engagement. Finally, study outcomes elicited pride and disappointment, and these were described as having a powerful reciprocal effect on engagement, often through their influence on self-efficacy.

Emotional engagement: interest and enjoyment

The power of interest to emotionally connect students with the course content and therefore make it easier to do the study and learn the material was evident. For many, a love of learning, despite negative schooling experiences, was a key motivation for returning to study: "I hated school ... I liked learning, it was the going to school" (Lexi). The notion of a "love of learning" was articulated through a metaphor of knowledge as nourishment for the mind:

Melissa: I am so hungry for knowledge, I'm loving, absolutely loving learning.

Charlotte: I like to learn... I think it keeps your brain alive.

Interest involves alertness, attention, and concentration and is a relation between a person and the task or topic (Ainley, 2006). Enjoyment, a separate but related emotion, arises from a combination of interest and a feeling of competence for the task (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). Dewey (1933) described this ideal combination as serious play. For these students, this emotional engagement was triggered by a range of connections with the course content. For those seeking advancement in their current job, links with their work were important: "The reason it was interesting was because that's what I've done for the last 20 years so it actually made me go, oh yeah, is that why that happens" (Scott). For students developing new careers, the future application of knowledge sparked interest: "I've been really excited about the soil paper and I'm like Oh, Oh, I can do stuff with this and it fits with my values... soil conservation, I could help farmers" (Maria). Interest wasn't just sparked by work however. For some students, personal interest in the topic triggered enjoyment for the learning: "I love

history, and so just having a little test or a taste of anthropology was really good, really good” (Toni). For others, connections with broader life experiences were important: “I enjoyed the human health and development; it definitely is something that I use within my life and with bringing up the children” (Samantha).

Interest and enjoyment positively influenced both behavioural and cognitive engagement. Firstly, it increased perseverance: “I want to learn about it. That’s the thing that keeps me going, the thing that keeps me wanting to read and learn about it” (Toni). It motivated them to work harder and do better, to behaviourally engage with their study: “I’m really really trying hard to do well because I’m enjoying the paper and I’m enjoying the ideas” (Maria). In addition, interest motivated students to extend their learning beyond the prescribed content: “I’m going further into a topic... I’m interested enough to keep reading beyond the question” (Daniel).

Secondly, the interest triggered cognitive engagement, students found it easier to understand and remember information that was interesting to them:

Melissa: That I find it quite fascinating and interesting certainly helps me with my learning because my brain is going ‘ok I’ve just read about this’ So I’m making the link between what I am studying and what is actually in front of me.

Being interested, enjoying the study, and therefore working harder and learning more effectively represents the highest level of engagement. This triggers a sense of satisfaction and pleasure that is intrinsically motivating. This positive spiral is clearly described by Melissa:

I am absolutely loving my study. School goes back tomorrow and I can’t wait. I’ll be up early, my head will be in that computer and I’ll be head down and bum up and rather than that being a chore, I just love it. My brain just needs feeding (laughs). The more I learn, the more I want to learn. It’s like I’m addicted to it almost.

These findings support previous work illustrating the role of interest in encouraging persistence (Sansone & Smith, 2000) and intrinsic motivation (Bye et al., 2007). The findings also support Fredrickson’s broaden and build theory, which argues that these positive emotions have an upward spiralling effect, motivating exploration, broadening people’s thought-action repertoires, and leading to expansion of the self (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008).

The importance of interest meant that choice was a critical determinant of student engagement. Students didn’t work as hard on compulsory courses as they were less likely to align with their interests and so were less enjoyable. Similarly, the ability to choose a topic of interest increased motivation and engagement:

Kaitlyn: I am studying to be a teacher so it was clearly a matter of interest for me to select that particular article...planning for this assignment has been quite exciting, almost a feeling of ready to go, the anticipation of a new challenge.

Emotional inhibitors: boredom, frustration, and worry

The commonly experienced negative emotions were boredom, frustration, and worry. Even the most passionate learners could lose interest depending on course content and design.

Melissa: History and statistics I find incredibly boring because it's not something I can apply... I do get bored with just having to remember data for the sake of remembering data.

Lexi describes how this impacts on her engagement: "The moral stuff was just as boring as cardboard and it was just really hard to connect to". Boredom was consistently associated with lower behavioural engagement: procrastination, fewer hours spent studying, and reduced effort. It was also associated with lowered cognitive engagement, learning was more difficult: "Ohh my god, I just cannot absorb this information, I'm not interested" (Daniel).

Frustration was triggered by teaching practices and university processes. Poorly designed course materials and high workloads were key sources of ongoing frustration that was powerful enough to override strong student interest:

Maria: It's funny because I really thought that particular paper with the high workload was going to be one that I was really interested in. And it's not, I'm not that excited by it any longer. I think if they just cut down the workload or whatever it would be a more enjoyable paper to work with.

Anxiety was common, with students describing themselves as nervous, worried, scared and, more extremely, overwhelmed, terrified, and freaking out. The focus of these concerns shifted throughout the semester. In the early stages, anxiety about the unknown was paired with excitement from interest in the topic: "When I'm not being panicky about how it's going to go, when I can actually stop thinking the anxiety thoughts related to it and just go, wow, I'm finally studying psychology! I'm going to love it!" (Sarah). Most of the students had been out of education for years and so much of their early worry stemmed from not knowing what was expected and how to study: "That's what I'm freaked out about, is how you actually do it" (Vee).

As the semester progressed, worry focussed on specific tasks, often assessments, but also other aspects such as time management and participating in discussion forums or campus courses. Lack of recent experience continued to be a problem: "I knew I was going to get stressed before the exam, crikey first time I'd had an exam in 30 something years" (Jeremiah). Academic writing was a major source of anxiety for many students, including fears about

referencing: “The whole plagiarising thing scares the shit out of me. And I’m too scared to paraphrase... my fear is that I might think I’m paraphrasing, when actually I’m quoting” (Natasha). Melissa attended a daylong course for new students where the focus on academic writing had a powerful impact:

I went there feeling very confident about what I was doing and I left there feeling very unconfident. And feeling very, um, dumb actually (laughs)... I’m going to struggle. And it’s worrying me, it’s worrying me a lot. I have an understanding about what I’m studying but, I’m really nervous about the technical side of things, you know like academic writing, command words.

This illustrates the importance of academic self-efficacy, a student’s perceived confidence in their ability to adequately complete a task (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). The students appraised the task ahead and if they doubted that they were capable of doing what was required, this triggered worry. Not knowing what was expected compounded this. Past research has also highlighted the important role of self-efficacy. High self-efficacy is seen as necessary for enjoyment and enthusiasm while low self-efficacy can trigger negative emotions for a task, such as boredom and frustration, which impact negatively on engagement (Goetz, Frenzel, Hall, & Pekrun, 2008; Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Stupnisky, & Perry, 2010).

For most of the students, anxiety reduced as they progressed through the semester; they gained an understanding of what was required as well as evidence of their capabilities. This made them feel good and increased their motivation for the next task. Daniel explains this cycle:

I hadn’t written since I left school after fifth form and went in the army... and then having to write that, I was quite nervous. I was like, oh my god, 1500 – 2000 words, oh my lord (laughs)... when I got my first result back and I got a B- it boosted me quite a bit, I was like oh my god I actually can write still.

Contact with other students was another important antecedent of anxiety. Worry about being judged negatively prevented some from participating in online or campus course discussions. At times this was linked to their age: “I don’t want to, you know, I’m older I don’t want to come across as being stupid” (Maria). Students also compared themselves to others and this influenced anxiety levels. For example, initially Melissa doubted herself because others students came across as ‘really intelligent’. Later, online comments from struggling students boosted her:

Lost my confidence, lost my mojo. Because the level of people that were there they seemed to be really intelligent and they seemed to be able to pick up technically really quickly and academically what was required.

Some people are struggling more than me... I feel sorry for them because I can hear they're struggling but I'm saying it doesn't make me feel so dumb...when you see other people struggling, it doesn't feel quite so heavy, heavy on your shoulders. You don't feel quite so isolated.

Other students also found distance study an isolating experience at times. Bird and Morgan (2003) suggest that connecting with other students can help to normalise and thus diminish fears and that the lack of such opportunities for distance students can be problematic. The benefit of online discussion boards was evident in the current study with many of the participants feeling reassured by reading about other students' experiences, problems, and grades. As Jeremiah says, "I'm not necessarily going through anything that nobody else is going through. It's not unique. It's, um, it is very reassuring". A few, however, commented that online contact is not as effective as face-to-face: "I know you've got the websites and things like that, and the forums, but it doesn't feel the same for me" (Samantha).

Similar to previous studies, the effect of frustration and worry on engagement varied: Anxiety and anger can reduce intrinsic motivation and subsequently effort, or it can trigger greater effort in an attempt to avoid failure (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). In the current study, the length and depth of the emotion were important. Short term frustration from a passing problem appeared to have little or no impact on student engagement. A certain amount of anxiety, however, increased motivation and led to greater behavioural engagement:

Natasha: I've got assignments on two, three, four, of the courses that are due in the first week of April. And quite frankly at the moment I'm a little bit daunted as to whether or not I'm going to get them done. Having said that, I think that fear gets me moving a bit better.

The motivating role of anxiety is well illustrated by Toni who, after getting a higher grade than expected on her first essay found she worked less hard on the second essay: "It's because I'm not worried about it this time round. I'm just very, ah, blasé about it. I feel, you know, it's stress. I felt better being pressured, pressurised in the last assignment than now". However, while moderate anxiety can be valuable, at the other extreme, if anxiety was too high and self-efficacy too low, the fear could become paralysing and prevent the student from engaging: "I didn't submit the assignment...I just freaked out. I just really didn't do it" (Bex).

The effect of chronic anxiety and frustration, usually from university factors such as poor course design, was more consistent, impacting negatively on behavioural engagement: "I didn't know what the hell was going on with my paper ... I was just like oh I'll flag it, I'll just hopefully pass it, you know" (Daniel). For some students, ongoing frustration led to the ultimate disengagement, withdrawal from the course: "It was just frustrating me too much, and then I thought you know what, I can do without this, it's making me feel crap about studying" (Sarah).

This illustrates the idea that with ongoing problems negative emotions can generalise as moods and feed back into the learning situation (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002).

Emotional outcomes: pride and disappointment

Outcome-focussed emotions also impacted on engagement. Students experienced pride and satisfaction from grades, from achieving milestones such as submitting an assignment, and from coming to grips with a difficult module. Receiving their first grade was an emotional time for all; it was evidence that they could do this: “It just made me feel, oh gee I’m still able to do it. That’s good. You know. Especially getting older” (Toni). If they felt they had done well, the pride increased motivation and self-efficacy, which led to greater behavioural engagement in the next task. This is well illustrated by Jeremiah who was delighted to earn a B+ on an essay:

The next few days at least, every time I opened up one of my books or tried to figure out a question or whatever it might be, it was a case of, ‘oh I know I can do this’. I had a more positive attitude to what I was approaching, it was like, oh okay I know I can do this. I did that, I can do this.

As mentioned earlier, Toni was the exception. While she was proud of her mark, rather than being motivated by it she became complacent and found it hard to get going on the next assignment. This highlights the individual subjective nature of emotional experiences.

Grades also often triggered disappointment: “I got 25 out of 40 so 62%. I was really disappointed with that and thought that I probably would have done better” (Samantha). Such disappointment could reduce behavioural engagement: “I struggled to accept it for a couple of days and didn’t feel like doing anything” (Natasha). A particular issue with grades that triggered disappointment and frustration was the university’s attention to detail regarding academic writing and referencing. Some students struggled with these skills and were frustrated when they felt they were demonstrating knowledge in their assignments but lost marks for writing:

Natasha: Because the topic is the media, not academic writing...so if I’d missed the mark entirely on the content, I could understand a low mark, but the fact that I was spot on... it did feel like a real slap in the face.

Whether students were proud or disappointed, and therefore their future engagement, depended on expectations. For example, Jeremiah was pleased with a C+ grade whereas Lexi was initially disappointed with an A: “I wasn’t overly happy. I thought I could have done better”. Expectations stemmed in part from past learning experiences:

Charlotte: I am a total perfectionist, and coming from a background, from flying, we were always pushed so hard to aim for 100% in theory subjects, it felt that anything less than an A- on my assignment was like a failure.

Their interests and strengths were also important. For example, Vee was “aiming for 50%” on her essay assignment and “literally jumped for joy” when she got 70%. However, she was disappointed with 93% for the second assignment “because assignment two was my forte. It was all spreadsheets. I actually enjoyed it. That’s why I wasn’t happy with 93%; I could have got 98%”. Perceived effort also influenced their emotional response to a grade. If they felt they tried hard but still did poorly then they saw little point in future effort:

Melissa: I got a C+. Which I know is a pass but I feel soooo disappointed because I put so much time, passion and energy into it ... This next paper I'm not going to put as much into it... I won't mind getting a C if it reflects my input.

Their lack of knowledge of university grading was important. Melissa was disappointed with 70% on her essay and it was only during the research interview at the end of the semester that she realised that this was a B+ grade:

Getting the 70% you see, I wasn't happy with that either. Because I'm used to, at school you see, going back to school days, I'm used to being that A B student... it might have helped me if I knew that 70% was a B, that would have psychologically helped me, but 70% I sort of saw as a C.

Conclusion

Examining academic emotions through the lens of Kahu’s (2013) framework of student engagement enables a greater understanding of the relationships between emotions and engagement. As discussed, different emotions act as part of engagement, as inhibitors of engagement, and as outcomes, which, in turn, influence engagement. It is recognised that academic emotions emerge from a transaction between the person and their environment (Pekrun, 2011; Schutz, Hong, Cross, & Osbon, 2006) and this is reflected in the findings. Emotions are the point of intersection between university influences, such as teaching practice and course design, and student influences, such as academic skills and self-efficacy. For example, interest and enjoyment occur when course content aligns with the student’s life experiences. Worry also lies at the intersection of university and student, triggered by the nature of the learning task in relation to the student’s skills and self-efficacy. Finally, outcome emotions of pride and disappointment stem from university grades in relation to student expectations and past experiences.

Also clearly seen are the reciprocal relationships between the student, their emotions, and their engagement. Interest and enjoyment influence engagement leading to positive outcome emotions, and these cycle back to further increase motivation and self-efficacy, which further increase engagement. Similarly, frustration and anxiety can trigger disengagement, leading to poor outcomes and disappointment that reduce motivation and subsequent

engagement. These relationships between motivation, affect, and learning are widely agreed to be reciprocal (Linnenbrink, 2006; Meyer & Turner, 2006) with Schutz et al. (2006) suggesting that, given the strength of the influences, it is difficult to consider them as distinct constructs. This complexity of reciprocal relationships is recognised within the student engagement literature with Zepke (2011) recommending that student engagement is best understood as a “dynamic and non-hierarchical framework” (p. 9).

Greater awareness by institutions of the roles that academic emotions play in student engagement is vital. Understanding the antecedents of emotions and the impact on student engagement enables improved course design and institutional support. For example, the importance of interest highlights the need to give students opportunities to connect learning with life experiences. Equally, understanding the negative emotions stemming from low self-efficacy and lack of academic skills (M. Murphy & Fleming, 2000; Tones et al., 2009) suggests the need for greater information, guidance, and preparation for adult distance learners to smooth their transition to study (Bird & Morgan, 2003).

The focus on older, first year students may mean that some of these findings are particular to that population. Student engagement occurs within, and is influenced by, the socio-cultural context. In addition, as R. B. Brown (2000) reminds us, while we are born with the capacity to experience emotions, society shapes how and when they are expressed. More research is needed therefore to explore academic emotions and student engagement in other populations. In particular, the current study had only four male participants. This underrepresentation of men is compounded by a general reluctance of men to share their emotional experiences (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002). This was evident in the current study where the men’s video diaries tended to have less rich emotional detail.

The qualitative prospective design of this project enabled important insights into emotions and their relationships with student engagement. Corbin and Strauss (2008) argue that “one cannot separate emotion from action; they are part of the same flow of events, one leading to the other” (p. 7) and this encapsulates the findings of this study: emotion is central to student engagement.

Chapter 9

Conclusions

“We should not settle for notions of engagement that fail
to reflect the complicated lives of adult students”

Vaccaro and Lovell (2010, p. 173)

The aim of this thesis was to develop a deeper understanding of the engagement of mature-aged distance students during their transition to university. Three research tools were used: an exploratory study analysing existing survey data, the theoretical re-conceptualisation of student engagement, and a prospective qualitative study following students and their families during their first semester. Findings, contributions to the literature, and limitations have been discussed within the individual papers. This final chapter briefly recaps the key findings before taking a wider view and discussing three overarching ideas, proposed by the framework, and endorsed by the qualitative study, which this thesis contributes to our understanding of student engagement, and the engagement of mature-aged distance students specifically. I then reflect on the research process before finishing with recommendations for students, staff, and the university. Suggestions for future research are made throughout this chapter.

Overview

Study 1 used a survey of first year students to examine the links between three sets of variables: age and mode of study; six dimensions of student engagement; and student outcomes of satisfaction, learning, and intention to leave. Student engagement was found to be an important predictor of both satisfaction and learning, with a supportive learning environment and work integration as particularly strong influences. While mature-aged distance students rated their learning and satisfaction highly, they had a different pattern of engagement to internal younger students. Key strengths were work integrated learning and deeper learning strategies; however, distance students reported lower engagement on all scales except work integrated learning, and older students reported lower rates of active learning, particularly interaction with other students. Together these findings paint a picture of the mature-aged distance student as someone who is satisfied with their learning experience, who enjoys the opportunities to link their learning to the workplace, but who is more isolated from their fellow students.

While the AUSSE analysis revealed interesting findings, it represented a limited view of student engagement. The second stage of the research, therefore, developed a conceptual framework that draws together diverse understandings of student engagement. Educational researchers agree that while student engagement is a useful construct, a more comprehensive theory is needed (Bryson et al., 2010; Fredricks et al., 2004; L. Harris, 2008). In clarifying the distinction between engagement, its antecedents, and its consequences, and in recognising the embedded nature of the phenomenon, the framework provides just such a theory.

Study 2, the final component of the thesis, followed a group of students during their transition to university. The qualitative design enabled a deeper understanding of *how* different factors influence engagement than has been available from past survey studies. In addition, it is one of the few studies to take a longitudinal approach to explore the changing patterns of engagement. The first aim of Study 2, to understand how engagement develops and changes, is addressed through the participant stories and the case study, which illustrate the framework in action, highlighting the individual nature of engagement. The analysis of space and time also addresses this first aim; viewing this important issue through the lens of student engagement showed the effect that struggling to find space and time had on students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioural engagement as well as highlighting the important role that family play in that process. The second aim of Study 2 was to explore the role of emotion during the transition and this aim is addressed through the analysis of the students' emotions, which extended Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia's theory (2012) on the relationships between student engagement and academic emotions.

Features of student engagement

These three research strands have each contributed to our understanding of mature-aged distance students' engagement in their initial transition to university. In addition, weaving the strands together brings to the fore three overarching features of their engagement. Firstly, engagement is multifaceted, composed of how the student is thinking, feeling, and behaving. Secondly, it is contextual and personal, influenced by the university and the student's own psychosocial and structural dimensions. Finally, engagement is dynamic, fluctuating throughout the transition to university as the impact of the various contextual factors strengthen and diminish. Central to all three features is the student's emotional experiences.

Multifaceted

This thesis supports the view that engagement is multifaceted with behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions as proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004), and as depicted in the conceptual framework of student engagement. In Study 2, the students' talk was replete with evidence of each of the three dimensions of engagement: how they were feeling, behaving, and

thinking. It is in the understanding of emotional engagement, however, that this thesis makes a particularly strong contribution to the literature. The dominant approach to student engagement in higher education, as represented by the AUSSE survey, focusses on what the student is doing. But the findings of this thesis emphasise the importance of how the student is feeling, their emotional engagement with their study. This adds to the body of literature demonstrating that learning is an emotional as well as a cognitive process (Dirkx, 2006; Linnenbrink, 2006). Where this thesis extends this literature is in theorising the links between emotion and student engagement and thus raising our understanding of *why* emotion is so important to learning. As Chapter 7 proposed, emotions such as interest and enjoyment are an integral part of engagement, while other emotions act as antecedents and outcomes that either increase or inhibit engagement. In addition, the impact of emotional engagement on both behavioural and cognitive engagement is shown: If students are interested in and enjoying the course content then both behavioural engagement, actually doing the study, and cognitive engagement, being able to focus and concentrate, are easier. Others suggest emotional engagement is a necessary prerequisite of cognitive and behavioural engagement (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012), an idea that warrants further exploration.

Contextual

A second key feature of student engagement, depicted in the framework and supported by the findings from Study 2, is that student engagement is contextual, embedded within the socio-cultural context and influenced by a wide range of variables stemming from the university and from the student themselves. In particular, the findings suggest that these factors can influence any of the three dimensions of engagement – the student's emotion, behaviour, or cognition.

The conceptual framework proposed that these variables can be broadly separated into university and student factors and the findings from Study 2 suggest that it is often the interaction, the alignment between the university and the student, that influences how engaged a student is with their study. Again, emotion is central. As others have noted, academic emotions are the result of a transaction between a person and their environment (Pekrun, 2011; Schutz et al., 2006), in this case between the personal variables such as academic skills and life experiences and university variables such as course design and assessments. When the university requirements and student characteristics align, positive emotions such as interest and enjoyment are experienced and engagement is potentially increased. But when there is a misalignment, a gap between the university and the student, negative emotions such as frustration and anxiety ensue and these can reduce engagement. It is important to recognise that these are *possible* effects. As critical realism highlights, variables increase or decrease the

chances of a student being engaged, but whether or not that happens depends on the multitude of other factors. The diverse stories in Chapter 5 illustrate this clearly.

One particularly important point of intersection for mature-aged distance students highlighted by this thesis is the alignment between the course content and the student's life experiences. The AUSSE survey showed that older distance students integrate their learning with their work more than other students do, and the findings from Study 2 show that much of the students' interest and enjoyment derived from the parallels they saw between their study and their past and present work experiences as well as their life experiences. What this makes clear is that it is not just work-integrated learning that is important as is increasingly recognised (Patrick et al., 2008), but, for older students, it is the broader idea of life-integrated learning that engages them.

Dynamic

The final important conclusion from this thesis is that engagement is not a static state, but rather a dynamic process. Others agree, with Lawson and Lawson (2013) describing engagement as "a dynamic system of social and psychological constructs" (p. 432). In particular, the thesis illustrates how rapidly a student's engagement can fluctuate throughout their first semester. When viewed from the perspective of the conceptual framework of student engagement, the finding that it is changeable is unsurprising. Many of the antecedent variables change throughout the semester and the participants' stories show this with highs and lows triggered by different university and individual factors. While the fluctuating pattern is unpredictable, there are two particular forces evident in the findings: the gradual process of learning how to be a student, and the often abrupt impact of unexpected life events.

The first semester at university is a steep learning curve. This thesis highlights that for mature-aged distance students, as well as learning course content, they must also acquire academic skills, technology skills, and, as Chapter 7 shows, skills to find the space and time to engage effectively with their study. The students' initial lack of skills and knowledge can negatively affect their engagement, particularly in the early weeks of the semester. Over time, for most students, this lessens. As the semester progressed, many of the students acquired the skills they needed. They experienced success in their assessments and this increased their self-efficacy, reduced their anxiety, and ultimately resulted in higher engagement. For a few, the skill gap was too great, success remained elusive, and their anxiety continued to impact negatively on their engagement.

While learning how to be a student is a foreseeable cause of changing student engagement, and one that tended to improve during the semester, the impact of lifeload was much less predictable. In planning and preparing for study, all the students felt they had the necessary time available. However, between paid work and family commitments, for most it

was a tight fit. Many of the students then experienced unexpected events during the semester that reduced their engagement – behaviourally in terms of insufficient time, but also creating stress that impacted negatively on their emotional and cognitive engagement. This parallels Zepke et al.’s (2011) finding that external factors exert their strongest influence in times of crisis.

Amending the framework

Emotion is a vital element of all three of these features of engagement. Emotions are a critical facet of engagement in the form of interest in the content and tasks; emotions are also important contextual influences, acting as the meeting point between the university and the student; and finally, emotions are a defining feature of the volatility of student engagement in the first semester. It is increasingly recognised that an appreciation of students’ emotional responses is essential to understanding and theorising students’ experiences in education (Dirkx, 2006; Linnenbrink, 2006). This thesis endorses that view and, in highlighting some of the key ways that emotion is related to engagement, enables a clearer understanding of *why* emotions are so important. Two changes are needed to the conceptual framework to better illustrate this. Initially, the intersection between the university and the student was labelled as ‘relationships’. The findings from this thesis suggest that emotion is a better descriptor and this modification is shown in Figure 5. In addition, an arrow has been added that more clearly shows that outcomes of engagement, including emotions, have a reciprocal influence on student variables such as motivation and self-efficacy.

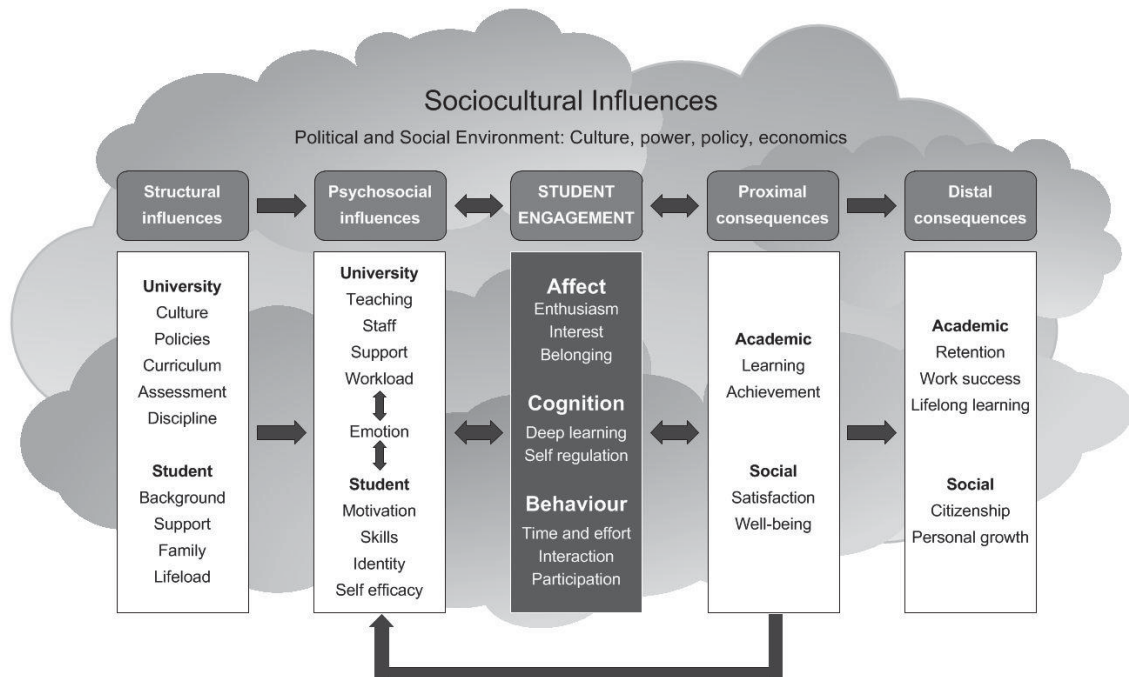


Figure 5. Modified conceptual framework of student engagement

Reflections on the research process

The limitations of Study 1, the AUSSE survey, have been discussed earlier as have some of the limitations of Study 2. However, other aspects of the design of the qualitative study warrant a more detailed consideration here in the thesis. This reflection on the research process also includes recommendations for future studies.

There were strengths and limitations to the data collection methods in Study 2. Overall, a weekly video diary bracketed with interviews was an effective design. The participants found the process of recording their diaries simple and fast, and there was only one technical issue resulting in the loss of a diary. When asked, participants commented that they would not have wanted to do a written diary as it would have seemed like a chore, another assignment. They also felt the videos were more detailed and more honest as they could not edit or polish what they said. All the participants said that meeting me first at the initial interview was important because they felt they knew me and could therefore talk more openly. The only participants that withdrew from the research project were those who also stopped studying, which is testament to the comfort and ease of the process.

In contrast, the choice to include children as participants in Study 2 was, in hindsight, poorly conceived and executed. Trying to capture the voices of the student, partner, and children in a single interview was too much and resulted in the partners' and children's data being less detailed. In addition, while I had some experience facilitating focus groups, I had no experience interviewing children. Generally, the children's responses were brief and I did not have the time, the skills, or the planned strategies to draw them out. Others have also noted the challenges of getting younger children to fully participate in family interviews (Åstedt-Kurki & Hopia, 1996) and the need for developmentally appropriate and creative data collection strategies (Christian, Pearce, Roberson, & Rothwell, 2010). The children's perspective therefore is unexplored in the analysis and is a useful direction for further research.

Including the partners in the interview potentially revealed a more complete picture of the student's experience, particularly relating to support. However, the couples may have wanted to present the family in a positive light and may not have felt comfortable disagreeing or criticising each other in the interview. The interview data therefore represent their shared perspective. In particular, it is likely that the agency each partner has within the family, as discussed in the analysis of space and time, will have affected some family members' willingness to share certain experiences or feelings in the family interviews. This was evident in one family. The student talked in her video diaries about her husband not supporting her, in particular pressuring her to study less, and suggesting she should be in paid work. In the final family interview, however, these issues were glossed over by both the student and her husband and the impact on her experiences was minimised. Future research with individual interviews of

students and their partners may reveal interesting contrasts and contradictions in perceptions of support and provide valuable insights into this important influence on engagement.

The sample for Study 2 was broad in terms of factors such as family structure, geographical location, and socio-economic status. This is reflected in the rich diversity of stories summarised in Chapter 5 and highlights the individual nature of student engagement. However, the disadvantage of such diversity is that it is difficult to draw conclusions about subgroups. For instance, culture is potentially an important influence on student engagement and studies focussing specifically on Māori or Pasifika students would be valuable. The ethnicity sample sizes were small, but the stories did raise questions about how family roles in different cultures impact on lifeload and therefore student engagement. Intersections between culture and socio-economic status also warrant exploring. In addition, the particular experiences of male mature-aged students are underexplored in the literature; this is an important issue that the current study, with just four male participants, only touched on.

A related issue is gender roles. Much has been written about the impact of gender on mature-aged women's experiences returning to study, in particular their caregiving roles and lack of power in the family (Alsop et al., 2008; Christie et al., 2005). In the current study, the analysis of space and time revealed as much diversity within genders as there was between genders. However, there were no participants where the male was the stay at home parent, and caregiving responsibilities did influence the female students' experiences. The nature of that impact varied depending on the family structure and financial resources. This raises interesting questions around the interaction effects of socio-economic status and gender. As gender roles, including caregiving responsibilities, continue to change in New Zealand this merits future research.

Three final aspects of the wider research design warrant mention. Firstly, taking part in the research will have changed the students' experiences, an unavoidable limitation of prospective qualitative research. Firstly, being asked to discuss expectations and plans in the initial interview may have encouraged the family to think about the issues and therefore be better prepared. Secondly, as discussed earlier, there were times when I gave the students information and advice about the university processes. Thirdly, a number of students commented that reflecting on their study and their lives each week was beneficial and helped them to work through some issues. That the students found taking part in the research valuable opens up a possibility for a future study trialling mentoring and reflection as interventions to increase student engagement.

Secondly, I developed the student engagement framework from the literature prior to conducting the qualitative study. I then used that framework to formulate my questions for the family interviews, and the framework was the foundation of the trigger diagram that the students used to complete their diaries (Appendix N). Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that I

found support for the elements of the framework, including the three dimensions of engagement and the range of variables affecting their engagement. While I strove to remain open to other ideas, it is possible that another researcher, less familiar with the framework, would have interpreted the data differently. On the other hand, the students had no difficulty talking about their study in terms of the three dimensions of engagement and the influences, suggesting that the framework did parallel their reality to some degree.

Finally, this thesis has focussed on a particular population of mature-aged distance students at a single university. It is unlikely that these experiences will be exactly paralleled at other institutions or with other populations. The diversity evident in the 19 stories illustrates the wide range of influences as shown in the conceptual framework; but different policies and practices in other universities will no doubt result in different patterns of student engagement. Nonetheless, maintaining an awareness of the overarching principles illustrated in the framework, including the three identified features of student engagement: as multifaceted, contextual, and dynamic, will enable a better understanding of all students' experiences. Similar work, using interviews and video diaries throughout the semester, would be useful with other groups of students. In particular, it would be interesting to follow this study with a project focussing on campus-based mature-aged students to explore where their experiences are similar and different to distance students.

Implications for practice

An important implication of the findings of this thesis is that there are many parties with a role to play in improving student engagement. Students, families, teaching, and support staff, university and government policy makers all have the power to make a difference. This parallels research showing that tertiary teachers see engagement as a shared responsibility (Leach, Zepke, & Butler, 2014). Some implications for practice have already been discussed in the individual chapters. These are reinforced and extended here with key recommendations for the institution, the teaching staff, the student, and their family.

The negative impact of low academic skills, particularly academic writing, on student engagement suggests university policy makers need to consider entry requirements carefully. Interestingly, when asked before the semester what skills and experiences were needed for success at university, only a few participants mentioned academic skills, focussing instead on time management and self-motivation. In New Zealand, except in some specialised courses, undergraduate students over the age of 20 are not required to meet any entry criteria. As discussed, the first semester at university is a steep learning curve and a lack of academic skills adds considerable pressure. More needs to be done, for mature-aged students in particular, to better inform them of the skills they will need at university and, ideally, to offer ways of acquiring those skills prior to enrolment. It was noticeable in Study 2 that those from lower

socio-economic backgrounds struggled most with academic language and writing and many failed. While enabling entry to university for non-traditional students is important, more must be done to facilitate the transition. Letting them in unprepared is, in many ways, setting them up for failure. A useful offering for mature-aged distance students would be an online academic skills course that students took as a prerequisite if they do not have demonstrated academic skills. Such a course could not only teach writing, referencing, and researching skills, it would also familiarise students with the university environment and the demands of distance learning.

The findings highlight aspects of course design that teachers need to consider. A strong theme in this thesis is the role of interest as a driver of student engagement and the importance of students being able to connect their study to work and life experiences. Course designers would do well to encourage this process. For instance, older students bring a wealth of relevant experience and knowledge with them and this could be used in online and classroom discussions to not only trigger their own engagement but also to help younger students see the real world relevance of their learning. Choice is another key tool to trigger interest – enabling students to select a topic that interests them for essays, for example.

Other aspects of course design highlighted by this thesis are also important for student engagement. Awareness of the potentially negative impact that emotions such as frustration stemming from poor assessment instructions or badly written course materials highlights the need for staff to take great care and to listen to student feedback. Flexibility in course design was also flagged as important – staff need to appreciate that a key reason for selecting distance study for many students is their inability to do a particular task at a particular time. Finally, a poor understanding of processes and standards around assessment are a source of negative, inhibitory emotions that can be managed through better communication with students.

There are also key messages for prospective students that arise from this thesis. Firstly, that the first semester is difficult for most students and, as mentioned above, there is much that they will need to learn. In addition, life will almost certainly hand them unexpected challenges during the semester and so it is preferable to have spare capacity to meet such challenges. Therefore, limiting the study load in their first semester to just one or two courses is highly recommended. Table 8 at the beginning of Chapter 5 suggests that the students who took more courses tended to do less well, particularly if they also had high hours of paid work and/or family commitments. Universities could help by providing clear advice and information on the initial workload for new students.

The second message for students and their families stems from the analysis of space and time. As discussed in Chapter 8, students need to be flexible in their approach to study, willing to experiment with different ways of finding the space and time. Families play a critical role here and early conversations and negotiations on this issue are important.

Together these recommendations suggest a need for specialised support programmes for mature-aged distance students. In other research, students have suggested that targeted orientation programmes and specialised computer courses would be of value (Tones et al., 2009). The University of Southern Queensland developed such a first year support programme using a learning circle approach (Henderson et al., 2009). The meetings were informal with a range of staff available and topics originating from the students, including both academic and social issues. The programme was successful. For mature-aged distance students, an equivalent online programme could be developed.

The responsibility for engaging mature-aged distance students lies with all parties. We must not, as Zyngier (2008) warns, fall into the trap of assuming that when a student is engaged it is the responsibility of the teacher, but when a student is disengaged it is the responsibility of the student. Importantly, we need to understand that, as the framework for student engagement highlights, every student's experience is unique. Remaining flexible and being open to understanding different needs and concerns is therefore critical for all.

Final words

This thesis has explored the engagement of mature-aged distance students, an important and distinctive population in New Zealand, as they transition to university. Using different research tools, the project has highlighted key aspects of their engagement, in particular the importance of emotion in facilitating or inhibiting student engagement. In addition, the conceptual framework of student engagement provides a useful tool for future researchers, enabling engagement to be seen in a more holistic and contextual way.

Mature-aged students come to study for qualifications, for knowledge, and for interest, bringing with them a wealth of life experiences. They choose distance study because they believe it will make it easier to fit study into their lives. However, they often have little idea what to expect of university and many lack academic skills. The first semester is a challenge. Some realise quickly that this is not for them and they withdraw. Others struggle throughout the semester, never quite on top, and often finish with nothing to show for their efforts other than a student debt. Others succeed – they learn skills, they acquire grades, and they finish with a different view of themselves and a plan to continue. It is fitting to end this thesis with the words of one of the participants, Toni, who captures the process of learning to be a distance student with a compelling metaphor:

It is like a new person coming into your household you know, if you don't know that person well, or don't know them at all, things are a bit tense and a bit awkward. Takes a lot longer to get to know each other. My goodness. There are things that you like about it and things that you don't like. Sometimes you try to avoid it. Yeah. Very much like another person coming in to your home. You're

wondering, oh well I know I did. I was going to give up, so there we go. I wanted to kick that person out a long time ago. Oh my goodness (laughing).

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Appendices

- Appendix A: Statements of contribution to published articles
- Appendix B: List of publications and presentations arising from this thesis
- Appendix C: Consent to use AUSSE data
- Appendix D: Consent to use Massey University students
- Appendix E: Consent to access the student enrolment database
- Appendix F: Student information sheet
- Appendix G: Expression of interest form
- Appendix H: Confidentiality form
- Appendix I: Partner information sheet
- Appendix J: Child information sheet
- Appendix K: Adult consent form
- Appendix L: Child consent form
- Appendix M: Interview trigger questions
- Appendix N: Diary trigger diagram
- Appendix O: Release of interview summary form
- Appendix P: Release of interview transcripts form

Appendix A: Statements of contribution to published articles

DRC 16



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STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION TO DOCTORAL THESIS CONTAINING PUBLICATIONS

(To appear at the end of each thesis chapter/section/appendix submitted as an article/paper or collected as an appendix at the end of the thesis)

We, the candidate and the candidate's Principal Supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the candidate's contribution as indicated below in the *Statement of Originality*.

Name of Candidate: Eleanor Ruth Kahu

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Name of Published Research Output and full reference:

Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C. V., Leach, L., & Zepke, N. (2013). The engagement of mature distance students. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 32(5), 791-804. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2013.777036

In which Chapter is the Published Work: Chapter 2

Please indicate either:

- The percentage of the Published Work that was contributed by the candidate:
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- Describe the contribution that the candidate has made to the Published Work:
The candidate prepared the full draft of the manuscript and supervisors' comments and input have been to the same extent as for a usual thesis chapter.

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In which Chapter is the Published Work: Chapter 7

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(To appear at the end of each thesis chapter/section/appendix submitted as an article/paper or collected as an appendix at the end of the thesis)

We, the candidate and the candidate's Principal Supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the candidate's contribution as indicated below in the *Statement of Originality*.

Name of Candidate: Eleanor Ruth Kahu

Name/Title of Principal Supervisor: Dr Christine Stephens

Name of Published Research Output and full reference:

Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C. V., Leach, L., & Zepke, N. (in press). Linking academic emotions and student engagement: Mature-aged distance students transition to university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*.

In which Chapter is the Published Work: Chapter 8

Please indicate either:

- The percentage of the Published Work that was contributed by the candidate:
and / or
- Describe the contribution that the candidate has made to the Published Work:
The candidate prepared the full draft of the manuscript and supervisors' comments and input have been to the same extent as for a usual thesis chapter.

Ella Kahu

Candidate's Signature

Digitally signed by Ella Kahu
DN: cn=Ella Kahu, o=Massey University,
ou=School of Psychology,
email=e.kahu@massey.ac.nz, c=NZ
Date: 2013.12.09 16:15:50 +1300

9/12/2013

Date

Christine Stephens

Principal Supervisor's signature

Digitally signed by Christine Stephens
DN: cn=Christine Stephens, o=Massey
University, ou=Psychology,
email=c.v.stephens@massey.ac.nz, c=NZ
Date: 2013.12.10 10:55:51 +1300

10/12/2013

Date

Appendix B: List of publications and presentations arising from this thesis

- Kahu, E. R. (2011, November). *Debating the engagement of mature students in higher education*. Paper presented at the TERNZ conference, Wellington, New Zealand.
- Kahu, E. R. (2012, April). *A different pattern of student engagement: Mature distance students at university*. Paper presented at the DEANZ conference, Wellington, New Zealand.
- Kahu, E. R. (2012, November). *A data collection journey: Using technology but keeping it personal*. Paper presented at the Manawatū Postgraduate Student Research Day, Palmerston North, New Zealand.
- Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(5), 758-773. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2011.598505
- Kahu, E. R. (2013). From “loving it” to “freaking out” and back again: The engagement of a mature distance student in their first semester at university. *Refereed proceedings of the Manawatū Doctoral Research Symposium, 2*, 59-66. Retrieved from <http://mro.massey.ac.nz/10179/2645>
- Kahu, E. R. (2013, July). *Engaging in spaces: How mature-aged distance students fit study into their homes and lives*. Paper presented at the HERDSA conference, Auckland, New Zealand.
- Kahu, E. R. (2013, August). *Learning to engage: Mature-aged distance students' first semester at university*. Paper presented at the RAISE conference, Nottingham, United Kingdom.
- Kahu, E. R. (2014, May). *Mature-aged distance students: The importance of understanding the links between emotion and engagement*. Paper presented at the DEANZ conference, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C. V., Leach, L., & Zepke, N. (2013). The engagement of mature distance students. *Higher Education Research and Development, 32*(5), 791-804. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2013.777036
- Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C. V., Leach, L., & Zepke, N. (2014). Linking academic emotions and student engagement: Mature-aged distance students' transition to university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2014.895305
- Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C. V., Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2014). Space and time to engage: Mature-aged distance students learn to fit study into their lives. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. doi: 10.1080/02601370.2014.884177

Appendix C: Consent to use AUSSE data



MASSEY UNIVERSITY

MEMORANDUM

TO: Ella Kahu, School of Psychology

COPY TO: Professor John O'Neill, Director, Research Ethics
Mr John Redmayne, Acting Director, NCTL
Mr Malcolm Rees, Manager, Student Engagement & Evaluation
Dr Chris Stephens, School of Psychology

FROM: Professor Ingrid Day, AVC (Academic & International)

DATE: 24 May 2011

SUBJECT: Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)

Thank you for your letter of 16 May requesting access to the AUSSE 2010 data collected from Massey University students as part of your PhD project.

Subject to Professor John O'Neill's sign off, I have no objection to your accessing the AUSSE data.

Professor Ingrid Day
Assistant Vice-Chancellor (Academic & International)

Appendix D: Consent to use Massey University students

The Engagement of Mature Distance Students

CONSENT TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

- ✓ I have read the Information Sheet and understand the details of the study.

- ✓ My questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

- ✓ I am aware that it may be possible for Massey University to be identifiable to some of the readers of the PhD thesis, peer-reviewed journal articles, and conference presentations.

- ✓ I give consent for Ella Kahu to access Massey University students for this research project.

Signature:

Brigid Heywood

Date:

5/11/2013

Full Name - printed

Professor Brigid Heywood

Appendix E: Consent to access the student enrolment database

From: Sandbrook, Pat
To: Kahu, Ella
Subject: RE: Access to students for research
Date: Monday, 19 September 2011 9:33:48 a.m.

Hi Ella,

Your request to access the student database for the purposes of this research is approved, subject only to MUHEC approval of the project.

Please include reference to my approval when you contact ITS Helpdesk to initiate the data extract. I would be happy to check over your extraction criteria when you have finalised this, if that is of assistance to you.

Regards,

Pat

Dr Patrick Sandbrook
Director Student Management
Massey University
Private Bag 11222
Palmerston North 4442
New Zealand

Ph +64 6 3504246
Mob +64 27 5810591

Please note: The content of this email and any attachment is confidential and should be read by the intended recipient only. If you are not the intended recipient, please notify the sender immediately and delete the content from your system. You should not read, copy or distribute the message. Thank you.

From: Kahu, Ella
Sent: Tuesday, 6 September 2011 2:28 p.m.
To: Sandbrook, Pat
Subject: RE: Access to students for research

Hi Pat

As mentioned in my earlier email, I am conducting research for my PhD on mature distance students at Massey. The research proposal outlining the whole project is attached. I am a Senior Tutor and doctoral candidate in the School of Psychology at Massey's Wellington campus, supervised by Dr Christine Stephens, Associate Professor of Psychology at the Manawatu campus. My second supervisors are Dr Linda Leach and Associate Professor Nick Zepke from the Department of Education at Manawatu.

The third part of my project aims to follow a group of 12 students during their first semester at university in 2012. In order to recruit students for the project I need your approval to access information from Massey's student enrolment database. Specifically I would need the names and addresses of any new domestic students, aged over 24, enrolling in the first semester of 2012. As I need to interview the students prior to the start of the semester, I am hoping to initially write and invite students who are enrolled by mid January. If this does not yield enough

participants, I will invite a second group in early February.

I am applying for MUHEC approval for the project and the form requires me to attach your written consent to access the student database. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact either me or Dr Chris Stephens, my supervisor, as per the contact details below.

Ella Kahu
e.r.kahu@massey.ac.nz
Massey ext 62163

Dr Chris Stephens
c.v.stephens@massey.ac.nz
Massey ext 2081

Many thanks

Ella.

Appendix F: Student information sheet



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
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TE KURA PŪKENGĀ TANGATA

The Engagement of Mature Distance Students

INFORMATION SHEET: STUDENT

Dear _____,

My name is Ella Kahu and I would like to invite you to be part of my research project following a number of distance students over the age of 24 through their first semester at university. Please read this information sheet carefully to make sure you fully understand the research project and then, if you are interested in being involved, you can contact me or just complete and return the enclosed form.

Who can take part?

If you are a first time student at university, are over the age of 24, and have chosen to study as an extramural student then I would love to have you in my research. From those who are interested, I will be selecting 12 students with the aim of getting people with a range of ages, localities, genders, and family situations. If you live with family members then they will be invited to take part in family interviews. This includes any children who are aged five and over.

What's it about?

I am interested in how extramural students over the age of 24 coming to university for the first time manage the transition to university, how their study and their lives, including their families, interact and influence each other, and how they engage with their studies. I will collect data through family interviews and student diaries. These will all be recorded, transcribed and analysed.

What will I have to do?

If you agree to take part, you and your family (those who want to take part) will be interviewed at the start and end of your first semester, in your home or somewhere else that suits you. Any children aged five and over who live with you are also invited. We will explain the process to them and they can choose whether they want to take part. I will also need the consent of their parent/caregiver. The interviews will take about an hour and I will provide snacks and drinks for us all. The first family interview will discuss things like why you have decided to come to university, how your family feel about the decision, and what you are all expecting it to be like. The interview at the end of the semester will look back at your experiences and reflect in particular on the effect your study and your family have had on each other.

The second task is to keep a video diary throughout your first semester with the aim of making an entry at least weekly. If you have a computer and broadband internet, I will provide a web cam for the diary. If not, then you will be provided with a small hand held video recorder to use instead. The main focus of the diaries is your engagement with your study: how you are feeling about the process of studying and the content of your courses; how you are thinking about the material you are learning; and how you are behaving – what help you ask for, or how you structure your study for example. I will also be interested

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in how your study is affecting your family and other aspects of your life and vice versa. I will give you a \$40 petrol or supermarket voucher as a token of my appreciation for your time.

What happens to the interview recordings and diaries?

The family interviews will be audio taped. I will then transcribe the interviews and the video diaries for analysis. Participants will choose false names and these will be used in the transcriptions, and any other identifiable information (such as places) will be removed. I will send a copy of the interview transcriptions back to the family for approval. If however you do not return the release form within two weeks I will phone to remind you and then, if the form is not returned within another week, I will assume that the family is happy for me to use the transcription. The recordings and transcriptions of the interviews and diaries will be seen only by me and possibly my supervisors. Quotations will be used in the thesis and other academic publications. When the research is finished, the recordings and the transcriptions will be destroyed.

What are my rights?

You are, of course, not obliged to accept this invitation. However, if you do choose to take part then you will have the right to:

- withdraw from the study at any time prior to my starting the data analysis;
- refuse to answer any particular question;
- ask for the audio tape to be turned off at any time during the discussion;
- ask any questions about the study at any time;
- provide information on the understanding that no identifiable information will be used;
- be given a summary of the findings of the study once it is completed.

I'm interested. What do I do now?

If you think you might be interested in taking part then feel free to contact me either by phone or email and I can answer any questions you may have. I have also recorded a short introductory video online so you can 'meet' me before deciding: <http://studentengagementproject.shutterfly.com>. Then, if you are still keen, please complete the attached form and return it to me in the enclosed Freepost envelope. I will then be in touch as soon as I have selected the participants.

Contact details

I am doing the research as part of my PhD degree through Massey University. Please feel free to contact my supervisor if you have any questions or concerns regarding the research.

Researcher: Ella Kahu

Phone: 0800 247 587

Email: e.r.kahu@massey.ac.nz

Supervisor: Dr Chris Stephens

Phone: (06) 3569-099 Ext 2081

Email: c.v.stephens@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 11/67. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Nathan Matthews, Acting Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 350 5799 x 8729, email humanethicssouthb@massey.ac.nz

Appendix G: Expression of interest form



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
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TE KURA PŪKENGĀ TANGATA

The Engagement of Mature Distance Students

EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

If you are interested in taking part in this research project then please fill in your details below.
Return the form to me in the Freepost envelope provided.

Name:	
Age:	Gender:
What is your family situation? (Please include the ages of any children and indicate who may be interested in taking part in the interviews).	
What papers are you doing in the first semester:	
Type of residence (city/suburban/rural):	
Do you have a computer at home?	
Do you have broadband internet access?	
What ethnicities/nationalities are you and your family?	

CONTACT DETAILS

Address:
Contact phone number(s):
Best times/days for me to phone you:
Email address:

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Appendix H: Confidentiality form



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The Engagement of Mature Distance Students

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I, Titus Nicholas Kahu, agree to keep confidential all information concerning the project: *The engagement of mature distance students*. However, if the researcher, Ella Kahu, does not contact me after an interview within the agreed timeframe and I am not able to contact her by cell phone, I will give the address of that participant to the local police.

I will not retain or copy any information involving the project.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

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Appendix I: Partner information sheet



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The Engagement of Mature Distance Students

INFORMATION SHEET: ADULT FAMILY MEMBER

Kia ora,

My name is Ella Kahu. As you know, a member of your family is a participant in my research project following a number of distance students over the age of 24 through their first semester at university. I would like to invite you to participate in the family interviews with me. Please read this information sheet carefully to make sure you fully understand the research project and your rights if you choose to be involved.

What's it about?

I am interested in how extramural students over the age of 24 coming to university for the first time manage the transition to university, how their study and their lives including their family interact and influence each other, and how they engage with their studies. I will collect data through family interviews and student diaries. These will all be tape recorded, transcribed and analysed.

What will I have to do?

If you agree to take part, you would be interviewed with the student and other members of the family (those who agree to take part) at the start and end of the first semester in your home or somewhere else that suits you. The interviews will take about an hour and I will provide snacks and non-alcoholic drinks for us all. The first family interview will discuss things like why the student decided to come to university, how the family feel about the decision and what you are all expecting it to be like. The interview at the end of the semester will look back at your experiences and reflect in particular on the effect the study and family have had on each other.

What happens to the interview recordings and diaries?

The family interviews will be audio taped so I can transcribe the discussion for analysis. Participants will choose false names and these will be used in the transcriptions and any other identifiable information will be removed. I will send a copy of the interview transcriptions back to the family for approval. If however the student does not return the release form within two weeks I will phone to remind them and then, if the form is not returned within another week, I will assume that the family is happy for me to use the transcription. The recordings and transcriptions of the interviews will be seen/heard only by me and possibly my supervisors. Quotations will be used in the thesis and other academic publications. When the research is finished, the recordings and the transcriptions will be destroyed.

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What are my rights?

You are, of course, not obliged to accept this invitation. However, if you do choose to take part then you will have the right to:

- withdraw from the study at any time prior to my starting the data analysis;
- refuse to answer any particular question;
- ask for the audio tape to be turned off at any time during the discussion;
- ask any questions about the study at any time;
- provide information on the understanding that no identifiable information will be used;
- be given a summary of the findings of the study once it is completed.

Contact details

I am doing the research as part of my PhD degree through Massey University. Please feel free to contact my supervisor if you have any questions or concerns regarding the research.

Researcher: Ella Kahu

Phone: 0800 247587

Email: e.r.kahu@massey.ac.nz

Supervisor: Dr Chris Stephens

Phone: (06) 3569-099 Ext 2081

Email: c.v.stephens@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 11/67. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Nathan Matthews, Acting Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 350 5799 x 8729, email humanethicssouthb@massey.ac.nz

Appendix J: Child information sheet



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The Engagement of Mature Distance Students

INFORMATION SHEET: CHILD FAMILY MEMBER

Kia ora,

My name is Ella Kahu. An adult in your family has agreed to be part of my research and I would like you to be part of it too. I am interested in adults who come to university and their families. Please read this information sheet carefully and feel free to ask me or your family any questions.

What's it about?

The research looks at how adults who come to university for the first time do their learning and how this affects their family. I will interview the student with their family at the start and end of their first term at university. The interviews will be sound recorded.

Who can do it?

Anyone aged five or over can be part of the family interviews. Once you have read this and the research has been explained to you, you can decide if you want to take part.

What will I have to do?

If you agree to take part, you will sit with your family and together you will answer questions that I ask. You can choose to answer or not answer any of the questions. We will talk about what you and your family think it is going to be like to have an adult in the family studying at university this year. The interview will take about an hour but you can leave at any time. I will come back and do another interview half way through the year.

The family interviews will be sound recorded and then typed out. You will choose a false name for yourself and anything else that might indicate who you are (place names for example) will be taken out.

What can I do?

You don't have to do this of course. But if you do then you can:

- leave the interview at any time;
- choose not to answer any question;
- ask for the recorders to be turned off at any time;
- ask any questions at any time;
- give information knowing that your real name will not be used;
- be given a summary of the research results.

What happens now?

You can ask your parents/caregivers or me any questions you want. Then, if you want to do this, please tell your parent/caregiver and write your name on the consent form.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 11/67. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Nathan Matthews, Acting Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 350 5799 x 8729, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz

Appendix K: Adult consent form



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The Engagement of Mature Distance Students

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM: ADULT

- ✓ I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me.
- ✓ My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.
- ✓ I agree to the family interview being sound recorded.
- ✓ I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Full Name - printed _____

Please provide either an email or postal address so I can send you a summary of the results of my study.

Appendix L: Child consent form



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The Engagement of Mature Distance Students

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM: CHILD

I have had the research explained to me and I understand what it is about:

Yes No

I know I can ask questions at any time:

Yes No

I would like to join the family interviews and I understand I can leave any time:

Yes No

I know that I do not have to answer any question I am asked:

Yes No

My parent(s)/caregiver(s) are willing for me to join in the family interviews:

Yes No

I know Ella is tape recording our family interviews and I am willing to be taped:

Yes No

Write your name here, or ask your parents to write your name, if you want to join in the family interviews:

Name: _____

Date: _____

Parental Consent

I am willing for my child as named above to take part in the family interviews under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Full Name - printed _____

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Appendix M: Interview trigger questions

Initial Family Interview

Why have you decided to study at university?

What are you hoping to achieve?

How did you decide which subjects and papers to take?

Did you talk the decision over with your partner and/or children?

How do you think this is going to affect you all?

What do you think it will be like when Mum/Dad/partner is studying?

Have you thought about where you plan to do the study? How will this affect the family?

Have you thought about when you will do your study? How will this affect the family?

What are you looking forward to about studying?

What do you think are going to be the biggest challenges?

What changes (if any) are you planning to make to fit study into your lives?

End of Semester Family Interview

How has the semester been?

Did it differ or not from what you expected? How?

What effects has Mum/Dad/partner studying had on you?

Do you think Mum/Dad/partner will carry on studying? Why/why not?

Did you talk about what Mum/Dad/partner was learning at all?

Did you gain anything from the study?

What did you do when things got difficult? Where did you go for help or support?

How did you manage the time commitment? When did you study? How often?

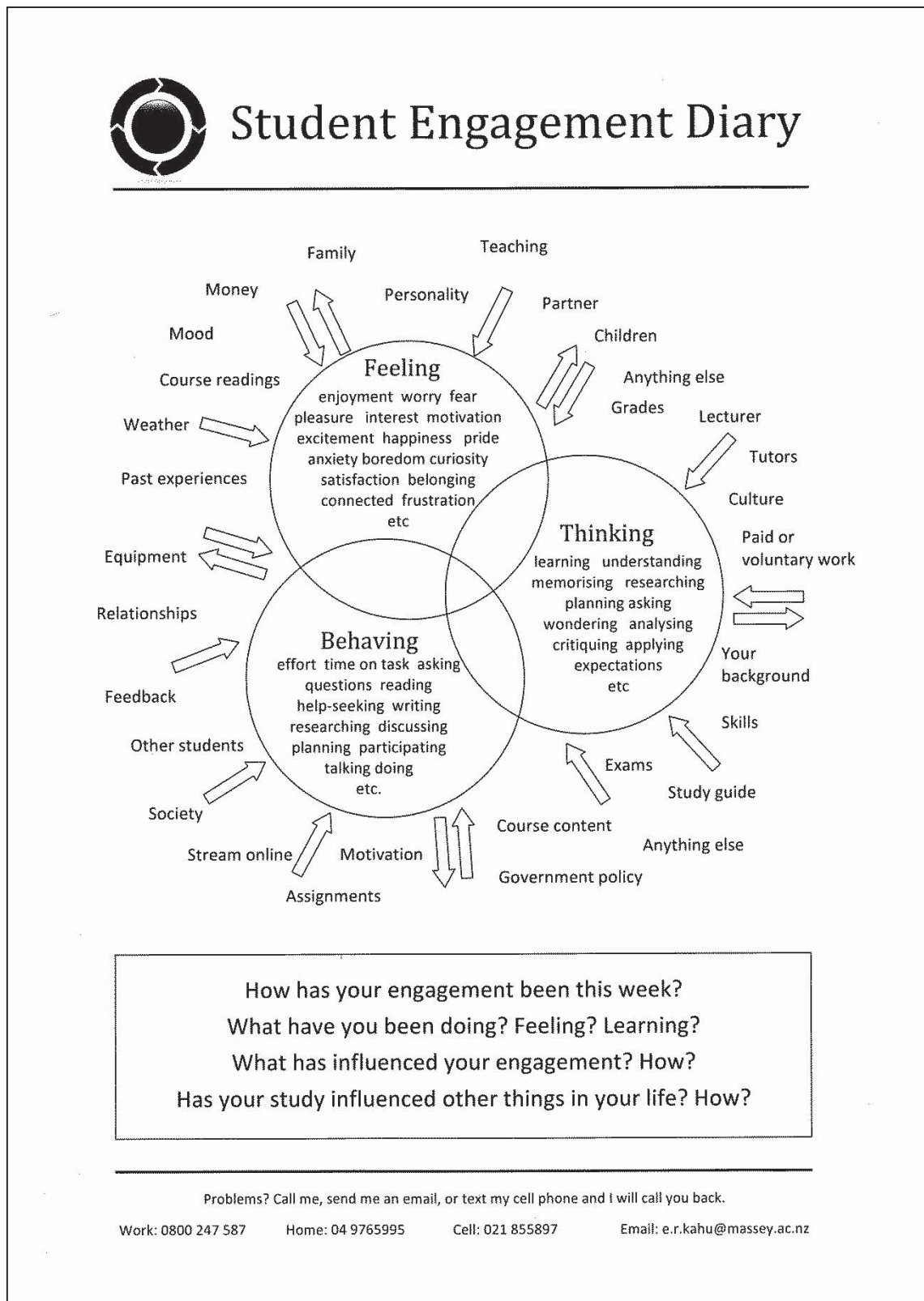
How did you manage the physical spaces? Where did you study?

How did the family impact on your engagement with your study?

If you are carrying on with the study, will you do anything different next semester?

Other questions will depend on the content of the student's diary and initial interview.

Appendix N: Diary trigger diagram



Appendix O: Release of interview summary form



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The Engagement of Mature Distance Students

RELEASE OF INTERVIEW SUMMARY

I confirm that I have shown the summary of our family interview to the family and that we have had the opportunity to read and amend the summary.

I agree that the edited summary and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Full Name - printed _____

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ki Pūrehuroa

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Appendix P: Release of interview transcripts form



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The Engagement of Mature Distance Students

RELEASE OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have shown the transcript of our family interview to the family and that we have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature:

Date:

Full Name - printed

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ki Pūrehuroa

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