“Exploring the online learning experiences of health and social care students.”

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Abstract

Introduction: The aim of this study was to explore the lived experience of health and social care students studying online at University of Essex. The timing of data collection meant that this coincided with COVID-19, which affected this experience for students dramatically. Intersectional analysis examined if key characteristics of ethnicity, age and gender affected the online learning experience. The study also aimed to seek student suggestions of how to overcome any challenges that were identified.

Methods: This study used hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the lived experience of students. Purposive and maximum variation sampling was used to recruit a range of students within the School of Health and Social Care (HSC) at the University of Essex (n = 12), targeting diversity across the areas of specific interest (ethnicity, age and gender). Semi-structured interviews were conducted via online video calls and transcribed verbatim. Data were then analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: Four themes and twelve sub-themes were identified. The four main themes were: 1) The physical environment; 2) Social impact of learning online; 3) Engaging with the content; and 4) Meeting expectations. The impact of ethnicity, age and gender was shown to vary greatly, highlighting the diversity of students in the sector and promoting the proposal of a new Integrated Framework for Personalised Online Learning. Student suggestions included pre-recorded lecture content and greater use of interactive games and quizzes.

Conclusions: Online learning offers many benefits for HSC students but requires a pedagogic shift to be implemented successfully. These benefits need to be balanced

against important factors such as lack of social interaction, learner disengagement and, given the broad student demographic within HSC at Essex, intersectional considerations. Implementing student-led suggestions for improvements to online education should empower students as agents of change and improve the overall quality of educational experience.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Online learning has seen rapid development in recent years, and nearly all higher education providers now offer online courses or educational services. This can be as a standalone mode of delivery or in conjunction with traditional campus-based methods, known as blended learning. Online courses offer the convenience and flexibility of not requiring physical teaching spaces and also allow students and teachers to work at locations and times convenient to them. Prospective students may be attracted to the perceived convenience and enriched educational experiences that the method can arguably provide. However, Levey (2007) found that attrition rates for online courses was historically 25%-40%, far higher than the 10%-20% seen in comparable campus-based courses. The Open University, a market leader in this field within the United Kingdom, has reported annual dropout rates of around 35% (Fowle, 2022).

A common difficulty that students have identified in relation to online learning is the need to adapt to asynchronous interactions, with instructors frequently failing to provide immediate feedback in the online learning environment. Students may consequently encounter increased cognitive burden, stress, communication ambiguities or gaps, and decreased motivation (Kim, Hong & Song, 2019). It has been documented that academic programmes for the health and social care (HSC) professions are difficult, time-consuming, and emotionally and academically taxing for many students (Barkley, 2011). HSC students are held to high standards by professional organisations due to the substantial amount of theoretical content, in addition to completing extensive practice placement hours (Emanuel & Pryce-Miller, 2013).

Online learning appears to provide several advantages in relation to these challenges, as it enables students to study from diverse locations during their practice placements and potentially around shift periods outside of standard university operating hours. There are however several challenges posed by this mode of learning. Due to the applied and practical nature of many HSC programmes, online learning is not considered optimal for a number of curriculum topics (Berge & Muilenburg, 2005). This study therefore aims to explore the online learning experiences of HSC students studying at University of Essex, recognising and focussing on student demographics that are pertinent to this area of study and seeking student-led suggestions to improve or overcome any challenges faced.

Each of the five main chapters of this thesis is dedicated to a different part of the research process. The first chapter presents the study background and provides extensive context for the research problem. This section serves as the project's introduction and includes an outline of the research to be conducted and why it is proposed. The second chapter systematically reviews existing studies and scholarly research on the topic and key themes are highlighted. Research methods and methodological considerations are outlined in chapter three, including research design, data collection methods and tools, sampling strategy, study participants, and other crucial ethical issues. Primary data, gathered through semi-structured interviews, are then presented as the study results in chapter four.

The final chapter of this thesis will add to the current literature on the subject by providing novel insights and discoveries, as well as in-depth discussions of these

findings to complement the empirical data and highlight their consequences. This section of the study is crucial because it compares the results of the primary data collection with the findings presented in the literature review, helping to realise the study's goals and objectives. This chapter also concludes the whole project, summarising the key findings and recommendations and includes an account of the study's success in meeting its aims and objectives. Future practical applications of the key findings and recommendations are discussed, along with a review of study's strengths and limitations.

1.1.a Online learning

The term "online" learning encompasses any form of education that utilises a variety of internet-enabled technologies, including virtual learning environments (VLEs), videoconferencing software, mobile phones, and personal computers, in either a live or pre-recorded setting (Hrastinski, 2008). With synchronous approaches, students can ask questions of instructors and peers and receive instantaneous feedback through interactive means of communication like videoconferencing. Asynchronous approaches do not need students to respond in real time but employ media like e-mails and forums to disseminate information (Hrastinski *et al*., 2010).

1.1.a Changing pedagogical practice

An important aspect that can be identified as a consequence of online learning, is a change in emphasis from teaching to learning (Harris, 2004). Online pedagogical practices have evolved significantly over time, with the online learning environment now focusing more specifically on the learners' needs and preferences. The emphasis in course development has transitioned from teacher-centred to student-centred

approaches, in which curricula are consistently developed with the learning requirements of the students as the primary consideration (Zhu & Liu, 2020). As a result, online learning has transformed into a self-directed learning practise in which instructors' functions have progressively diminished to those of facilitators, in contrast to the conventional behaviourist approach to instruction (Khan, 1997). This educational approach is distinguished by the use of digital technology within an integrated framework that prioritises constructivist settings and student interaction as key elements (Harris, 2004).

Online education can also be seen as a social and cognitive process in which the primary concern extends beyond the mere transmission of information through remote technologies. Thorough preparation for this setting entails not only the identification of the curriculum to be covered but also the deliberation on how various forms of conventional classroom interactions can be facilitated via online methods (Conole, 2021; Hodges *et al*., 2020). This means that the development process for online curricula often entails significantly more time than that of conventional, classroom settings.

1.1.b Importance of technology

Different types of Information & Communications Technology (ICT) are used to provide online education, and these platforms can be seen to significantly influence students' experience and satisfaction in healthcare education. Through the use of pertinent technological solutions, students have been shown to achieve positive learning experiences without incurring additional cognitive burden or tension (Chang *et al.*, 2020). Importantly though, in order to engage in various learning activities, take exams,

and complete academic assignments online, students must possess reasonably high levels of digital literacy and proficiency (Kim, Hong & Song, 2019; Nichol *et al.*, 2003).

The availability of dependable internet connectivity and platforms that provide uninterrupted access to instructors, peers, and lectures is a significant determinant in assessing student expectations and, consequently, their experiences with online learning (Arruabarrena *et al.*, 2019). These important factors enable students to comprehend and adjust to the pedagogical approaches and technological advancements that their instructors may implement within the online learning environments. Indeed, research has shown that students are more likely to participate in online educational activities when they have easy access to digital infrastructures and platforms (Arruabarrena *et al.*, 2019; Conole, 2021).

1.2 Measuring student experience

The success of students' learning is significantly impacted by their learning preferences and approach to learning, both of which are heavily influenced by their environment (Entwistle, 1998). Through these preferences, students express a variety of personal objectives, approaches, and concerns. It has been documented that these factors influence the learning activities undertaken by students, specifically the importance that students attribute to learning conditions or tasks (Arruabarrena *et al.*, 2019).

The significance of exploring student learning experiences to assess and improve satisfaction with, as well as perceptions of, higher education, has been underscored by scholars (Kim, Hong & Song, 2019). Although, similar to other fields,

researchers frequently encounter the difficulty of identifying the most appropriate instruments, approaches, or methods to investigate the student experience across various learning environments.

The heightened focus on active learning, the move from traditional classroom instruction to online learning environments, and the significant changes to pedagogy facilitated by technology have all contributed to students developing increasingly critical viewpoints in recent times (Arruabarrena *et al.*, 2019). Although previous scholarly works have extensively examined student experience with a view to exploring and improving this in terms of conventional education, much greater work is yet to be done to comprehensively evaluate the student experience of learning online.

When researching lived experience, it is well documented that not all populations and groups are represented equally (Cundiff, 2012). Researchers commonly use the term “hard to reach” to refer to inaccessible populations, who are often inaccessible for a number of reasons such as geography or social status (Sydor, 2013). Another well reported obstacle to the involvement of disadvantaged groups is decreased trust in the process of research itself (Bonevski *et al.*, 2014; Hynes, 2003). For example, the disclosure of an individual’s stigmatised identity as a consequence of their involvement in research may result in a loss of status, privacy, or reputation (Bonevski *et al.*, 2014).

This emphasises the critical relevance of maintaining participant anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process. Further details of which can be found in the Methodology chapter.

As this study focusses on the experiences of HSC students at University of Essex, the researcher consulted with the School of Health and Social Care's Director of Diversity and Inclusion, to discover if there were any "hard to reach" groups of particular relevance that should be included specifically within this study. It must be highlighted at this point that the researcher's role as a lecturer within the school where participants were to be recruited from was noted as a potential limiting factor and/or source of bias. However, the study began before the researcher took up an academic role within the school and this is more fully discussed in the reflexive statement (section 3.1) and study limitations section (section 5.6). The following individual characteristics were identified to have particular significance to the school's strategic aims and commitment to student outcomes and were therefore identified as areas of specific focus for the study.

1.2.a Ethnicity

Individuals belonging to the same ethnic group often have a deep bond with each other's history and may also share distinctive attributes, such as a shared language, religion, or culture (Stone, 1996). Historically and currently, the terms used to classify various ethnic groups have changed in meaning and usage from country to country. Because the term "race" is associated with debunked notions of human nature, character, and social organisation, British researchers often prefer the term "ethnicity" instead (Platt, 2011).

According to Zubair & Norris (2015), defining ethnicity in research is complicated by the assumed diversity of people's life histories and cultural identities. A substantial body of research, however, suggests we should abandon the notion that ethnicity is

inherently harmful and instead focus on the ways in which people's ethnic identities serve as strengths and buffers (Phillipson, 2015; Torres, 2015; Zubair & Victor, 2015). In addition, a deeper appreciation for the variety within communities of people from ethnic minority backgrounds would lead to more specific and effective approaches to research involvement (Vickers *et al.*, 2012).

People from ethnic minority backgrounds face a number of societal obstacles, including unequal access to resources, poor health outcomes, and modesty concerns stemming from religious and cultural norms (Hussain-Gambles *et al.*, 2004). Richardson's (2008) research revealed that individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds have a lower likelihood of receiving high-quality degrees compared to their White peers. This disparity persists even though children from all ethnic minority groups are more likely than White children to progress from secondary education to higher education.

The percentage of students from ethnic minorities who graduate with honours is consistently half that of White students and has not improved in the past two decades (Richardson, 2018). Further to this, numbers of ethnic minority students on health and social care courses in the United Kingdom are higher than those of all other areas of education, yet an attainment gap continues to grow (Claridge *et al.*, 2018).

1.2.b Age

Pre-registration healthcare programmes have traditionally attracted a more mature student body (those over 21 on beginning their course), perhaps due to increased graduate employability and bursary or government funded opportunities. Although

recent financial changes have led to a decrease in the enrolment of older students in higher education, 50.7% of undergraduates studying disciplines that fall under the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) classification for “Subjects Allied to Medicine” were 21 or older. In no other subject did the percentage of students 21 or older exceed 23%. (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2022).

Mature applicants to higher education have different educational profiles than their younger counterparts. Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (2018) found that mature candidates, particularly those aged 30 and above, are more likely to apply to lower-tariff institutions and are more likely to live at home while studying (hence typically apply to local universities). They are also more likely to make only one choice of university and course. The literature suggests that mature students’ rates of HE participation may be affected by the fact that they have fewer university options to choose from due to family responsibilities, which can make the application process seem daunting and time-consuming (Health Education England, 2018).

Compared to all sectors of higher education, HSC courses recruit the highest number of mature students, so it is crucial that studies of students’ perspectives in healthcare education account for the wide variety of ages represented. Several issues have been identified by researchers when attempting to design studies with a wide variety of ages of participants, including the language used, recruitment procedures, and interview strategies (Hulley *et al*., 2001). Although, when compared to younger individuals, mature students often have more life experience to draw from and can describe that experience with greater assurance (Fischer *et al.*, 2001).

1.2.c Gender

Literature suggests that as well as being older than their counterparts in other fields, women make up 86.7% of the health and social care student population (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2018). Females tend to outnumber males in the medical professions overall, but this is especially true in the UK and other countries where nursing and allied health are highly female dominated. Although, it has been argued that, despite much greater numbers within the sector, long-standing patriarchal practice means that female voices are not always heard and representation in leadership roles is far less than might be expected (Cho & Jang, 2021). It is becoming increasingly apparent however that increasing male involvement and narrowing the gender gap in health and social care is crucial. Boosting male engagement in health and social care education could prove extremely beneficial, such as increasing the number of domestic graduates in these disciplines, making sure the workforce more accurately reflects the community it serves, and alleviating the existing skills deficit in these areas (Office for Students, 2020).

Although male students are significantly underrepresented in healthcare education, it is crucial that their perspectives be included in any associated research. Challenges in enlisting male participants have been commonly noted in social research (Oliffe & Thorne, 2007). Many factors, such as cultural norms, gendered roles, and individual perspectives on the associated value from participation, are suggested to contribute to this phenomenon. However, Macdonald *et al*. (2010) contend that this may be the consequence of researchers employing research methods that are more empathetic to women, which may deter men from participating. A lack of affective

expression among male research participants has also been identified as a ubiquitous challenge by qualitative researchers across various sectors, such as healthcare and education (Smiths *et al.,* 2006).

In more recent times, several alternatives have emerged to replace the binary systems of gender identity or expression. Non-binary is a term used to refer to individuals whose gender identity does not align with the traditional categories of male or female. There are several other terms, such as transgender, genderqueer, agender, bigender, and many more. None of these names precisely correspond to one another, but they do share a common thread: they all refer to a non-binary experience of gender (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014). However, it is crucial to note that, when transgender people participate in research that is directly related to their identities, they also place themselves at a higher risk of discrimination, harassment, and violence, which is already a common experience for transgender people (Herek, 2009).

1.3 Intersectionality

One objective of this study is to explore specific individual characteristics and if this affected individuals' experience of learning online. It is important to remember that specific identities or characteristics frequently interact or "intersect". As a result, there can be an overlap between the social, psychological, and physical vulnerabilities (or privileges) experienced by individuals (Bauer, 2014). Within the context of this study, the overlap of ethnicity, age and gender will be highlighted and explored in relation to one of the specific research objectives. These characteristics viewed in isolation might provide some level of insight into student experience. But by looking at these together,

and in relation to one another, a deeper level of analysis can be provided. One which aims to uncover complex and interconnected insights which might otherwise be missing from the literature (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). For this reason, this study has adopted intersectional techniques within the analysis, using these so that the influence of social categories, historical context, and relationships to power systems can be explored with regards to the student experience of learning online (Anthias, 2013). It must be highlighted however that this is not an "intersectional study" or using this concept as an overarching framework. Although it can be used as a complete methodology, this study has selected intersectional analytical techniques and approaches to data analysis to address one specific research objective.

1.4 Students as "change agents"

The importance of student "representation" and "voice" in institutional practices is growing. Despite the difficulty in defining the term "student experience," it has been ingrained in the language of higher education. More recently, there has been a rise in the utilisation of the term "student involvement" and associated concepts regarding students' roles as "collaborators" and "partners" in their educational institutions. The term "student engagement" is employed to denote a broad spectrum of participation. As articulated by the Higher Education Academy (2010), this can be seen as where students play an active role in defining their own learning experiences.

Others see students who take an active role in directing their education as potential "change agents." One definition of this term is "a person whose presence or thought processes causes a change from the standard approach of dealing or thinking

about a problem” (Freidman’s Business Dictionary, 2010, p. 310). Kay *et al.* (2010) posits that a change agent is more about their identity than their actions; they must be patient, self-motivated, empathetic, and driven by a sense of purpose. Despite their potential dissatisfaction with the status quo, change agents are primarily concerned with enhancing future experiences. This is centred on the idea that students should possess a strong desire to implement a vision, comprehension of the areas needing changed and a clear picture of what could be (Kay *et al.*, 2010).

Despite the growing number of undergraduate and postgraduate students and the various demands placed upon a higher education institute, the University of Essex publicly commits to ensuring that their learners have the optimal experience. It places a high importance on the student “voice” by actively engaging students in various forums, conducting satisfaction surveys and requesting feedback at the institutional and programme level.

However, it could be contended that students have not been directly involved in the process of effecting change, despite the university’s sincere endeavours to engage students and listen to student feedback. An institution that only "listens" to students and addresses their requests differs from one that actively encourages students to discover problems, produce possible solutions, and actively contribute to the necessary changes. The idea of subconsciously or unconsciously listening to the student's perspective promotes the idea of the student as a "consumer." The concept of students as "change agents" expressly supports the idea that students are active participants and collaborators who have the ability to truly transform practices (Kay et al., 2010).

This distinction becomes increasingly important in a sector that has been criticised for the marketisation and commercialisation of education (Czerniewic *et al.*, 2021).

The concept of creating learning communities should serve as the foundation for engaging students in quality processes. In practice, this means encouraging students to view themselves as equal partners with faculty in the pursuit of quality improvement and encouraging them to participate in collaborative conversations about ways to strengthen assessment, curriculum, and instruction (Ramsden, 2008). As a result, the development of student-led communities of practice and quality of student experience can be significantly impacted by pedagogical changes that students initiate. One specific research objective of this study was therefore to encourage participants to offer suggested ways to improve the student experience of online learning within the school, overcome any barriers they may have experienced or identified and, hopefully, improve the experience for any future online learning cohorts.

1.5 Impact of COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 drastically altered the delivery of higher education for a prolonged period of time. It posed a significant challenge for international education systems and online learning developed rapidly in response to this (Schuck & Lambert, 2020). Understandably, many educational institutions were unprepared for the sudden transition, and as a result, students of all ages, nationalities, genders, ages, and occupations were affected greatly by the associated national and institutional changes to processes in response to the pandemic. Among these were shifts such as mandatory online learning, the elimination of traditional classroom settings like lectures and

tutorials, and the adoption of novel forms of evaluation and grading (Watermeyer *et al.*, 2020). These tensions were exacerbated by factors, such as home-schooling, isolation, worry and anxieties about finances or losing a job.

Research revealed that campus closures had a substantial impact on students' lives, with many having to study and work from home and others facing the increased pressure of home-schooling dependents also (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2020a). Some people experienced physical and/or mental health issues resulting from the loss of liberties they were accustomed to enjoying (Lee, 2020). Students' anxiety was also seen to rise due to the rate of changes in education resulting from the global pandemic (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). From October 2020 to December 2020, the Office of National Statistics reviewed the experiences of students during the coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic. They claimed that fewer than 50% of pupils were content with their educational experience. According to the Office for National Statistics (2020), out of the total respondents, 29% expressed unhappiness or strong dissatisfaction with their academic experience. Among this group, two-thirds ascribed their displeasure to the quality of education and how it was delivered.

1.6 Background of this study

Early research into online learning has begun to explore student experiences in different educational settings such as tertiary and higher education. But far less progress has been achieved in understanding student experiences of online learning across different professional disciplines within these sectors. This is especially true within applied and practical subjects such as health and social care. The vocational nature of many

courses within this area of education means that virtual or online teaching and learning methodologies often lack the impact and effectiveness of in-person instruction (Emanuel & Pryce-Miller, 2013). Very few studies have looked at this in great detail however, and even fewer have focused on student experience and how the common student demographics within this field may affect this.

1.6.a Gaps in current knowledge

Researchers have begun to investigate the complexities encountered by teachers whilst creating and delivering online courses (Arruabarrena *et. Al*., 2019; Conole, 2021; Emanuel & Pryce-Miller, 2013; Mariono *et al.*, 2021). However, very little studies have explored the students' experiences, other than via module/course evaluation feedback and general student satisfaction surveys. Emergent literature has missed the nuanced consideration of student perspectives, which is expected to be covered in adequate depth through this study. This study will prove to be a thorough account of student-focused issues pertaining to their adjustment to and use of online learning methods. This understanding will help the teaching staff to address student needs in future online learning environments and to foster better relationships between students and teachers. This study is also anticipated to contribute to policies and guidelines regarding the management of on-campus, flexible and fully online students, so that teachers and institutions are in a better position to fulfil student desires, preferences and needs. The proposed study therefore hopes to address this by gathering and analysing a rich data set of student experiences, exploring the perceived benefits and challenges, examining key characteristics affecting online learning through an intersectional lens, and identifying student-led solutions to any challenges identified.

This research will expand the current state of knowledge on the understanding of the social care and health care professions and will help the audience (mainly educators and institutions) understand and develop the capacity to address some of the challenges associated with offering online education. An exploration of student-centric demographic and other factors such as ethnicity, age and gender will help education providers understand their target markets in a more comprehensive and precise manner. This knowledge will help them customise their offering, provide targeted information to students taking up different levels of study, and will help improve the relationship between learners and teachers.

1.6.b Aims and research objectives

The overall aim of this research is to explore the experiences of HSC students studying online in order to inform future educational approaches and practice within the school and deliver more successful online learning outcomes for HSC students. The objectives describe the activities which must be completed to accomplish the aims and reflect the exploratory nature of the research. The objectives are:

1) Explore the experiences of HSC students studying online to identify the benefits and challenges associated with this method of study.
2) Examine how key characteristics of ethnicity, age & gender can affect students' experience of online learning.
3) Identify student led solutions to online learning challenges within HSC.

1.6.c Significance of this study

Online learning has been changing the face of educational systems, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. In the broader landscape of higher education for the health and social care sectors, online learning has made it effective for students to advance their careers and be better prepared for the digital age, without having to worry about the time and space in which learning would be normally accessed (Emanuel & Pryce-Miller, 2013). This study establishes an understanding of online learning experiences of health and social care students, specifically exploring key student characteristics in a way that hasn't been done before. Using intersectional techniques to explore how these can affect student experiences of online learning, the study seeks to recognise the overall role of online learning in student success in the new age and dissects how the power of technology and communications has influenced educational pursuits (Islam, Beer & Slack, 2015). The study also places the participants/students at the heart of the recommendations, empowering them to suggest ways to overcome challenges they faced. This approach is unique within the current literature and adds another layer of significance to the study.

It is intended that the findings of this study would supplement other sources of data on the subject such as institutional statistics on student enrolment, retention and satisfaction rates and other learning analytics. It is also possible that course designers would consider some of the topics of this study to design online courses and curricula. As an important piece of research with potential implications for academia and the specific professional disciplines under study, it is worth investigating because online learning has arguably changed the face of higher education and enabled students to

engage with education at a greater level (Lee, 2020). In order to benefit from these advancements and determine whether they do provide as much value as many claim, it is vitally important to explore the student experience holistically and gain deeper insight into the associated benefits and challenge.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Systematic literature review

There is very little qualitative literature specifically exploring experiences of online learning with health and social care students, so it has not yet been synthesised. Therefore, this review aims to consolidate and critically explore the most pertinent literature on the subject.

2.1.a Article identification

To locate relevant literature for the literature review, a search was performed systematically across five electronic databases. To find relevant studies, search expanders and limiters were employed in conjunction with keywords (see Appendix A). Appendix A also includes the inclusion/exclusion criteria established in order to assess the suitability of the papers that were identified.

This study aims to explore an area where previously little research has been carried out. This is partly due to how little learning was done online within HSC prior to COVID-19, but also partly due to how specific the population of interest is. This means that there are limited published studies exploring this topic. With so little pertinent literature, the search was expanded to include all types of research that was anticipated to contain significant findings that were relevant to the review's objectives. However, this review exclusively reviews qualitative literature, in line with the methodological approach for this thesis.

The initial search yielded a total of 2,735 articles. 2,356 were then excluded at the title level due to their failure to satisfy the inclusion criteria. A further 366 articles were excluded through the abstract screening process. Thirteen studies were determined to be suitable for full-text screening. Two of the papers were review articles, two were excluded due to the fact that the sample was exclusively composed of teachers, two were excluded because the sample included learners who were not in higher education, and one was excluded because the courses studied by students were not restricted to health and social care subjects. Altogether, seven studies were screened out as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. A PRISMA diagram is included in Appendix B, which shows the full selection procedure for studies. Finally, six studies were identified by adhering to the aforementioned procedures. An overview of these investigations is available in Appendix C.

There is a contention that qualitative synthesis is considerably flawed, in that it decontextualizes the research it incorporates, thereby preventing the generalisation of findings from one setting to another (Britten *et al.*, 2002). A reviewer is therefore partly responsible for verifying that concepts can be transferred from one context to another in a valid manner, emphasising instances where this is not feasible. By including a comprehensive summary table of the studies incorporated in this review (see Appendix C), context is maintained and individual assessment of any transfer's validity can be facilitated (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

2.1.b Article review procedure

2.1.b.1 Quality appraisal

Slavin (1987) argues that systematic reviews ought to comprise solely those studies that adhere to rigorous methodological standards. Conversely, McPherson & Armstrong (2012) contend that all pertinent literature should be incorporated. Clearly, there is a lack of agreement over the appropriate, scientifically assessed standards for eliminating research based on its quality. Nevertheless, to avoid readers drawing inaccurate conclusions, it is recommended to provide clear quality assessment of all studies used (Harden, 2008).

The methodological rigour of the studies included in this literature review was evaluated using a tool called the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (CASP, 2002). CASP is a commonly used appraisal tool, used to critique and review the quality of qualitative studies. It comprises a number of checklists, each of which contains a number of questions presented in a systematic way to guide researchers through a comprehensive appraisal of the studies reviewed (Higgins & Green, 2011). This systematic approach is a real benefit to early career academics such as the researcher for this study as it provides clear structure and confidence that all aspects have been considered. Further to this, the CASP tool was devised for use with health-related research and was therefore deemed appropriate for the context of this study. However, limitations of CASP have been reported in that it can be time consuming and less sensitive to evaluative and interpretive studies. Also, as quality appraisal is dependent upon clear reporting, study *conduct* is not always adequately reviewed (Buccheri & Sharifi, 2017).

In carrying out the literature review, the researcher also experienced another limitation of the CASP tool. The CASP tool, in its original form, lacks a criterion for evaluating the suitability of a study's qualitative paradigm. Qualitative research methodologies are guided by several theories, epistemological frameworks, and ontological perspectives, with researchers having the option to adopt multiple philosophical paradigms (Carroll & Booth, 2015). Throughout the literature review, the researcher occasionally encountered conceptual ambiguity within the selected studies, whereby, for instance, the study design or data collection procedures were incongruent with the data analysis techniques employed. Another instance was authors employing a hybrid methodology, integrating several, different, and occasionally conflicting paradigms. Considering the significance of this within qualitative literature reviews, the researcher intends to incorporate an additional question regarding conceptual design in further studies. This would develop an enhanced CASP tool that effectively evaluates the authors' approach to inquiry and the coherence of the related conceptual foundations.

As already noted, the lack of literature in this relatively specialist field limited the number of research that could be incorporated. Consequently, publications were not subjected to methodological quality exclusions; rather, this element was completely appraised to let readers extend the conclusions of the review in line with accepted standards. The researcher carried out a comprehensive CASP review of the selected articles. The full CASP appraisal table of the identified studies can be found at Appendix D. Most included clear indication of aims, used appropriate qualitative methodologies,

recruitment strategies, and data collection and analysis methods. Across many of the studies, the researcher and participant relationship was not adequately considered or was difficult to determine. Most articles highlighted key ethics involved in data collection, and ethical considerations were explicitly discussed.

Chandler (2022) was the only article where ethical issues could not be easily identified, therefore it was not clear if the issues were discussed and treated in an appropriate manner. The article by Suzuki *et al*. (2022) could not provide a clear statement of study aim(s) and it was hard to tell if Mortazavi *et al*. (2021) clearly outlined what the study was about. Most of the research articles provided an explicit and comprehensive discussion on key findings, including relating the results of the study with existing literature base as well as to future policy and research implications. In some cases, such as across the research works of Langegard *et al*. (2021) and Chandler (2022), the transferability of findings in another, similar research context was deemed questionable due to the presence of sample bias or other representativeness limitations. Most articles highlighted the implications of their work for future use by researchers and practitioners, although in majority of the cases, these were weakly discussed or appeared to be limited in their explanations.

2.1.b.2 Data analysis and synthesis

By adhering to Thomas & Harden's (2008) process of thematic synthesis, a methodical synthesis of the pertinent literature was produced. The methods employed to synthesise qualitative research remain a subject of ongoing debate. This is primarily because some argue that qualitative research lacks generalizability, and that synthesising the findings

could decontextualize them (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Nevertheless, for the results to be accessible to a broader demographic, qualitative research must be synthesised (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Thematic synthesis helps provide understanding of intricate personal narratives, aligning with the ontological and epistemological stance of this undertaking. Following the recommendations of Thomas & Harden (2008), the extracted data included any entries documented as “Results” or “Findings.” The data set was analysed to extract only the relevant information for the review. Exact copies of all pertinent data were transcribed into Word documents. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the information, each study was reviewed two times (Cruzes & Dyba, 2011). In order to preserve a close relationship with the data, line-by-line coding was done manually and theme development was carried out.

By systematically coding the data, preliminary themes that were descriptive in nature were generated. To ensure that the codes contained comparable information, the researcher utilised a technique called "constant comparison" inside and across the data (Cruzes & Dyba, 2011). To surpass, or “transcend” the data, analytical themes were then obtained by comparing categorised segments (Thorne *et al.*, 2004). The themes and sub-themes identified are outlined below in Table 1.

Table 1 – Systematic Review – Main themes & sub-themes

Main themes	Sub-themes	N
Paradigm shift to online education during COVID-19	Timesaving and Flexibility Technical problems and lack of digital skills Changes in online learning environments and pedagogy Student needs may vary	6
Psychological barriers to online education	Lack of socially supportive environments Interaction & engagement versus social isolation Inclusive learning environments Sustaining meaningful relationships	5
Teaching skills in online education environments	Developing resilience through teacher personality Familiarity and confidence with tech-assisted learning Challenges of pedagogical transition to online/distance education Skills development and sustainable teaching management	5
Online is the new normal	Inevitable transition to online learning mode What can we do better? Need for continual support Continual analyses of student experiences and preferences	5
No one answer to online education expectations	Customise teaching to suit student needs Understand student perspectives, demographics, and behaviours Supporting struggling students	4

2.2 Review of the literature

The following sections go on to discuss each identified theme across the research articles and conceptualises the findings against each theme and subtheme. It must be noted that themes have been identified and discussed in no particular order; they are all of equal importance in relation to this systematic review.

2.2.a Theme 1: Paradigm shift to online education during COVID-19

All articles involved a discussion of the paradigm shift to online education because of, or exacerbated by, the COVID-19 pandemic outbreaks. When describing how online education took place during the pandemic outbreaks, all articles referred to a mode of learning that changed significantly as more students took up online ways to complete their academic work. A considerable focus was placed on the positives of online education environments, especially flexibility and time-saving advantages in comparison with in-person, traditional learning (Suzuki *et al.*, 2022).

Most of the articles reported the value of online learning in saving students' commuting time or on other daily commitments (Kunaviktikul *et al.*, 2022). Online education was also reported to provide greater flexibility for learners to access coursework at times convenient to them and at their own pace. In regards to the online learning model, the articles discussed how it has compelled learners and teachers to adapt to new pedagogies and learn how to pay due attention to student experiences of navigating online education.

The paradigm shift to online education also highlighted factors that contribute to less positive experiences for online students. One of the most obvious shifts reported

was in the challenging pedagogical shift to delivering education online (Mortazavi *et al.*, 2021). The challenges of pedagogical transition to online/distance education do not just call for student-driven approaches; a successful strategy must entail what teachers and faculties must do to ensure students are facilitated in their shift to online learning and are better supported along the way (Mortazavi *et al.*, 2021). This requires the development of skills and managing teaching practices in a more sustainable, online friendly, and collaborative fashion (Kunaviktikul *et al.*, 2022; Mortazavi *et al.*, 2021). A thriving online education environment needs to adapt the curriculum to the demands of online teaching and to tailor the design and delivery accordingly (Langegard *et al.*, 2021).

Almost all articles shed light on the wide variations in learner requirements and preferences in online learning environments. The articles discussed how online education creates additional responsibilities on teachers and students to learn in an adaptive environment where communication and social engagement are critical. Langegard *et al.* (2021) discussed how knowledge about students' experiences when using online teaching approaches must be able to improvise more than simple didactic strategies in medical education. The articles discussing the impact of online education experiences on students' performances reported deterioration in learning outcomes once the transition from traditional to digital learning is made (Langegard *et al.*, 2021).

2.2.b Theme 2: Psychological barriers to online education

The second theme found across the articles was the psychological roadblocks of online education. All studies suggested there are psychological barriers to online education

which derive from social isolation and lack of belonging in online learning communities. Most acknowledged that the often self-directed, self-paced and self-regulated learning environments in a virtual setting can affect students' mental capabilities, sense of worth and motivation (Chandler, 2022). The COVID-19 situation decreased opportunities for students to participate in extra-curricular activities and build relationships with peers, classmates and teaching staff. In the absence of socially supportive environments, students feel lonely in their educational journeys and are at a higher risk of developing mental health issues arising from stress, isolation, and lack of social engagement (Suzuki *et al.*, 2022).

Kunaviktikul *et al.* (2022) discussed how motivation and concentration problems pose major psychological roadblocks in the online learning environments where higher risks of psychological distress and social isolation affects students' motivation to study and hampers their focus or concentration levels. In a balanced approach, the faculty and facilitators need to carefully balance interaction and social engagement in newer ways to curb these psychological issues as much as possible.

Most articles discussed, in their own ways, how online teaching and learning needs to build an inclusive learning environment where educators do not only address resource availability but also facilitate and foster student engagement and cohesion (Chandler, 2022; Gumede & Badriparsad, 2022; Suzuki *et al.*, 2022). In an inclusive online learning environment, student needs should be placed at the centre of policy and strategic decision making. This entails caring for student experiences and providing

opportunities for students to increase self-motivation and successful communication with peers and teaching staff.

Across the articles, one of the emergent themes was the need for online learning environments to allow sustainment of meaningful student-teacher or learner-facilitator relationships. Building relationships in a virtual classroom is a critical skill that requires experience and great skill. Hence, online education comes with the added responsibility of maintaining interactions and sustaining collaboration wherever students are in the online education journey (Chandler, 2022; Langegard *et al.*, 2021).

2.2.c Theme 3: Teaching skills in online education environments

All articles discussed how teaching is different in online education environments, and how teachers need to adapt their teaching skills accordingly to be effective educators. There can be many factors around teachers' teaching and facilitation skills that may make or break their relationship and rapport with students. Online education teachers and lecturers need to have a thorough understanding of the content they are presenting and the technology at their disposal. They also must realise the critical need for excellent communication skills, which can be quite different in a virtual classroom than in the traditional one. Sufficient training and preparation, including acquiring digital skills and being more prepared and aware of the challenges, form the first few steps in this journey.

Some of the articles reviewed critically analysed how teaching skills vary in the online landscape and how teachers and faculty need to be more proactive in terms of

designing or fine-tuning their teaching skills to suit the needs of virtual classrooms (Chandler, 2022; Gumede & Badriparsad, 2022; Langegard *et al.*, 2021). Chandler (2022) discussed how online education has even influenced face-to-face, in-person teaching and is regarded as a critical element in influencing student experiences in the post-COVID environment.

The consensus from across the reviewed articles called for a more thoughtful, planned, and organised approach in adapting online teaching skills for positive student outcomes. In one of the articles, emphasis has been placed on fostering teachers' own capabilities and personality, for it is often not just about what the teacher 'does' within the classroom but also about who the teacher "is" (Suzuki *et al.*, 2022). Students are also reported to improve their academic performance and engagement with learning when they view their teachers as 'role-models' of positive learning and teaching.

Teachers' own confidence with online technology adoption was shown to be a critical aspect of creating positive student experiences and developing students' own digital resilience (Gumede & Badriparsad, 2022; Suzuki *et al.*, 2022). Through proper management and intervention strategies, teachers and faculty need to develop or enhance skills, knowledge, and strategies in order for students to manage their digital identities, feel safe using online education platforms, and benefit from the many opportunities that online learning offers (Langegard *et al.*, 2021). This is also about building familiarity and confidence with tech-assisted learning, and sustaining students' confidence through data protection, online safety, and cyber resilience plans (Langegard *et al.*, 2021). Gumede & Badriparsad (2022) highlighted that the online learning environment needs to be enabled for all students. The article also discussed

about humanising teaching and learning which is not limited to transferring information using digital technologies but creating relationships for better student success outcomes (Gumede & Badriparsad, 2022).

2.2.d Theme 4: Online is the new normal

A key theme emerging from the literature review has been the fact that online education has inevitably become the 'new normal'. COVID-19 drastically changed the way students accessed learning, interacted with their course and teachers, and engaged socially with their peers. This rapid transition to online learning meant that most students did not see it coming. Articles by Chandler (2022) and Kunaviktikul *et al.* (2022) reported the challenges that came with this transition, especially in reducing extracurricular activities and other outlets for energy and social interaction. The articles contended that there is no one answer to how online education manifests into positive student experiences, especially in the health and social care professions (Langegard *et al.*, 2021). The needs of the students from a particular discipline must be kept at the forefront while devising the policies and frameworks that could improve the learning for them. Although, this may differ between professions within one institution and even between different cohorts of the same profession.

Gumede and Badriparsad (2022) examined the challenges raised by the participants in their study and contended the results show how critical it is to attend to all student needs. The majority of the articles accentuated the necessity for education providers to maintain academic rigor in the online world whilst building the learners'

community, creating social interaction opportunities, and amplifying engagements within the online learning setting. The articles have also all favoured the demands of continuous research and identification of teaching and learning models suited to individual learning needs, rather than a standardised approach.

2.2.e Theme 5: No one answer to online education expectations

The final theme presented emphasised the customisation demands of online learning that is tailored to individual characteristics and student needs. It is critical to understand student perspectives, behaviours, and preferences in the development of curriculum design and delivery. Supporting students with specific learning differences (SpLDs) should be a priority. Students must also be facilitated to be able to tackle the complex mixture of the learning management system and other internet-enabled platforms whilst accessing their courses, interacting with the teachers, and participating in discussions (Kunaviktikul *et al.*, 2022; Suzuki *et al.*, 2022).

Communications with students should be clear and frequent so that the teacher-student relationship remains open and honest as to what students need. Students should be supported to apply the course content to real world situations or form diverse perspectives. With online learning, this is possible when students are encouraged to increase or improve their discussion posts, participation in online discussions, ask follow-up questions, or supply examples from their own experiences of the studied phenomenon (Gumede & Badriparsad, 2022; Suzuki *et al.*, 2022).

In the digitised learning environment, supporting struggling students requires scaffolding or supplying supplementary information to support foundational knowledge

and skills. Across the reviewed articles, it was noted that most of the authors have encouraged the involvement of students in discussions and practical world discussions more than the traditional classroom environments. This would make them feel respected, heard, and will also encourage them to take part in other online activities (Kunaviktikul *et al.*, 2022).

Mortazavi *et al.* (2021) identified the three primary solutions associated with positive student outcomes as the potential for receiving feedback, channel development, and the enhancement of educational content. Gumede & Badriparsad (2022) examined the need for establishing balance in the 'new normal' and enablement of inclusive learning environments built on the strong foundations of teacher-student relationship and communication. Kunaviktikul *et al*. (2022) examined how online learning increased students' and faculty members' confidence and familiarity with technology-assisted learning. All these understandings combine to inform practice while making a strong case for its use in continuous professional and personal development.

One of the least recognised aspects across the reviewed articles, which would have added more value to the overall speculation of the topic, was intercultural understanding and respect. Having intercultural understanding and an acknowledgement of diversity plays a vital part in understanding individual learning needs and designing the course content in response of those needs.

2.3 Summary of literature review

This systematic review shed light on key emergent themes from a thematic synthesis of six relevant articles. The first theme talked about what was meant for students and

teachers by the conceptual move to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 altered the educational landscape and involved a host of challenges and opportunities for everyone involved. The second theme focused on discussing the psychological barriers to online education, particularly the lack of socially supportive environments and the need for recognising the comparisons between interaction/engagement and social isolation, causing undue stress and psychological disorders amongst students.

The third theme shed light on how student experiences can be positively influenced using a thoughtful and organised approach to teaching and facilitation. The fourth emergent theme was regarding online education becoming the “new normal” for students across the globe, and how teachers need to be responsive to their individual needs and digital demands in order to make this a successful process for all parties. The final theme emphasised the need for customised learning solutions suited to individual needs and preferences.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Philosophical & Theoretical Foundations

The fundamental philosophical and theoretical positions that serve as the foundations for this investigation will now be examined in order to guarantee transparency. This encompasses a detailed exploration of the researcher's ontological and epistemological perspective, the corresponding philosophical position, and a rationale for the methodology and methods employed.

3.1.a Ontological position

The field of ontology is dedicated to the examination of fundamental concerns regarding the human condition and reality (Blaikie, 2007). The ontological position of a researcher therefore defines their relationship to this in relation to the concept under investigation. There are numerous ontologies, such as positivism, critical theory, constructivism, and realism and these can be seen to exist somewhere along a continuum (Guba & Lincoln,1994). The realist worldview is grounded in the scientific method and the belief that objective reality exists apart from subjective experience. As the researcher believes that our thoughts contribute greatly to our perceptions, this viewpoint is at odds with their beliefs. The researcher's own practice as a clinician and educator has led them to believe that different people can interpret the same event depending on a large number of issues, highlighting the importance of seeing reality as constructed in tandem with these factors rather than as an independent entity.

Direct realism and critical realism are only two examples of the variety that may be found along the continuum. Critical realism recognises the need of considering several

levels of analysis in order to account for the interactions that take place between individuals and these levels (Novikov & Novikov, 2013). Conversely, direct realism posits that the world is typically stable and focuses on a singular dimension. The relativist perspective asserts that objective truth does not exist, and an individual's sense of reality is dependent on their own circumstances, such as their cultural and linguistic background (Fletcher, 1996).

Because the researcher wasn’t looking for a single, unwavering truth, but rather wanted to show how various people’s experiences are shaped by diverse frames of reference like their age, gender, and ethnicity, they adopted a relativist ontological stance. This best reflected the researcher’s own clinical and educational background and knowledge of the individual differences in the manner in which individuals interpret their own experiences.

3.1.b Epistemological position

Justified belief is simply one of the topics that epistemology explores in depth, along with the techniques, validity, and breadth of knowledge acquisition (Swinburne, 2001). The significance of the researcher's interaction with the individual who possesses the knowledge is underscored by Guba and Lincoln (1994). Like ontologies, epistemological stances can be located on a spectrum (Manson, 2008). Realists' epistemology is founded on empiricism and is linked to the positivist paradigm, as they maintain that objective knowledge is more likely to be representative of the general population (King & Horrocks, 2010). Researchers may eradicate subjectivity and concentrate exclusively on the data at hand, according to advocates of this methodology.

In contrast, Constructivist epistemology holds that the mind may construct its own reality in response to stimuli (Balbi, 2008). This method implies that the researcher is unable to maintain objectivity and detachment, as knowledge is perceived as a by-product of social interactions and is generated through this transactional process (Ponterotto, 2005). Due to the potential biases outlined in the self-reflexive statement, and how improbable it was that they could be entirely pushed aside, the researcher felt that this was an epistemological position that would be most appropriate for this study. The interpretivist paradigm, which has its roots in phenomenology and hermeneutics, advocates for this Constructivist way of knowing. Multiple realities and constructs are possible, according to interpretivism (Morrow, 2005), and these can be accessible through mutually agreed-upon meaning.

Because the researcher believed that personal biases and worldview would inevitably creep into analysis of the data participants provided, Constructivist epistemology was adopted. The researcher also believes that people may have more than one “reality,” or set of beliefs about how the world really is, and that this is how true knowledge is acquired. This viewpoint highlights that participants, being authorities on their own experiences, possess information that is unique to the time and location in which they reside.

Other epistemological stances exist, such as Objectivism. Perception, or sensory evidence, is fundamental in Objectivism since it provides the foundation for all knowledge. Our senses of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell allow us to take in the world around us. Objectivism, in this sense, is an empirical approach to philosophy

(Biggerstaff, 2012). Nevertheless, there is a risk associated with embracing an Objectivist perspective since it may result in prioritising a singular truth about an object, rather than acknowledging the human as a person whose consciousness is deeply embedded in a world of significance (Parnas *et al*., 2012).

3.1.c Qualitative approaches

Finding meaningful connections between words and drawing conclusions is the aim of qualitative research, which aims to provide a comprehensive and accurate picture of the phenomenon being studied. Subjectivity and the human experience are central to the qualitative approach (Leung, 2015). Within a positivist framework, quantitative studies focus on numerical data and provide statistical interpretations (Creswell, 1998). For quantitative research in this area, structured surveys typically centre on predetermined satisfaction categories, which may deter participants from answering honestly and candidly about the significance they have placed on their experiences (Willig, 2001). However, this positivist-oriented reductionism may fail to capture the subtleties of a person's experience (Krauss, 2005).

A qualitative approach was selected for this study as it seemed to fit with the interpretivist paradigm, which was used to explore the students' individual experiences of online learning. When deciding on this approach, the aims and objectives of the study and the existing literature on online learning experience were taken into account. Interviews, focus groups, and case studies are just some of the qualitative methods that have been used in the past to investigate people's perspectives on the online learning experience (Kundu & Bej, 2021). This qualitative inclination may also be shown in

studies examining more traditional or campus-based learning experiences (Ramsden, 2008).

3.1.d Consideration of methods

The philosophical underpinnings of the study goals and their compatibility with particular methodologies were taken into account when weighing up the merits of various qualitative approaches. Due to their prevalence in practice, and within the literature, the methodologies of grounded theory, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and hermeneutic phenomenology were examined.

3.1.d.1 Grounded theory

Proposed and developed by Glaser & Strauss (1967), Grounded Theory (GT) seeks to build theory by looking past existing concepts and assumptions about how society works (Glaser, 1978). Many variants of this approach have been produced in response to the criticisms of its objectivist and positivist position (Charmaz, 2006; Dey, 1992). Charmaz (2000) created Constructivist Grounded Theory as a means of shifting to a more interpretative paradigm, one that prioritises meaning above the presence of a fixed, objective world.

The fundamental argument against this approach is that the established theory is too specific and that there is room for error in the technique (Allan, 2003). GT was not chosen for this study since the goal was to better understand people's real experiences rather than to develop a theory. The risk of not having enough participants to do theoretical sampling was also a limiting factor.

3.1.d.2 Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

IPA is a qualitative research approach that investigates how individuals understand important experiences by emphasising the personal meaning of these experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It was therefore considered as a suitable approach for this study. IPA enables researchers to engage with a specific study topic on an individualised level, which distinguishes it from typical psychological research methods (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). This method prioritises the cultivation of “meaning” at the individual, particular level, rather than formulating generalisations about broader populations.

However, as a result of this highly idiographic approach, the focus of IPA means that small and homogenous samples are used. This allows deep exploration of a particular topic but without the breadth of participant variety that this study required. As the study aimed to explore very specific, and wide-ranging demographic differences in the student experience of online learning, IPA was discounted and other forms of phenomenology were explored.

3.1.d.3 Hermeneutic phenomenology

Hermeneutic Phenomenology, which draws on philosophical hermeneutics and the work of Gadamer and Heidegger, concentrates on the lived experiences of participants. According to Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) hermeneutic phenomenology, our first and essential encounter with the universe is inherently filled with profound significance. Our perception of the world as meaningful is immediate and automatic since the world, with its people, histories, cultures, and events, existed before we tried to understand or

interpret it. The aim of hermeneutic phenomenological research is to shed light on and reflect upon the meaningfulness of this basic experience (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).

Expanding upon previous research, van Manen (1990) provided a definition of phenomenology as a means of examining how individuals engage with their daily experiences and inquire about their perception of the world. van Manen (1997) described his approach as a “human science” that aims to bring the various meanings of life’s occurrences to reflective consciousness through a compassionate and thoughtful approach. It may be seen as a technique for ascertaining the interpretations of persons’ verbal or written communication (Langdridge, 2007). van Manen’s approach to Hermeneutic Phenomenology combines and links the fields of phenomenology and hermeneutics. It has proven to be successful in research projects that investigate health and educational topics (Smith *et al.*, 2009). For these reasons, this approach was adopted by the researcher in this study.

van Manen’s approach suggests a 6-stage process, with the steps defined below in Table 2.

Table 2 – van Manen's 6-step process (Penner & McClement, 2018)

Steps	Definition
1. Turning to the nature of lived experience	Formulating a research question.
2. Investigating experience as we live it	The phenomenon is captured through methods of investigation (eg, interviews, focus groups).
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon	The overall meaning of an informant's experience is sought when reflecting on the themes.
4. Describing the phenomenon in the art of writing and rewriting	Through the process of writing, the intention is to make visible the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of the informants.
5. Maintaining a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon	The researcher must strive to remain focused on the research question.
6. Balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole	The researcher is asked to "constantly measure the overall design of the study/ text, against the significance that the parts must play in the total textual structure"

3.1.e Theoretical underpinnings to hermeneutic phenomenology

To ensure that the methodological approach selected aligns with the ontological and epistemological perspective of this inquiry, the relevant theoretical foundations of hermeneutic phenomenology will now be explored.

3.1.e.1 Phenomenology

According to Smith *et al*. (2009), phenomenology is a branch of philosophy that focuses on the study of human consciousness and the subjective experience of the universe. Husserl, the progenitor of phenomenology, contended that the application of natural scientific methodologies to human matters is inappropriate due to its disregard for context and individual interpretations (Laverty, 2003). He aspired to provide a scientific study of observable events that elucidated the manner in which objects are perceived and conveyed to the human mind (Spinelli, 2005). Husserl proposed that we adopt a phenomenological attitude by looking inward, contemplating our perception of things, and paying attention to our subjective experience. This involves setting aside our usual, unquestioned perspective (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Husserl's identification of the 'life world' was an important aspect of his work and this concept served as the context for various subsequent phenomenological approaches (Langdridge, 2007). Despite the various schools of thought on phenomenology, studying human lived experience is central to them all. This study seeks to investigate the lived experiences of students studying online, encouraging participants to be reflective about their experiences and recalling them in their own words. This therefore supports a phenomenological method of approach.

3.1.e.*2* Hermeneutics

This study's concern with meaning-making, which incorporates the hermeneutics school of interpretation, is one of its secondary goals. Heidegger eventually developed his own school of philosophy known as "existential" or "hermeneutic" phenomenology, following

on from Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology (Heidegger, 1927/2011). Heidegger contends that it is impossible to separate the process by which one ascertains the essence of a phenomenon. According to him, it is impossible for researchers to evaluate “things in their appearance” in order to ascertain their essences while remaining impartial or disinterested in the subjects (Langdridge, 2007). Heidegger emphasised the significance of our "fore-conception," which refers to our prior experiences, assumptions, and preconceived notions that might hinder our capacity to accurately perceive things.

In his work, Gadamer (1975) delved into the intricate interplay between the interpreter and the interpreted. Hence, it is crucial to include both the interpretation provided by the subject about their description and the interpretation assigned by the researcher, referred to as the "double hermeneutic”. The constructionist viewpoint, which holds that everything is produced as a construction by the person or by society, serves as the foundation for this. It is necessary to choose a strategy that takes into account how meaning is created and how the researcher contributes to it.

The interview language functions as the medium via which data is gathered. The researcher engages in the process of establishing truth by identifying phenomena and interpreting them. This involves a continuous movement, known as the “hermeneutic circle,” between analysing a specific piece of the text and considering the text as a whole (Langdridge, 2007). This process is referred to as the “circle” method, which involves the researcher comprehending each individual piece of the text by analysing its connection to the complete manuscript.

3.1.e.3 Power of language

Gadamer's (1975) focus on hermeneutics centres on the manner in which language discloses the nature of existence. This philosophical perspective posits that all comprehension is rooted in phenomenology and that understanding can be achieved solely via the use of language. Langdridge (2007) and Rapport (2005) argue that language, understanding, and interpretation are closely interconnected. According to Gadamer, language is not a separate entity from the world; rather, it serves as a means of representing the universe. Language derives its reality from its ability to encompass and convey the representation of the world. Gadamer established a connection between language and ontology, drawing inspiration from Heidegger's ideas. He shifted the focus from the prevailing epistemological mode of knowing to a mode of being (Rapport, 2005).

van Manen (1997) expanded upon this concept, suggesting that language serves as a means to uncover one's existence within certain historical and cultural contexts. This understanding is shared by both the participant and the researcher, and is facilitated by the use of language, such as the language employed during interviews (Langdridge, 2007). He argues that phenomenology plays a formative role in the shaping, transforming and performing of the relationship between being and practice (van Manen, 2007).

3.2 Self-reflexive statement

Self-reflexivity is an essential aspect of qualitative research and allows the researcher to reflect upon how the study may have been affected by factors such as their own world views, social background and past experiences. These considerations don't necessarily limit the research and, as long as they are declared and in line with the stated epistemological and ontological positions, can therefore be seen as crucial, contributary factors of the overall research process (Novikov & Novikov, 2013). Critical reflexivity can therefore be seen as the continuous dialogue of critical self-evaluation that the researcher undertakes throughout the study and the act of consciously recognising how their own influence may affect it (Pillow, 2003).

To remain critically reflexive of my own role within the study, I maintained a reflexive journal, as recommended by Braun & Clarke (2013). This diary allowed me to capture thoughts, emotions and moments of indecision, prompting me to reflect on potential areas of limitation in the study or how my own views or interpretations may have influenced data and findings. I began by stating my own personal reflexive "stance".

I am a 45-year-old white male from the United Kingdom and work as a lecturer within the School of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex. Previous roles included working in the military and private healthcare. I am married, with two children, and consider myself to be working class. Possibly due to my military background, I'm often described as direct and quite serious, although I consider myself to be a kind and empathetic person. Prior to doctoral studies, I had studied online myself, completing a

Postgraduate Certificate and Master of Business Administration (MBA) via this mode of study.

Upon reflecting on my own position as a lecturer within the school in which students would be asked to discuss their experiences, it immediately struck me that it would undoubtably affect their responses. They may not wish to provide feedback that was particularly negative for fear that this may somehow get back to those involved in their education and result in unfavourable treatment or marking. They may also feel uncomfortable giving positive or negative feedback on their experiences if it somehow revealed that they had not participated in sessions or disengaged from lesson content without the lecturer's knowledge.

This issue of positionality is a common challenge within professional research projects such as this study, where the often-unavoidable researcher position within the organisation can be seen to affect the outcomes. The term 'positionality' both describes an individual's world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context (Foote & Bartell, 2011). Traditional views of insider-outsider positionality have more recently been replaced with the acknowledgement of a continuum, where the researcher's role is more fluid (Hiller & Vears, 2016). Indeed, I was a lecturer and postgraduate student myself whilst carrying out this research and reminded participants of this to try and identify more with them, hoping to gain their trust. I had also begun the study whilst not in the lecturer role and the subsequent move to an academic position had afforded me insight into the topic being explored from opposing viewpoints, potentially affecting my approach to knowledge production.

As the study progressed, I realised that, rather than see my position as a lecturer as merely a limitation to the study, taking a reflexive approach could allow me to use my personal insight and fluid positionality to improve it. A reflexive approach suggests that, rather than trying to eliminate their effect, researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in their work, aiming to understand their influence on and in the research process (Bourke, 2014). In doing so, I was able to better align with the philosophical and phenomenological underpinnings of this study and address the issue of intersubjectivity, where conflicting interests are negotiated and resolved (Cooper-White, 2010). My personal journey as a student to lecturer/researcher during the study therefore informed and influenced the outcomes. This is recognised in hermeneutic phenomenology, where the researcher becomes an active participant in the interpretive process and knowledge production is seen to be co-created (Koch, 1996).

An interesting insight afforded to me by the reflexive journal was how my role as a lecturer at the same university as the students allowed participants to vent their frustration on some of their online learning experiences. Often not having any other means to express their views on the topic, some students talked freely and at length about the challenges they had faced and made very specific comments or complaints about the online teaching and learning they had experienced. I felt this put me in an awkward position as I felt obliged to apologise on behalf of my employer for some of the things I was being told but I also knew that this was key data to get to the heart of the student experience and help improve future practice.

During the pilot study interviews, I realised that I had a tendency to focus on the negative experiences described by the participants. Upon reflection, I concluded that this may have been as a result of my own personal challenges and poor experiences of online learning and that I may have been somehow projecting this into the interview process. After realising this I made a conscious effort to conduct more balanced interviews, aiming to explore the positive and negative experiences in more equal measure. I also made a note to reconsider these observations and purposively consider strengths-based elements during the coding process, as recommended by Braun & Clarke (2013).

An entry of particular note in my reflexive journal was after a second participant described issues of domestic dispute that had arisen as a result of their online learning. Two females talked of disagreements with their male partners focused on access to computer equipment and quiet areas within the home from which to work/study. The responses seemed to hint at deeper marital issues that were unrelated to the focus of the study and I felt unprepared to offer any professional or ethical response. In my position as a male, I also felt unable to identify easily with their struggles. This made me realise how much responsibility you have as a researcher and how the roles of researcher and lecturer with potential pastoral responsibilities could become blurred for students participating in the study.

3.3 Study design

3.3.a Data collection tool

The tool used to collect data within this study was the semi-structured interview. It is proposed by Reid *et al.* (2005) that this method has the benefit of facilitating rapid rapport building and in-depth, intimate conversations. This approach enables the researcher to ask predefined questions that are open-ended in nature. Contrary to fully structued interviews or surveys, this approach is seen as a flexible means of gathering data that encourages interaction between the researcher and the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This also allows researchers to delve more deeply into personal matters, which sometimes involves sensitive topics, as follow-up questions and exploring other related avenues of discussion are encouraged (Lobe *et al.*, 2020; Sy *et al.*, 2020).

3.3.b Interview schedule

The complete interview schedule is available in Appendix E. Simple screening questions were used to re-confirm the eligibility of participants in the first three questions. These introductory inquiries were also employed to alleviate participants' anxiety, necessitating only brief, direct responses. The purpose of Questions 4 and 5 was to establish the context by examining their overall impressions of online education. Smith *et al*. (2003) recommend that participants commence by posing general questions about the phenomenon's experience in order to orient them to the inquiry's focus. This also enables the establishment of a rapport with the participant, which is advisable for subsequent inquiries that are more detailed or emotionally evocative (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Questions 6-12 were designed to urge participants to reflect deeply on their experiences by presenting particular instances, rather than allowing them to give generalised perspectives. These included describing specific benefits and difficulties of online learning, challenges they faced and how these affected their learning experience. Follow-up questions were included on the schedule to help prompt participants if they struggled to fully describe situations or how they had felt. However, these were not always used by the researcher and other follow-up questions were used at times as conversation flowed, in line with the principles of semi-structured interviews (Reid *et al*., 2005).

One of the key objectives of this study was to identify student-led solutions to online learning challenges within HSC. Therefore, several of the questions were followed up with further prompts to ask about ways participants thought challenges they faced could be overcome in future. The final question (13) was open-ended, designed to encourage participants to share any further information or experiences they felt relevant. This often turned up unexpected responses, that the researcher had not considered when compiling the schedule. This provided some valuable data and proved a very useful addition. After each interview, a debrief was conducted where participants were reminded of their rights to confidentiality and to withdraw at any time, the anticipated outcomes, and the study's timelines.

3.3.c Interview setting

An important consideration when selecting data collection tools is the ability to utilise technological tools that integrate with or represent the phenomenon under examination

(Lobe *et al.*, 2020). Interviews were therefore conducted utilising video-conferencing software (Zoom) in a remote manner. The study's context is consistent with the chosen technology for conducting interviews, specifically, an "online" method. This also aligned with the government COVID-19 regulations and university policy at the time of data collection. However, the ability for participants to select their own convenient and more "neutral" location for interviews has been shown to contribute to a more relaxed atmosphere, enabling participants to engage in open conversation and mitigate potential power imbalances that may arise between the interviewer and respondent (Archibald *et al.*, 2019).

According to Herzog (2005), the choice of interview site influences how participants shape their perception of reality. Another apparent advantage of doing online interviews was that participants were able to stay fully engaged in their current experience, which perhaps facilitated deeper reflection. Throughout several interviews, numerous disruptions occurred. These factors encompassed delivery to households, ambient noise generated by family members or housemates, and technology challenges such as microphone and camera malfunctions or insufficient connectivity. The experience of conducting interviews in these circumstances was discussed in the researcher's reflexive journal. The researcher contemplated the potential impact of these same problems on the participants' capacity to actively participate in online learning. It also prompted the researcher to contemplate the extent to which they were gaining access to the intimate lives of the participants, frequently in their homes. Consequently, the researcher explicitly clarified their position as a researcher rather than a teacher/lecturer at the start of each interview.

3.3.d Sampling

Participants were recruited from across the School of Health & Social Care at the University of Essex. This university was selected, partly due to convenience, but also due to the diverse student body it attracts. With a broad range of demographics and global focus, it provided an ideal frame from which to recruit. The researcher utilised purposive sampling to align with the theoretical foundations of phenomenology, which involves selecting individuals who had expertise in the specific topic under investigation (Reid *et al*., 2005). Purposive sampling is a method that seeks to include participants who have a wide range of experiences related to a certain phenomenon. This is done in order to prevent the biases that might occur with opportunity or convenience sampling (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The lack of broad applicability of the results obtained by purposive sampling is a significant obstacle associated with this method. Due to the non-random selection of the sample, it may lack representativeness of the larger population, and the findings of this study may not be applicable to other groups or populations. Nevertheless, since this objective was not the focus of the study, the researcher considered it suitable.

As this study was looking to explore the student experience across the school, participants were sought from a range of academic programmes, including full-time and part-time, and at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. One of the study objectives was to examine whether three key characteristics affected students' experience of online learning. Therefore, criterion sampling was utilised to identify participants with a range of ethnic backgrounds, genders and ages. Criterion sampling helps researchers

study a very specific or narrow criteria and explore the implications of these within the phenomena of interest (Reid *et al.*, 2005).

Some of the specific sampling criteria required participants from traditionally "hard to reach" populations, often due to historical or cultural barriers. Therefore, snowball sampling was also used. This non-probability sampling method is where existing participants personally refer new participants who meet the specified criteria (Langdridge, 2007). This allowed the researcher to generate specific sub-groups within the sample to directly address the study aims and objectives. It is acknowledged that snowball sampling can potentially introduce potential for sampling bias, as participants may only refer others with similar experiences or beliefs. However, this is a vital method of ensuring representation of key characteristics within a sample and was mitigated by using multiple sources to recruit initial participants.

3.3.d.1 Sample Size

The size of the final sample was deliberately not large to maintain an idiographic emphasis. This decision was based on previous qualitative studies in this field and the general criterion for sample sizes in phenomenological investigations (Smith *et al.*, 1999). Phenomenological researchers prioritise depth above breadth in their investigations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Some recommendations include that a small phenomenological study of this kind should have a participant pool ranging from 10 to fifteen individuals (Turpin *et al*., 1997; Creswell, 2013). The sample size used also aligns with studies explored in the literature review (Chandler, 2022; Gumede & Badriparsad, 2022; Suzuki *et al*., 2022).

The initial objective was to enrol fifteen participants in order to accommodate withdrawals and ensure that a minimum of ten interviews were available for analysis. In the end, twelve participants were recruited and participated in the investigation. Several other individuals expressed interest, but they neglected to respond to the initial correspondence. Three males, eight females, and one non-binary participant comprised the final sample. In addition to gender, the participants represented a variety of ages, ethnic backgrounds, and academic disciplines. Appendix F contains a comprehensive analysis of the demographics of the participants.

A limiting factor for participant recruitment and final sample size was partly due to effects of COVID-19. Interviews were advertised as taking place online, due to government and university social distancing regulations in place at the time. Some interested participants expressed initial interest but then complained of “Zoom fatigue” or reluctance at carrying out unnecessary online meetings. This may have been partly due to overwhelm from the whole experience of the pandemic but also from people transitioning to new online ways of meeting and working.

3.3.e Inclusion & exclusion criteria

Establishing clear inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants enhances the probability of generating dependable outcomes and safeguards vulnerable persons from being taken advantage of (Reid *et al.*, 2005). It is crucial that criterion is set that reflect the study aims and objectives, whilst remaining fair and practical. With regards to inclusion, participants for this study had to have studied online within the School of Health & Social Care. The only age criteria was that participants must be over the age

of eighteen. Much older participants were eligible but not likely to be recruited due to the population the sample was being drawn from (university students). Although, HSC do have a higher average age profile than many other academic departments with the university.

In terms of exclusion criteria, those who did not speak English were eliminated owing to the financial implications of translation. The only other exclusion criteria were students within the school who had not studied online in any way. As previously stated, criterion sampling was used to recruit participants with a range of key characteristics. These were age, ethnicity and gender. Although none of these characteristics were used specifically as general inclusion or exclusion criteria, they were considered when filtering volunteers for the final sample to allow a range within the various demographic sub-groups.

3.4 Procedure

3.4.a Recruitment

Participants were recruited from across the School of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex. A range of methods were used to advertise, and seek volunteers for, the study. This included social media posts, posters within student area and emails. Background information was provided, along with the overall aims and objectives of the study. Interested parties were directed to contact the researcher by email with any further questions or to express interest in taking part. A couple of meetings were arranged with students who wished to ask questions about the study before committing. These face-to-face meetings proved valuable in the early stages and helped shape

some of the messaging and language used for recruitment and within the subsequent pilot study.

It became clear to the researcher that some students felt uneasy about airing what they felt might be dissatisfaction at their online learning experience and how this might affect their future assessment or grades. Wording was amended to make sure that confidentiality and anonymity were made very clear in any recruitment materials, hopefully allaying any potential fears and empowering students to come forward to talk openly about their experiences. The researcher realised that their role as a lecturer within the school could contribute to this also and so had to address this potential conflict early on in any discussions and make clear their role as researcher in this study, rather than teacher or assessor within the school.

Once interest to take part was expressed, a participant information sheet was sent to potential volunteers (see Appendix H). This outlined the study in more detail, including the likely outcomes, confidentiality and anonymity agreements, risks and participant rights. If interested parties then wished to volunteer, they were then asked to complete and return a study consent form (see Appendix I). This document contained a number of statements that volunteers signed to confirm their understanding of the study and associated processes involved. They then signed the overall document, giving consent to take part and acknowledging their right to withdraw at any time.

Potential volunteers were also asked to return a participant demographic survey (see Appendix J). As previously discussed, the information provided on this did not collect inclusion/exclusion criteria information specifically but was used to allow the

researcher to filter potential participants using criterion sampling methods. Therefore, a final sample could be selected including a range within the various demographic sub-groups of interest. Careful consideration was given into how this demographic information was collected to ensure that it was inclusive and in line with standardized criteria across the sector.

Due to Data Protection legislation, the researcher decided to avoid asking for highly specific personal information such as date of birth. Age groupings were used that allowed respondents to indicate the age range they fell within. This allowed data to be grouped accordingly and used to inform data analysis, without risking any misuse of personal data. The categorisation of gender has become highly sensitive and no longer a simple binary option. Bauer *et al*. (2017) state that gender identity has a significant impact on how people experience phenomena and the concept was crucial to the aims and objectives to this study. Therefore, a *Trans* category was included as an accepted umbrella term, to cover respondents who identify in other ways such as non-binary, transsexual or pangender. Schudson & Morgenroth (2022) state that gender identity is a fluid and constantly evolving concept so, in line with data collection methods used for other studies in this field, an extra category of *Other* was added with a free text box. This would allow respondents to self-identify and respond in ways in which they felt none of the other categories might represent.

Collecting data on ethnicity can be challenging due to the concepts involved being complex and multifaceted in nature. Membership of particular ethnic groups is self-defined and subjectively meaningful to individuals. This is often in the context of

evolving social or political landscapes (Sykes *et al.*, 2010). The demographic survey therefore utilised the “harmonised” ethnic categories (with examples) recommended by the United Kingdom Government Statistical Service (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This included detailed ethnic categories specific to the constituent countries within the United Kingdom, as well as widely used categories of worldwide and multiple/mixed ethnicity. Although the use of defined categories does restrict the freedom of respondents to self-identify their ethnicity, it is important in allowing researchers to arrange data in a reproducible way and between sources (GSS Harmonisation Team, 2023).

3.4.b Pilot study

Pilot studies in qualitative research allow the “trialing” of crucial procedures or a specific research instrument. Conducting a pilot study has the benefit of gaining preliminary insight into potential areas of failure in the primary research project, potential lack of adherence to research procedures, or unsuitability or complexity of recommended techniques or equipment (Baker, 1994). Consequently, the researcher initiated the investigation with a pilot study involving three participants. This process served to refine the research protocol, test and adjust the interview questions, appraise the overall feasibility and, importantly, gain preliminary data.

The pilot study proved valuable and ambiguous wording in the draft questions was highlighted by participants and addressed. It became clear that the researcher’s role as a lecturer in the school could have an impact on participants’ willingness to speak freely, something that was then reflected upon in the reflexive journal/statement

and then addressed directly in subsequent interviews. The researcher also used this time to identify and overcome logistical issues such as privacy and internet connectivity. This led to the production of extra information and guidance for participants in the main study.

The additional measures implemented in the pilot study can be seen to enhance the study's internal credibility and dependability. However, it must be noted that successful completion of a pilot study does not always ensure the success of a subsequent study. It can be argued that if issues are highlighted in a pilot study, and modifications are made in response to this, data could be flawed or erroneous (Peat *et al*., 2002). This is certainly a significant concern in quantitative studies. But in qualitative studies, such as this, a progressive approach to data collection and analysis is commonly applied. According to Holloway (1997), each interview in a series should be seen as an improvement over the previous one. This is because the interviewer may learn useful insights from the prior interviews, which will be used to build better interview schedules and questions for the upcoming interviews. Therefore, the researcher believed that doing a pilot study was an essential and vital stage in the design and development of this study.

3.4.c Interview procedure

The researcher conducted interviews utilising the Zoom video conferencing programme, which allowed for face-to-face (online) interaction. Participants were sent joining instructions and links for the meeting in advance, along with some guidance on ensuring privacy, adequate internet signal and minimising disruptions. All participants were

reminded of study aims and that interviews would be recorded before interviewing began. Interviews were then recorded using the automated recording system within Zoom. Whilst setting up the meetings in the software prior to interviews, transcription was selected. This meant that all the recorded discussions were automatically transcribed verbatim.

The interviews varied in length, ranging from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 25 minutes. The mean time of an interview was 57 minutes. Before commencing the interviews, the participants were notified that the duration of each interview would be around 60 minutes. After 60 minutes had passed, participants were notified and given the option to continue. None of the interviews were terminated at this point. Many of the interviews were documented to include notable pauses and non-verbal reactions, including facial expressions and gestures. These were noted as accurately as possible by the researcher during the interview and added to the transcripts during editing. In line with van Manen's (2003) approach, long pauses or silence were not discouraged by the researcher. These can often allow participants to gather memories and continue with their story. Although, if participants did declare any kind of mental block, the last sentence or question was repeated to aid participants regain their train of thought.

3.5 Data analysis

Hermeneutic Phenomenology was selected as the qualitative research approach for this inquiry, as previously stated. More specifically, by applying the methodologies suggested by van Manen (1997; 2017). This technique suggests a six-step process, with the last four steps guiding the researcher in analysing the collected data. The

method was chosen for this investigation due its emphasis on meaning exploration and its description of the subjective experience of an individual in relation to a phenomenon, in addition to its impact on that individual (Creswell, 2007).

3.5.a Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a commonly employed interpretative approach in hermeneutic phenomenology that aims to discover themes within transcribed interviews (van Manen, 2014). Thematic analysis is valuable for revealing the intrinsic “meanings” present within transcribed interview data. According to Ho *et al.* (2017), allows the researcher to develop insight into the prevalence of theoretical or practical knowledge that is hidden inside ordinary language throughout the process of performing theme analysis in hermeneutic phenomenological research.

Thematic analysis is a methodology and approach used to produce a thorough, complex, and multidimensional description of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It surpasses mere description as it endeavours to unearth the underlying themes and sub-themes that are encapsulated and emphasised in the work’s developing connotations and imagery (van Manen, 1997). Hermeneutic phenomenology differentiates between the process of identifying themes, which involves rebuilding the underlying structure of meanings found in human experiences as articulated in written language, and simply uncovering repetitive patterns (themes) (van Manen, 2014).

3.5.b Reflexive thematic analysis

Perhaps the most significant factor contributing to the recent surge in interest surrounding thematic analysis, is the seminal publication by Braun & Clarke (2006),

which explored the subject in the realm of psychology. However, scholars who cite Braun & Clarke's (2006) work commonly fail to utilise their more recent "reflexive" approach to this methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2019 & 2020). This promotes more active involvement of the researcher in the co-production of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Codes are therefore developed based on the researcher's own interpretations of meaning patterns seen in the dataset. In light of the significance attributed to reflective practise in pedagogical research and HSC, this study employed this reflexive approach to thematic analysis.

With the researcher making an effort to minimise their professional and personal biases, they examined particular sections that addressed the personal experiences of online learning in accordance with the recommendations of Braun & Clarke (2019). The objective being to facilitate meaning to present itself within the framework of personal lived experience (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 2002). To improve the study's credibility, the researcher maintained a reflective journal during the entire process to promote openness and recognition of possible biases (Walsh & Downe, 2006). The journal documented the researcher's preliminary observations with the intention of "bracketing off" any preconceived notions. These personal reflections were then utilised to constantly adjust the data collection and analytic processes.

An adjustment demonstrating this is how the researcher recognised that the results of one interview may influence the next. Following the completion of two interviews in succession, the researcher realised that the interview technique in the latter may have been influenced by the emotional topics discussed in the former.

Following this realisation, interviews were no longer scheduled in close succession, allowing for sufficient time to completely process the discussed topics.

3.5.c Process

Braun & Clarke (2020) propose six phases that assist in identifying and examining the essential components of theme analysis. Although the six phases are organised in sequence, the analysis is not a straightforward procedure where each step is finished one after the other. Conversely, the analysis employs a recursive and iterative approach, necessitating the researcher to repeatedly go repeatedly through the phases as necessary.

Analytic reduction is therefore an iterative endeavor that entails a cyclical examination of the texts and their situated meanings. These experiences are then rebuilt using a philosophical interpretation that places the individual's lived experience into a wider historical and cultural framework (Rescher, 1997). Although not adhered to as a strict set of instructions, Braun & Clarke's (2020) six-phase procedure served as a general guide for this investigation. Each of these phases will now be explored in greater detail.

3.5.c.1 Phase one: Familiarisation with the data

The process of data analysis began with the listening and modification of verbatim interview transcripts captured via the Zoom software. Occasional misrepresentations of words and difficulties in accurately recording participant speech with particularly strong dialects were issues that occurred with the software. The researcher's interview notes

aided in the correction and editing process, and access to the audio-video recordings allowed for accurate retranslation of the data. Nevertheless, the researcher discovered that the editing process became increasingly challenging the longer it remained between the interview and the transcription review/editing phase. As a result, scheduling the editing process in close proximity to the interview became imperative.

Following this, the data were cleansed by eliminating repetitions and mis-starts without altering their meaning or nuance. In situations where the participant used “it” or “thing” to allude to a particular object or concept, the specific object or concept was enclosed in brackets. In instances where the subject used “they” or “them” to refer to another individual, the individual’s relationship to the subject was delimited within brackets. To ensure anonymity, any potentially identifiable information, including the names of other students or staff members, was substituted.

3.5.c.2 Phase two: Generating initial codes

Following the completion of the review and editing process, every transcript underwent multiple readings. Through the use of handwritten notes, immediate thoughts regarding small portions of data were captured by highlighting relevant words, phrases, and sentences. Preliminary observations were made through spontaneous textual analysis, during which the researcher provided commentary on the transcript’s substance, linguistic choices, and interpretations pertaining to non-verbal cues such as pauses. All pertinent data was encoded, excluding narrative segments that were irrelevant to the experience and its wider context (e.g., preliminary ice-breaking discussions regarding weather).

Coding (as well as theme development) is a fluid and organic process that frequently evolves during the analysis phase. Advancement in the analysis process typically promotes increased comprehension of the data, potentially leading to the identification of novel patterns of significance (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The codes generated by the researcher were inductive in nature, meaning they were derived directly from the data's content and were devoid of any preconceived notions or conceptual frameworks. As a result, the data were 'open-coded' rather than coded according to a pre-established coding framework so as to more accurately represent the participants' intended meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Additionally, latent coding was implemented. This endeavour surpasses the mere description of the data and seeks to discern latent meanings, presumptions, ideologies, or concepts that might influence or shape the data's semantic or descriptive substance. This means that when coding is not immediately apparent, the analysis becomes significantly more subjective, requiring the researcher to take on a more active and creative role. Braun & Clarke (2013 & 2020) have, in fact, asserted on multiple occasions that themes and patterns do not "emerge" from the data. Conversely, the researcher assumes an engaged position in the process of deciphering codes and themes, as well as determining which ones are pertinent to the research inquiry.

3.5.c.3 Phase three: Generating themes

Upon completion of coding all pertinent data items, this stage commences. The focus shifts from examining the meaning and importance of individual data points, to

examining the combined meaning and importance across the entire dataset (Boyatzis, 1998). An examination is conducted on the classified data to determine how distinct codes can be merged in accordance with their shared meanings in order to generate themes or subthemes. This process entailed consolidating several codes that pertain to a comparable fundamental concept or attribute of the data into a solitary code.

Subsequently, codes that represented a cohesive narrative within the data were designated as a theme or subtheme. It is crucial to emphasise that the significance of a subject is not contingent upon the quantity of codes or data items that contribute to its formation. The structure of codes and data points must possess meaningful significance in order to effectively address the specified research question(s) (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

At this stage, themes identified ought to be discernible; however, the researcher encountered difficulty in identifying certain themes that seemed to be in opposition to one another. Additionally, the researcher encountered challenges in relinquishing certain intriguing codes or potential themes that, upon closer examination, failed to align with the overarching analysis. As a result, codes and data items were organised based on their associated topics, and possible themes were developed.

3.5.c.4 Phase four: Reviewing potential themes

This stage necessitates evaluating the candidate themes in respect to the entire dataset and the coded data items (Braun & Clarke, 2013 & 2020). One aspect of the examination is evaluating whether the items and codes form a consistent pattern. If this

is the case, it may be concluded that the candidate theme or sub-theme puts forth a coherent argument which enhances the overall story within the data (Patton, 1990). The ultimate aim of this phase is to establish that themes can be effectively informed by items and codes, and that the interpretation of the dataset can be appropriately guided by themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two of the prospective themes were subsequently discarded because they did not explicitly address any of the research objectives. At the end of this phase, it is suggested that a thematic map is produced, showing the links and relationships between the themes/sub-themes. This can be found at Appendix K.

3.5.c.5 Phase five: Defining and naming themes

As previously stated, each theme must offer a cohesive and rational explanation of the data that cannot be deduced from the other themes. It is crucial however that the themes come together to create a logical and consistent storyline that matches the information and offers relevant insights for the study objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2016). During this step, the titles of the themes were subjected to a final review. The names serve as the initial clue to the reader on the information derived from the data. Consequently, names that were concise and instructive were selected.

During this phase, the researcher needed to determine which data items and quotes would serve as extracts when presenting the results. The selected excerpts are chosen to present a succinct and persuasive narrative of the claims posited by a specific theme (Terry *et al*., 2017). Occasionally, numerous extracts were used to demonstrate the unity of the theme's individual data elements and to convey the diverse ways in which meaning is expressed in these data elements.

3.5.c.6 Phase six: Producing the report

As outlined above, reflexive thematic analysis is seldom completed sequentially as it requires an iterative process. Unlike typical quantitative research methods, qualitative research includes the report write-up as an essential component of the analysis process, rather to having the researcher do the analysis and then compose the results separately (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Throughout the analytic process, the codes and themes underwent development and modification, which therefore influenced the results and the corresponding report.

3.5.d Intersectional analysis

Within a “matrix of dominance marked by overlapping oppressions” (Collins, 2000, p. 23), the concept of *intersectionality* is a way to examine and comprehend the lived realities of individuals who are tigmatizati on multiple fronts. Intersectional techniques are advantageous to researchers because they offer an analytical framework for understanding the connections between, and impact of, various personal characteristics and socially constructed identities, and how these influence experiences at individual and group level (Bauer, 2014).

This approach has been critiqued by some for focusing on the oppression of groups and neglecting other aspects. Hancock (2007) state that this criticism stems from the observation that the majority of research using intersectional approaches has mostly focussed on specific groups, such as women of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Nevertheless, the theory of intersectionality posits that this framework applies to all groups, since individuals are members of several social categories or groups, each

characterised by varying levels of power or inequality. This indicates that it may be utilised to explore topics where individuals can experience different privileges or oppressions, or who possess both advantages and disadvantages simultaneously (Christensen & Jensen, 2012).

Data analysis in this study therefore employed an intersectional layer, which considered both similarities and distinctions among categories and factors, while also taking into account variations in experiences and perspectives. Using a multi-level approach via nested coding of the data material (Hankivsky, 2014), the relationship between individual experiences and behaviours and broader contextual and group-level factors were therefore explored to specifically address research objective 2.

3.6 Ethics

3.6.a Ethical approval

Prior to doing any research, the University of Essex's Ethics Review and Management System (ERAMS) granted full ethical approval. The proposed study (ETH2021-1856) was reviewed by a committee to ensure that it met the appropriate ethical standards and principles. Evidence of ethical approval can be found at Appendix G.

3.6.b Ethical considerations

Ethical concerns may manifest during any phase or stage of the qualitative research procedure. The researcher primarily took into account the following ethical considerations: informed consent, risk of injury, confidentiality, and anonymity. These will be explored in more detail in the following sections.

As the study proposed using human participants, the researcher completed the university's online training course in qualitative research before submitting the ethical approval application. It is essential to acknowledge that safeguarding the rights of human participants and maintaining confidentiality are of utmost significance in the context of online interviews, given the challenges of establishing trust and rapport due to the lack of physical contact (Abedin *et al*., 2019).

This study completely adhered to the ethical principles for human research outlined by the British Psychological Society (BPS). The fundamental tenet is that the potential for damage should not exceed the risks that are usually encountered in daily life (BPS, 2021).

3.6.b.1 Informed consent

Before starting all interviews, the researcher acquired informed written consent from each participant, following the ethical approval guidelines. Prior to the study, participants were provided with information on the study's goals and objectives, potential advantages and dangers of participation, protocols for ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and the rights of the participants. Appendix H contains the information document for participants. The participants were prompted to pose inquiries, and those who expressed interest in taking part were invited to a consultation with the researcher in order to provide written consent and address any concerns. Before conducting any interviews in this study, written consent was obtained.

According to Munthe *at al.* (2010), acquiring informed consent entails counselling the participant and providing them with sufficient information to enable them to make an

autonomous decision. The consent form (Appendix I) was formulated in adherence to the guidelines provided by the university. It comprised several confirmatory statements, which were duly acknowledged by the participants through initialling. In addition, their signature and date were required to finalise the consent procedure.

3.6.b.2 Risk of harm

When examining human experiences, Cresswell (1998) suggests “debriefing” following interviews. The aim being to confirm that the interview has not had any negative impact on the participants, due to any memories or emotions it might have evoked. As a result, participants were queried regarding their interview experience and whether there were any topics they wished to elaborate on but were unable to do so. In the event that participants expressed any concerns regarding their personal safety or the safety of others, the researcher forwarded this information to the student wellbeing team at the university for further discussion with the participant. There were no disclosures of such concerns by study participants, and there were no referrals to the wellbeing team.

3.6.b.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

Respecting the privacy of participants and obtaining their informed consent regarding access to their personal information and data are all components of confidentiality. The principle of anonymity guarantees that no unnecessary collection of personally identifiable information occurs and that the research guarantees that no participant can be identified (Elliot *et al.*, 1999). The researcher informed the participants that the interviews would be video recorded and that the footage would be reviewed at a later

date. Participants were advised that they had the option to terminate the interview at any time and to deactivate their camera or microphone at any moment.

In an effort to maintain confidentiality, the researcher conducted interviews within a private room. To safeguard privacy, the researcher placed a sign to the exterior door to denote that the room was in use. The participants were provided with interview instructions in advance, which also advised them to locate private areas to conduct the online interviews and to utilise signs or inform colleagues, family, or friends that they would be discussing private and confidential matters.

Every interview transcript was securely stored as a password-protected Microsoft Word document, ensuring that any personally identifiable information was removed. The researcher was the sole individual who was aware of the unique access credentials for each file. Afterwards, the participants were given a unique code letter that was only known by the researcher. Each file was encrypted with a password and securely kept in the university's cloud storage. Transcripts were securely maintained in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office, where the process of coding was manually carried out on physical copies.

Furthermore, all demographic and consent documents that were scanned were stored in a secure cabinet until they were digitised. Additionally, demographic information and consent forms were physically secured until they were scanned electronically. The digital files were subsequently password-protected, and all paper copies were shredded and disposed of in confidential refuse containers within the school.

All interview data and recordings shall be retained for a maximum of five years in adherence to data protection legislation, after which they shall be deleted. A password-protected folder was utilised to store backups of all digital resources on an encrypted personal hard drive. Each participant was informed of their entitlement to withdraw from the research at any time through the participant information and consent forms. Consent was not withdrawn by any participant at any stage of the study.

3.7 Assessing quality

Quantitative research has historically been associated with validity and reliability, in order to guarantee the production of trustworthy and credible results. There is considerable debate regarding the significance of these constructs, as the subjectivity of the researcher can more easily influence the interpretation of results in qualitative studies (Brink, 1993). Researchers have posited that instead of employing the criteria utilised to evaluate quantitative research, the quality of their investigations ought to be gauged in accordance with a suitable set of criteria (Smith *et al*., 2009).

Consequently, many methods have been created to evaluate the standard of qualitative research. Smith *et al*. (2009) support Yardley's (2000) criteria since they offer several methods for assessing quality and are relevant to research of any theoretical perspective. Yardley (2000) established four principles: context awareness, commitment and rigour, openness and coherence, and effect and importance. Each will now be described in greater detail.

3.7.a Sensitivity to context

Contextual sensitivity refers to the practice of considering the social environment and the interactions between the researcher and the participants when interpreting and evaluating obtained data (Yardley, 2008). Demonstrating sensitivity to context can be accomplished through various means, such as conducting a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, considering the socio-cultural environment in which the research is situated, and approaching data collection with care and consideration (Yardley, 2000). Importantly, the idiographic emphasis of phenomenological investigation means it is highly influenced by context sensitivity.

Thorough examination of the ontological and epistemological stance was undertaken, alongside an in-depth investigation of the theoretical foundations of research methodologies, to guarantee that the approach aligned with the objectives and stance of the research. In addition, context sensitivity was accomplished through the use of verbatim excerpts that gave participants a voice, which is presented in the results chapter. With respect to demonstrating sensitivity during the interview, the researcher established rapport by leveraging their professional healthcare background and endeavoured to remain cognizant of any interactional challenges that may have arisen.

3.7.b Commitment and rigour

The principles of commitment and rigour highlight the importance of ensuring meticulous data collection and analysis methods, as well as the participants' level of attention and commitment. The rigour of a study may be affected by several factors, including the quality of data collection and processing, as well as the suitability of the

sample in regard to the research objectives (Yardley, 2000). During the pilot phase of this study, participants provided suggestions and input on the interview questions and preliminary analysis. These two techniques were used to assure the rigour of the investigation. The researcher also participated in many doctoral research training courses offered by the institution to ensure that quality was maintained, and practices used were in line with current and best practice.

3.7.c Transparency and coherence

Transparency refers to the researcher's ability to clearly delineate the various phases of the inquiry. Coherence pertains to the degree to which the research procedures employed align with the theoretical concepts of the approach (Yardley, 2000). The researcher's use of a reflective journal, which included assumptions and other reflections, helped to obtain reliable data for this study. Incorporating participant feedback from the pilot study while developing the interview schedule not only reduced question bias but also created a setting where participants felt at ease expressing their experiences openly and honestly.

The tigmatiher confirmed comprehension of participants' meaning during interviews through means such as clarifying the definitions of terms or phrases used, summarising their responses, and repeating them back to ensure clarity and accuracy. An additional step taken to ensure coherence and transparency in this investigation was to maintain a transparent audit trail of all activities.

3.8 Dissemination

This thesis will be available via the University of Essex Repository upon successful completion of the Professional Doctorate in Healthcare Education. The researcher also hopes that the findings and recommendations will be reviewed by key individuals within the School of Health and Social Care. The thesis will therefore be shared with the school's Dean, Director of Education, Director of Research and Director of Student Engagement and Satisfaction. It is hoped that the outcomes will help drive future online learning approaches and policies within the school, improving the online learning experience for future students within it.

During the interview debriefing phase, participants were presented with the choice of granting consent to be contacted in order to receive a copy of the study or to be invited to a feedback meeting regarding the research's outcomes. With the consent of all participants, written summaries and/or feedback meetings will be provided to all individuals involved.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of a thorough qualitative analysis of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews detailed previously. Braun & Clarke's (2019, 2020) reflexive thematic analysis approach was taken to identify key themes and associated sub-themes within the data. As discussed in the Methodology chapter, themes identified are intended to be discernible from one another, whilst presenting a coherent narrative (Boyatzis, 1998). However, inevitably there is always some overlap between topics discussed and codes generated. If it appeared that certain preliminary themes lacked sufficient data to substantiate them, they were merged as sub-themes into other overarching themes.

4.1 Findings

The findings in this chapter are reported without theoretical interpretation and reflect purely the data presented by participants and the personal analysis of the researcher. Greater exploration and interpretation of the topics raised within this chapter, with reference to pertinent literature, will be provided in the Discussion chapter.

4.1.a Theme One – The physical environment

The predominately home-based, physical environment in which learning took place emerged as one of the main themes. In contrast to in-person and classroom or campus-based learning, the online learning environment gave more autonomy to students to control their routines as they wished. However, greater distractions, difficulties differentiating between home/study space and technical difficulties posed real challenges to this mode of study.

4.1.a.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Distractions from learning

Many students faced challenges learning online in terms of distractions. Often these were external:

> *"People knocking at the door with Amazon deliveries. I could never fully concentrate. I think it does definitely distract you, studying at home. It definitely affected my learning [because] I really struggled to focus a lot of the time (A 157)."*

Other participants identified that learning online hampered their ability to focus and affected their studying momentum significantly, due to distractions like home deliveries and easy access to food and drink:

> *"You know it's easy to sort of be distracted by the things that are around you; you're not in the classroom. You know you've got the distractions you can get up and walk away and make a cup of coffee or grab food or whatever (F 65)."*

For participants, distractions did not only occur due to external factors and disturbances. In the online learning environment, engaging with others within the household or engaging in daily conversations during studying hours can be distracting and diverts students' attention off to other tasks. These environmental aspects do not happen in the classroom, as they are dedicated spaces designed for teaching and learning. However, within the household, such boundaries can easily blur, causing extreme distraction and hence, lack of attention or engagement in the learning. Interestingly, these were reported more by older participants, and more specifically, those with parental responsibilities. This was made even harder by the requirement during the

COVID-19 pandemic to home-school children for prolonged periods, increasing the pressure on students who had children:

> *"It was a nightmare. I had three kids at home during a lot of that time and two of them needed teaching at home cos the schools were shut. I was trying to set them work to do, log-in to do online lectures and stuff, whilst trying to keep my kids from killing each other! (D 333)."*

Some of these internal distractions from learning also appeared to be influenced by cultural or gender-based roles within the household:

> *"I have a load of brothers and sisters in the house and I have to look after them a lot. I'm expected to do loads of cooking and cleaning, which isn't really fair as my brothers don't have to do this, but it's just the way it is I suppose. When I'm away at uni all day [on campus] I didn't have to do all that (A 420-422)."*

Participant A here describes how the cultural expectations within her household meant that females were expected to do more of the household chores and cooking. This was something that she didn't feel as much pressure to do when studying on campus and outside of the home environment.

The use of digital technology and associated ease of access to other software or games can also steal students' attention from their studies, leaving them in a distracted state. Although these challenges can be overcome through following an organised daily routine, the distracting elements embedded in the online learning environment cannot be ignored:

> *"I felt like I actually didn't take much of it in during online lectures. I did try number things like put my phone in my drawer or things like that. I found that being able to just look at my phone whenever I wanted was really distracting (J 235-237)."*

One participant (J) identified that their mindless online scrolling or using Twitter and Facebook has been challenging in terms of paying attention to the lectures or engaging with the class during online breakout sessions. They also felt that online methods lend more control or power to students, and this can severely alter the dynamic and ability to learn when students are distracted or do not feel like studying. This, on the other hand, is not a major issue in the in-person, classroom-based environments, where digital technology use is often prohibited during lecture hours:

> *"I would not dare look at my phone all the time in a face-to-face lecture but online there's nothing to stop you just checking Facebook or whatever. I spent so many wasted hours scrolling through social media when I was meant to be in online lectures or breakout groups (J 245-247)."*

Knowing what takes students' attention away from learning and keeping track of distracting elements can be helpful in acknowledging the challenges that exist and taking small steps to curb them the next time students prepare for their online studies.

4.1.a.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Differentiation of space

In the home-based online learning situations discussed, a student's bedroom or lounge often becomes their classroom, hence, disrupting the sanctuary of their resting or recreational spaces, leading to poor work-life balance in many cases:

"But it does affect your way of studying because I only had access to my bedroom, because the rest of the house was absolutely crazy. So, you're studying in the same place as you're living. No differentiation, so it becomes hard. There is just no separation of anything (A 140)."

Home-based online learning therefore often blurs the boundary between classroom and personal space(s), which for most students can also mean lack of focus and motivation. This happens when students are not able to switch their brain to a 'studying mode' because the physical space remains unchanged. These situations can cause poor concentration levels, and students can struggle to follow lectures, participate in the virtual classroom, and may even contribute to poor academic results. Simple tasks such as getting dressed and commuting to the university can sometime also mean preparing the mind to study, and bringing themselves to a more focused, dedicated headspace.

Due to the loss of traditional classroom features, students' personal leisure spaces are also compromised in the name of home-based, online learning, causing poor effects on their social and personal relationships:

"Not feeling comfortable, not even wanting to, and not having much choice over how much do I show people [through computer screens]. There is kind of stuff in my house like when you come to a classroom, you only bring yourself and you do not bring anything from your home. If you've got children. You do not bring them [to the classroom] (K 162-164)."

This participant (K) identified that they felt online learning intruded into their privacy and personal circumstances, without giving any control over their surroundings. In an in-person classroom, a student may wish to discuss their family structures or

about their children with other classmates but may or may not prefer to show their children to the world. In the online environment, this personal choice does not always exist or is highly compromised in many instances.

Another profound impact of the lack of differentiation of space is identified in participant L's situation where she felt that studying at home meant that she was unable to separate from her maternal role and caring for her children's needs. This was often at the expense of her own learning commitments or ability to engage. Interestingly, this was not something she'd struggled with whilst studying the same course in-person:

> "*Quite deep stuff you know, about my role as a Mum. I've got an older one that's 19, I've got one that's 11 with autism, and then a 10 and six years old. And they're all very needy, so maybe if my family dynamics are different, I would not have felt this way, but yeah, I've got a big family and a lot of responsibilities. I couldn't think about studying when they were all constantly needing my attention or asking for stuff. You can detach from all that when you go off to uni but not when studying at home [online] (L 818 – 829).*"

As identified by the participant (L), studying at home often means juggling both childcare duties and educational responsibilities at the same time. This becomes more evident as a challenge in families having more children and even more so when they have special learning needs or medical conditions. In contrast to the traditional, in-person classroom, students do not have the choice to leave their parental responsibilities behind for a few hours for studying in a focused, dedicated environment. When at home, the increasing needs for parents to provide childcare steals their attention, consumes their energy, and can leave them distracted with very little motivation to engage in educational activities.

One participant (F) identified that, in the online learning environment, differences in people's professional boundaries can lead to arguments and other issues. When students living in a household have different learning or social preferences, there needs to be a well-rounded system of regulating their professional lives. In this case, their partner barging in during meetings and studying often made the student annoyed and sometimes, even frustrated. All these effects will have significantly adverse impacts on their productivity, mental health and can even disrupt personal relationships with other family members:

> *"My wife was guilty of that with me. Like, if I am in a lesson or doing group work, she just barged in, bringing me in tea or coffee but interrupting me. (F 573-574)."*

4.1.a.3 Sub-theme 1.3: A flexible approach

Despite the challenges analysed in the above passages, the interviewees also stated that online education offers certain advantages in comparison with traditional classroom environments. The participants discussed how online learning offers the flexibility to provide childcare while studying, can be a time-saving mode of learning, is largely cost-effective, offers access to international lecturers/conferences/guest speaker sessions, allows the comfort of self-paced learning, provides flexibility in revisiting lectures in students' own time and has proven to be a good alternative mode for socially introverted or anxious people:

"It was incredibly beneficial to me. It's [online learning] very flexible because, like, I might need to stay back if I've got my daughter at home, I can just tend to her quickly. I would be able to stay at home and still take part. (D 111)."

This participant (D) identifies that online learning provides them with the flexibility to tend to childcare duties at home while being able to participate in their studies without major disruptions. For stay-at-home parents, online learning supports the pursuit of academic goals without sacrificing personal schedules. This also means there would be no emotional struggles involved in attending the class and taking one's child (or children) to the play area, to cook meals first or to prioritise pending school assignments. This does not only mean huge benefits in terms of parenting the children but causes an overall positive impact on students' mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Another participant (K) talked about how being at home studying also means taking out unnecessary decision-making from daily life such as about the clothes or shoes to wear or how to look in a certain way to be classroom acceptable.

"Obviously, keep it with self-care or sharing whatever but it's like you have to put so much effort into going to class in person like, oh, what am I going to wear today; I can't wear those shoes again because I have worn them like two days ago and a lot of other worries about appearances. (K 16)."

While online-learning etiquette does require students to wear appropriate clothing even though they are not present in the class in-person, the online learning environment allows students the confidence to dress down and more comfortably than when attending a physical classroom session. Although research suggests students' attire

plays an important role in creating a professional and disciplined classroom environment, it comes as no surprise that online learning environments offer more flexibility for modest dressing and does not require too much thinking into students' expressions of themselves. This flexibility and comfort was reported as a real benefit and contributed to students being able to concentrate more fully on the learning content.

Other participants contended that online education has economic benefits for students struggling with financial constraints. Aside from the flexibility it offers in learning in one's own time, online education also reduces financial burdens allowing students to keep their budgets under check while not denying themselves the opportunity of pursuing academic and career goals. As online learning reduces or even negates commuting and fuel costs, most participants contended that the financial savings were a real boon. The following comments highlight this and demonstrate how not having to commute to the educational institute has been considered a beneficial aspect of online education:

> *"I guess the fact that I could study at home and don't have to travel is quite a benefit because it means obviously you save money on traveling you know, save money on fuel. You save a lot of time as well, so it takes me sometimes up to two hours to get in. So, it's been quite nice in that sense in I could save time and money. (B 60-62)."*

Another participant (D) identifies the opportunities that online education provides in revisiting lectures or watching themselves present in their own time and at their own pace:

"And I know quite a few of us have found it really useful to go back to listen again, or re-watch lectures to clarify things. Zoom allowed us to watch yourself like presenting, so you can kind of just critique yourself. But also, re-listening listening to what other people have said. (D 353)."

As part of added flexibility, online education enables students to pursue education in a customised fashion, no longer being tied down by rigid timelines of the academic timetable. This not only accommodates different lifestyles but also facilitates the students to have a more personal study approach – a way that works for their own learning needs, their own pace and learning styles.

4.1.b Theme 2 – The social impact of learning online

The social aspect of learning is arguably the most challenging to replicate in the online learning environment. Students and teachers often crave social interaction in the virtual classrooms; hence, the need to address the social and emotional needs of those involved in online learning environments is crucial. The second emergent theme from the interviews discusses the social impacts of online learning. This includes how virtual learning environments can alter group dynamics and how people communicate. It also addresses the effect online learning can have on a student's accountability for their learning.

4.1.b.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Group dynamics in the virtual classroom

An online classroom can enable students to contribute to an environment of openness, dialogue, and respect, specifically in cases where some students may find it challenging to speak up or present their views in a face-to-face setting. In learning spaces like these, where the temporal dynamic and status relationships of the classroom undergo

remarkable changes, students and teachers are equally responsible to structure the virtual class interactions in a way that enables effective learning to take place. Introductions, icebreakers, and participatory activities are some measures using which teachers and students can mutually facilitate the group bonding process in virtual classrooms:

> *"On the campus I guess because you're interacting with people face to face, you know who you are talking to. When you talk to a person you know, it just feels more interactive, so you just find that easier to stay focused and I get the info I learned more in person. Although, I have I've had some online sessions where there has been quite a bit of interaction, where they've done breakout rooms where we've done smaller group discussions (B 14-28)."*

This participant (B) has identified that the lack of social connection in the virtual classrooms can affect concentration levels and has limited flexibility in how students can interact with one another and collaborate on projects or coursework. However, according to the participant's comments, online breakout rooms offer some value in enabling group discussions and positively affecting student collaboration in the online learning environment. Participant B goes on to discuss this in more detail:

> *"I'd say that the breakout rooms definitely did help to make it more interactive as a group, and it helped me keep my attention for longer. But still doesn't compare to actually being in person, where you're actually talking to people (B 41-46)."*

Another participant stated that they felt that online conversations are usually dominated by extroverts, individuals who speak louder or might have more confidence

in speaking up. This in turn, means that in the online environment, it is easier for shy or introverted people to hide behind screens and may not have the chance to share their thoughts or views, develop confidence or ask questions to confirm understanding:

> *"I also found it quite difficult with group conversations so with people sort of obviously talking over each other and with the delay and the connections and everything else, and I think I found that quite difficult, where is it was almost whoever was loudest would always speak first and go ahead of everyone else. (I 19)."*

Another participant I talked about how hard online discussion groups were due to cameras often being turned off by students and not being able to see each other. For some students, noticing others having their videos turned off might appear discouraging and can even dampen their motivations of engaging with the others and starting or maintaining online discourse:

> *"Most of the people had the cameras off so there was no point having any discussion because it is horrible, you can't see what people are up to, what they're doing, you don't even know if they're actually there. No point going into groups and discussing things because you can't see anybody, so I couldn't see the point of it. You just cannot engage very well with a person if you can't see them. A lot of what you learn is from someone's facial expressions etc. (C 24-28)."*

Participants stated how their preference was to design the group dynamics of breakout rooms in Zoom so that there were fewer students participating in the discussions as a closed group. This offers more possibilities of interacting with one another, in contrast to larger groups where people either speak too loud and too often, or shy away quietly in the background:

> *"If they're inside the main online lecture room, you kind of notice that a lot of students tend to go quiet and there might be certain students who end up speaking the most. But generally when there was like just 5-6 in the breakout rooms, there was much more engagement and it was so much more enjoyable (K 50)."*

Another interesting insight into how group dynamics are affected by online learning was offered by one of the participants. They described how the random nature through which breakout rooms were created within video conferencing software meant that there were several times that no males were included within a breakout discussion group. The participant described how this affected the tone and dynamic of the discussion that ensued:

> *"Yeah, really weird. Sometimes the breakout rooms wouldn't have any guys in. That would never happen in class where the lecturers are always really strict about making sure there's a mix of guys and girls. It was weird cos normally there's guys in these discussions and without them there was a weird vibe man, you know. Just all girls chatting and no guys there to put across their view or how things might be seen by males. I didn't like it (J 581-607)."*

The gender balance of group discussions is important to ensure that a range of views and feelings are represented. This is especially important in healthcare education where males are generally under-represented. The way in which these particular situations came about highlight how technological aspects of online learning can affect the dynamics within the virtual class. It is therefore important for educators to be aware of this and take steps to overcome this wherever possible to fully embrace a range of viewpoints and voices within class discussions.

An interesting, and disappointing aspect of online group dynamics impacted by gender was the experience relayed by Participant K. This participant identified as non-binary and displayed non-binary pronouns (they/them/their) within their online screen name. These were widely ignored by many other students, leading to multiple cases of mis-gendering and causing significant emotional distress to the participant:

> *"I always put my pronouns up on the screen in Zoom but the other students constantly ignored them. I remember just feeling so angry and after a while I tried to tell them that to uphold someone's dignity, you really should respect their wishes. One student ended up getting really like upset and angry with me, they couldn't really understand from my point of view. I mean, I get this a lot, but when I had it there on the screen online, it just really showed how little respect they had for me and my gender identity (K 517-521)."*

Participant K highlighted how challenges they faced everyday were amplified by elements of online learning. The helpful opportunity to display pronoun preferences and ways to be addressed when communicating online was overshadowed by other students' apparent lack of respect for these wishes. Participant K went on to state that they felt that the more detached or remote nature of interaction and group dynamics afforded by online learning meant that, again, some students didn't seem to be adhering to the social norms usually expected and displayed within the classroom environment. Although participant K did state that teaching staff were reasonably quick to address the issue in this case, it is important to note the impact that mis-gendering can have on students' self-esteem and how potentially unintended consequences of online learning technologies can contribute towards matters like this.

4.1.b.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Communicating online

The dynamics of online communications can be challenging to tackle, presenting issues that contrast to in-person activities:

> *"It [communicating] is I'd say harder online, yeah it was not impossible, but you're certainly more engaged if you're in the room [full] of people. I feel like I'm doing okay, it's been fine, but it would have been more interesting, more engaging in person, but it's not been a problem as far as I'm concerned (F 117, 374)."*

This participant (F) compares online communications with traditional, in-classroom discussions and draws comparisons on the effectiveness with which a message can be conveyed in person as opposed to virtually. Another participant did not see this as a major issue, but described preferring in-person conversations to feel more engaged with their classmates and teachers:

> *"I feel like in online lectures though, they're still just faces, like literally just facing a screen. Versus in person, you know, like when the teacher is moving around and looking you in the eye. Like I can see, you know, how people's hands move so I have more information. There's more varied information, rather than me just in front of a laptop facing it (B 41-48)."*

While teachers can create opportunities for learners to engage or communicate with them online, such as chat functions and raising virtual hands, not all students feel satisfied with the comparative value and richness of communication that this allows. Participant B (above) clearly states that, while online teaching offers some interaction opportunities for students, it cannot be compared with the traditional, in-person

interactions with classmates. Mainly due to having little or no ability to observe non-verbal cues and gestures.

Another participant (I) identifies why online communications are harder to control and influence than in-person conversations:

> *"Part of the problem is that a lot of communication is through body language and over Zoom you don't get that. All you do is get really as a PowerPoint and then someone sort of speaking through that PowerPoint. I don't know it's a lot easier to engage and you know you're there you're just naturally I think you're going to be able to speak more and speak up (I 82, 90-91)."*

Other participants explained how they struggled to engage in their classes due to a feeling of restraint in the online environment. Asking questions of the teacher to clarify understanding could therefore become difficult due to a number of reasons including distraction and confidence:

> *I think when you study online, you often don't get an option to speak as easily so it's difficult to get in your questions. You put your hands up, you use the system and then you have to wait, but the lecturer might just get a little bit diverted in their thinking and forget about other people got their hands up, so you just leave it. I suppose I felt restrained trying to communicate in class online, it not the same (C 138-143)."*

A further challenge that was highlighted, mainly by those whose first language is not English, was the increased difficulty communicating verbally online. Whether raising questions with lecturers or communicating amongst peers, some participants recalled how other individuals reported that it was difficult to understand their words or accent. Participant G described their experience of this:

There were so many times that people said they couldn't understand what I was saying. That was teachers and classmates. My English is very good but they kept saying my accent was too strong and it was hard to make out what I was saying. Nobody ever said that to me in-person before. It might be cos' over the Zoom it was harder to hear or be clear what I was saying but it might be because I wasn't there in-person, people felt less bad about being rude about my accent (G 165-166)."

The reduced ability for clear communication that online learning presented often left participants feeling embarrassed or even unwilling to try and engage in class discussions or raise questions in future sessions. This was outlined by participant A:

"If you do have a language barrier or an accent or you're not really clear on what's being spoken about, you don't have the same experience. That will always affect your confidence or in terms of interaction, how much you interact in class, how much you say. I ended up feeling embarrassed and not confident enough to speak up (A 147-148)."

Classrooms should not hinder students' ability and desire to ask questions to be able to engage with the coursework and increase their understanding levels. Teachers will have to think of ways of establishing healthy communication rules and practices, where students are encouraged to provide feedback and be positively acknowledged for their efforts and participation.

4.1.b.3 Sub-theme 2.3: Learning accountability

In order to engage in any learning, there is a degree of personal accountability expected of students. This means taking ownership of their own learning needs and applying the discipline and focus needed to complete educational tasks. However, the social nature of learning means that often this accountability is often shared and, in some ways, driven by the class or group as a whole. Given the issues of social isolation and online

group dynamics discussed in previous sections, this element of shared or group accountability appears to become decreased within online learning and students feel more personal accountability and therefore greater pressure:

> *It's different, isn't it? When you're in class on campus you chat and hear if other people have already started on their essays or revision and that, and that kind of spurs you into action to get working. When we went online, that just disappeared, and I had no idea what anyone else was up to. I just had to work to my own deadlines. I mean, I tend to leave everything to the last minute so that didn't go well for me. I put myself under too much pressure and got pretty stressed about it all (A 20-23)."*

Other participants talked about how the perceived increase in online environments, and extra pressure they subsequently felt, meant that at times they would simply disengage altogether from other learning activities and group discussions. Often due to feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work expected of them and not being able to discuss this pressure with classmates as easily in order to diffuse it or develop plans with peers to address it:

> *"There were times where, just sitting by myself in my house studying all this theory and reflection and stuff, you know. I just thought, what am I doing. I can't do this by myself. I really wondered whether I should carry on and sometimes, cos it was just online, I wouldn't bother listening or taking part (D 157-159)."*

4.1.c Theme 3 – Engaging with the content

Engagement with academic content can look very different in the online learning environment. Educators need to work hard to adjust pedagogical approaches in order to engage learners, tigmatiza the benefits of virtual technologies and overcoming

challenges or barriers created by this method of learning. Students' levels of concentration and focus and the impact of subject matter all emerged as sub-themes affecting the ability to engage with learning content online. Technical difficulties also presented a clear barrier to effective engagement in online learning.

4.1.c.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Concentration & focus

The first sub-theme that emerged was the participants' struggles to concentrate and retain focus whilst studying online. Relative to conventional instruction, online classrooms offer limited opportunities for students to engage and participate, but also their concentration levels can drastically reduce depending on their moods and behaviours during the day. Participant (J) recalls how online learning decreased their concentration levels and learning rates:

> *"I did find the routine like gaining information and retaining it difficult in terms of my concentration levels. It definitely varies depending on my day. Depending on how many lectures, we had in the day, like a very long day I would find that by the afternoon, I was basically sitting on my phone and not paying attention at all. And yeah, so definitely my concentration levels were affected. I felt, compared with my undergraduate degree, which was all taught in person, it was completely different so overall, I think it was just very challenging for me (J 52-60)."*

Apart from social distractions and household circumstances, there can be a few other issues pertaining to the learning environment that affect the learning experience online. Sitting in front of a computer screen for multiple hours can cause health problems and deviate students from studying effectively. Spending a few hours in front of the screen (and/or electronic gadgets) can cause eyesight problems for students in addition to having sore backs and aching muscles; these become even more pronounced in an environment

where students do not have others to talk to or engage with. In the absence of interactive opportunities, participants described how their concentration and focus to study can severely be impacted:

> *"Tiring. It is tiring in the sense of being stuck in front of the laptop you know from 10am sort of sometimes I've teaching from 10am to have a break or lunch, then we go on up until about 5pm. You start to lose concentration. Staring at a screen for, how many hours, I start to ache, or my eyes personally start to ache. I start to get quite fidgety. And it gets to a point where the information is not going in anymore after about two hours, I cannot retain any more information (B 14-28)."*

These issues, if left untreated, can cause headaches, eye strain, backaches and a number of other conditions. Spending a lot of time in front of a computer screen isolates a student from working with real people, they may skip their break times and then have other problems with time management.

Lack of concentration and boredom at times appeared to be an issue that affected all participants, especially in some subjects or study areas where the level of detail is extensive and requires greater levels of commitment and focus. In order to make online learning an engaging experience, it is clear that teachers will need to modify their online curriculum and seek ways to make online classrooms an enjoyable experience for the students by turning bland and boring e-learning content into something useful and attention-retaining.

4.1.c.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Subject matter matters

Some topics or subjects are more difficult to study in an online learning setting than the others, due to specific characteristics of the coursework and the focus, concentration,

and dedication they demand from students. The third sub-theme under ‘engaging with the content’ highlights the fact that the area or discipline of study commonly referred to as the subject-matter is equally responsible in shaping students’ experiences and perceptions of the effectiveness of online learning.

> *“That one [subject] was quite difficult, I would say that I am fortunate because I did a bit of a psychology degree beforehand, so I knew what I was kind of getting into that one, but even then, I found one really difficult for the fact that research methods and statistics generally are quite dry (K 204).”*

Participant K describes how “dry” or “theoretical” subjects were especially challenging to study online. Even for someone like them, with background knowledge of the topic. Other participants also reported similar feelings about the difficulty in engaging with theoretical or highly technical learning content via online methods and not having the in-person or classroom experience to more fully explore or understand it.

Another element of learning, more specific to vocational courses like many of those with HSC, is more hands-on or practical skills. These often profession-specific tasks are crucial to the various health and social care careers and professions students are preparing for but seemed to be especially difficult to engage with for learners via online methods:

> *“I think the hardest thing for health and social care students is to study about hands-on experiences such as taking a blood pressure or pulse, which even the teachers are doing pretty hands-on. So practical elements are hard to follow online for students, much more difficult (L 420).”*

According to thoughts shared by this participant (L), the complexity and breadth of medical education presents challenges for online learning design and delivery, especially in scenarios where healthcare or medical students have to learn about practical topics or specific skills. Therefore, it is imperative that health and social care education focuses on blended learning approaches that allow students with clinical curriculums the flexibility of learning as they deem suited to their learning needs and as per course requirements:

> *"I'm quite a practical learner, I don't retain a lot of information if it's just on a slide and read out, so I think the lack of a hands-on learning is what I missed [in online learning]. They did try to make it as clear as possible, they sent us out anatomy gloves for us to like draw on each ligament and muscles and everything in the hands. There were some videos that went with that. But it's just not the same as handling an actual model like we'd do in the skills lab (J 132, 293-296)."*

The above participant (J) admits attempts at simulation offer flexibility and tissibility benefits by allowing students to watch and learn from the online resources in their own time and at their own pace; however, individualistic learning styles and preferences would be different. While many students would appreciate the flexibility and accessibility benefits of these videos and online resources, others might find it challenging to follow online content in medical education and other complex subject matters. Hence, these findings present important implications for instructional design and course facilitation; it provides an acknowledgement that knowledge and skill improvement in the e-learning context is also dependent on how the medium (online or traditional) supports students' individual learning needs and reduces barriers for more positive online learning experiences.

4.1.c.3 Sub-theme 3.3: Technical difficulties

Online education does not come without challenges and issues. On one hand, where the online learning environment has remarkably personalised learning experiences and offered students immense flexibility and autonomy, the associated technical aspects mean that students are often at a higher risk of facing limitations in their learning:

> *Yeah, like the number of times we go into a breakout room and then someone wouldn't join the breakout room, they just sit there in the main zoom call still because you've got to click the button to leave the breakout room for example (I 71)."*

Another participant remarked how they felt online education could prove to be more challenging for older students due to the reliance on information systems and technical proficiency:

> *"The older people in my course definitely struggled more with you know even creating a breakout room or knowing how to. From observing in the group, it was definitely a gap in the level of ability to depending on age. We have a WhatsApp group for ourselves and frequently it was the older ones in the group being like, can someone send me the link to join a Zoom lecture/session. (J 478 – 481)."*

Other participants remarked how the older members of their class seemed to be daunted by the technical skills required to successfully facilitate productive online learning:

"Yeah, like, the older ones were kind of scared of all the new platforms and software we had to get to grips with to study online. Sometimes they wouldn't even try a new system or whatever cos they just seemed like it was all too much for them. They were always moaning about not being able to log in or things not working but we'd all have done it fine (L 222 – 224)."

Online learning is new, uncertain, and different for students, parents, and teachers. Technical difficulties or technical knowledge gaps in the online educational environment can severely affect students' motivation, attitudes, and determination to achieve academic success. When students feel they are not adequately knowledgeable in accessing online lectures (via a video-conferencing app or software), they may feel they have failed to catch up with their virtual classmates. Moreover, many students could find it difficult to fulfil the technical requirements of a specific course and may be left feeling disappointed in their abilities. This can adversely affect students' motivation, success and mental health.

Switching from traditional classroom to computer-based educational environment meant a totally different experience for another of the participants:

"In class, my attendance and scores were very good. But once we moved online, I struggled with internet access where I live, couldn't keep up with lessons and my grades really suffered. Because of the internet access issues, I had to go out to buy data, mobile data, which I was spending over 50 pounds a month on. I'm a single mother and really can't afford that (G 61)."

As seen from participant G above, students with limited access to the technical equipment needed for online study, or adequate internet access, can be unfairly disadvantaged. The high costs of remote learning in certain circumstances could also be seen to disadvantage

certain socio-economic groups and discourage some students learning in an online environment.

The use of other online learning tools, such as virtual learning environments (VLEs), also affected the students' learning experience and how they engaged with learning resources:

> *"We could find some of our lectures on there [Moodle], but not all of them. I did find a bit difficult. It's not easy to navigate around, it's a bit clunky. It's not particularly nice or user friendly that software [Moodle], you know. It does loads of stuff but it just doesn't look particularly intuitive. It's doesn't just come naturally; you have to look around. There's loads of stuff on the screen that's quite distracting (B 387-389)."*

This participant (B) highlights the difficulties students face engaging with and navigating coursework in Moodle, which is a popular, open-source VLE. According to this participant's experiences, creating and storing coursework and presentations on Moodle can be quite frustrating for some students who might not have the knowledge or skills to locate them or engage with them fully. They found that engaging with e-learning software is not an intuitive exercise and can adversely affect students' motivation and course participation. In addition, busy screens with too much information presented within these VLEs can overwhelm students and be distracting, leaving them disengaged with the content.

4.1.d Theme 4 – Meeting expectations

The final theme that emerged from the interviews was about meeting and managing student expectations in the online learning environment. There needs to be continuous analyses of student experiences and learning preferences; however, managing

expectations in the online space is a challenging task ahead of educators who want to keep pace with changing educational landscapes.

4.1.d.1 Sub-theme 4.1: Quality and consistency

Achieving and maintaining quality online education requires pedagogical techniques and strategies that are specific to the virtual environment. This involves embracing elements of online, often asynchronous communication, fully tigmatiz technological tools, using creative and innovative ways to engage students and maintaining online etiquette to ensure positive student experiences.

An issue raised by participants was the lack of technical proficiency from the teaching staff:

> *"You know, they'll [teachers] send out a link. You'd go on it and there's nobody there and that's because they're not technical in that side of things and out so half of the group will be on one link and the other half is in another link, so that was annoying (C 176)."*

Participant C explains above how the mistakes made by teaching staff, often due to their own inexperience or lack of training with the software or technical tools needed to facilitate online education, negatively affected the learning activities and overall experience for students. Transition to move online from traditional teaching is not easy and success in this area would depend on educators having the right skills and competencies for online teaching. In this case, the role of training is critical in developing teachers' digital competence and increasing their confidence in using it.

The incorporation of games, quizzes or online polls and adding simulating and vibrant visuals into the course are simple ways of achieving this while supportive learning objectives. One participant I, who is a trainer in a volunteer role they have, shared teaching/engagement ideas from that organisation:

> *"I had to do this for my role as a trainer for St John's Ambulance. I would say little things that remind you that you are actually in a class, I guess, so we did a lot of games of at the start and end of [online] training sessions. They worked really well and kept people interested. If it is really bad, I would hate to experience this as a student myself, but just picking on people might be a good idea- just say oh, what do you think of this as the source like sorry, what did you say. [This] kind of [behaviour] had to keep them [students] interested in it [lecture] (E 137-147)."*

This participant suggests teachers should establish rules that foster participation at different times and levels. Teachers may use simple follow-up questions to verify their interest and engagement. Asking follow-up questions in Chat or within breakout sessions would stimulate student discussion in the virtual classroom.

Aside from the issues of quality outlined above, another key point raised by participants was the lack of consistency in quality, technical proficiency and student experience across various modules. This seemed to vary widely, depending on the abilities and attitude of the lecturers involved. Varying much more widely than students experienced during campus-based teaching, as explained by participant F:

> *"A big issue for me was the consistency of teaching. A few of them were really good you know, really tried to make it interesting and appreciated how hard it was to learn sat at home on your laptop. But lots of them just didn't seem to make any effort and just delivered their lectures over Zoom as if we were in the classroom. No attempt to change things up and adapt how they delivered the stuff. It was just painful and I felt really let down by that (F 212)."*

Another matter of educational consistency is that of dual-delivery. According to the comments made by another participant (D), dual-delivery to students online and those within a classroom, comes with a few challenges. Students learning online can find in-classroom discussions noisy and distracting and can often be left feeling disengaged with what's going on in the class. Attending an online lecture along with other students (who are present physically at the time of the lecture) appears to be an unpleasant or unpreferred mode of study, simply because of the disturbance, distraction, and lack of engagement it entails. Moreover, some lecturers or teachers prefer engaging with physically present students more than the online learners. Such challenges will continue to undermine the relationship between the teachers and the students, unless measures are taken to resolve these issues, establish expectations and create a concrete plan for the learning success keeping student experiences into consideration:

> *"It's better when everyone is online or everyone's there in person. When it's like half in the classroom, half online, that brings about a few difficulties. The noise from the classroom is way too loud when you're listening online so it's quieter for us. So you can't get involved. I think lecturers are naturally drawn to the people who are physically in front of them asking questions and stuff as well and you just kind of feel left out (D 320 – 348)."*

4.1.d.2 Sub-theme 4.2: Wellbeing and student support

One of the recurring themes within the interview transcripts was about the level of support students felt should be provided when learning online. The global pandemic forced many educational institutions to pivot to online learning at short notice, and while it has provided a convenient way for students to continue their education, it has also

presented new challenges. In the e-learning environment, managing expectations about the learning process also means establishing healthy boundaries and making sure that the students do not lose their sense of self-care and wellbeing in the process:

> *"If you're someone that takes a bit longer to process things then you really need that time with the lecturer [in person]. You don't get it. Because you've got three hours, they have got a tight schedule, you can send emails and stuff but it's not the same as meeting in person. When I would go in [the class] and maybe have a meeting for half an hour, I would have allocated time to that actually talk about it so again, I think one of the things about being online is the difficulties around catching teachers in the end of online lectures (K 219 - 232)."*

According to the perceptions of this participant (K), one of the basic challenges of online learning is that there is less academic support for students online compared to face-to-face interactions they can engage in the classroom. One of the primary reasons why students may feel that there is less academic support for them online is the lack of face-to-face interaction with their teachers and peers. In a traditional classroom setting, students can easily approach their teacher and ask for help or clarification on a concept, which will help them understand the course content and feel valued. This is not as easily accomplished online, as some students may feel less comfortable reaching out to their teachers, particularly if they are not used to communicating through virtual channels. Moreover, online learning requires students to be self-motivated and proactive in their studies, which would mean they have to initiate and act to be able to tigmat their time effectively and seek feedback where necessary. For some students, this could be a challenge, and they may feel that they are not receiving enough support from their teachers or peers. This was highlighted by participant K:

"I just felt like they could've done more to provide support you know. I'm not sure what but I hardly heard from my lecturers outside of the online classes and there were so many questions I had. I think they should've done more support sessions or something as loads of my friends were the same but we didn't know how to ask and everything was so crazy at the time (K 233 – 232)."

Online learning can be an isolating experience for students as they miss out on the range of activities that come with being on campus. This lack of sense of belonging and absence of the sense of community can adversely affect students' educational experience on the whole. In the online environment, students may not have the opportunity to meet other classmates or instructors in person, make new friends, and/or participate in campus events. This may have been exacerbated by the social isolation enforced by the government during COVID-19. Participants explained how these factors meant that not only was their student experience negatively affected, but their overall mental health and wellbeing was affected at times:

"Oh man, it was tough at times. Spending days studying online and not seeing anyone but your family was really hard. There were times that I got really down. I don't know why but just sitting around all day got me quite depressed (D 428)."

A few participants went on to say that they felt that the university should've provided more pastoral support during this tough and unprecedented time, tigmatizat the enormous pressures and difficulties that students were facing during this period:

"I definitely think the uni should've done more. More check-ins from your personal tutor or drop-ins and stuff. I was so down at times and just an email from someone to see if I was ok would've been nice. Not about my uni work I mean. Like, how I was doing, you know (E 115)."

An interesting observation by one of the participants (G) was that they felt that younger students, typically those in their first year of study, were disproportionately affected by the mental wellbeing and lack of support outlined above. Being surrounded by these types of students, but being older and having studied at university before, they noted how their classmates struggled due to not having time on campus to make friendships or engage in extra-curricular social activities:

> *"The younger ones did seem to struggle more. I was like a Mum to some of them, listening to all their worries, issues and that. I supported them as much as I could but had my own stuff to deal with, you know what I mean. But they didn't get the usual first year experience, drinking with your mates and making new friends. They weren't on campus to do the fun stuff and then just stuck indoors doing the boring lectures so I can see why that would be hard (G 254 – 256)."*

This was reinforced by one of the younger participants:

> *"I hated first year. I was so looking forward to going to uni and the whole campus experience. But I was stuck in halls in a tiny room. I couldn't go out or meet anyone else for months. I was so unhappy, I nearly quit a few times. I really feel my mental health was affected during that time and took a long time for me to feel normal again (A 333 – 335)."*

4.1.d.3 Sub-theme 4.3: Educational leadership

Providing clear leadership for students in online education can help ensure that online learners receive high-quality education and have a positive learning experience. Setting clear expectations, providing ongoing academic support, looking after student wellbeing, encouraging collaboration and community building, promoting continuous improvements, and fostering a culture of collaborative knowledge exchange are some ways in which teachers can maximize the benefits of online education for the learners

while not entirely depriving them of the opportunities they might have had in the in-person classroom settings.

According to one participant's experiences, sometimes, online learning can turn into a tedious experience for students in cases where technologically is not tackled with appropriate care. Teachers often didn't establish the rules of online learning, and the regulations around the use of the technologies involved so all students felt engaged, supported and motivated:

> *"Totally lacking a university-level experience. That was my biggest disappointment, I think, for me. Having had to do what I've had to do to get here, then you know, get this experience. They didn't even try and enforce rules at the beginning of sessions like make sure cameras are on, make sure you mute and all that stuff. I should have just done an Open University when I think about it now. (C 159-164)."*

Another participant echoed the experiences above and stated that they felt it is the lecturer's responsibility to engage students and organize and lead learning activities:

> *"I think the responsibility of engaging students comes from the lecturer to be the deciding force. A lecturer shouldn't leave it to the students to organise chat groups themselves, you know organizing the little groups and just picking their friends so they could chit-chat. I thought that was just not right, unfair, didn't like it. You need to mix up the whole group and make sure they're talking about the subjects involved (J 33 – 37)."*

In the online learning environment, teachers can demonstrate educational leadership in a variety of ways. Teachers need to set out clear expectations for students, create a schedule for class sessions and assignments, and provide clear incentives for group chats and breakout sessions.

One participant identified a key difference in remote learning as opposed to traditional classrooms, suggesting that online teachers need to exercise more influence and control over online engagements:

> *"I think, with the younger ones, they will just roll up you know in their pyjamas or whatever they're so relaxed and almost have this 'doesn't really matter' attitude. I think it's more to do with the lecturers. I think they need to take a bit more control in the lecture if it's online or if it's in the actual room (C 338)."*

Once identified, teachers should then be able to modify their instructional techniques to suit different learning styles and levels of engagement. Educators should facilitate the creation of authentic learning experiences for all students and must devise methods to encourage participation, collaboration, discussion, and collective problem-solving. Helping students stay accountable to their actions and performance in the virtual classroom will make their commitment more binding and long-lasting.

In building successful leadership in online education, teachers need to be mindful of students' learning needs and interests and have to use this information to develop effective student engagement and collaboration avenues. Teachers should be comfortable using online teaching and learning technologies and should be able to troubleshoot the technical issues that might occur during online lectures. They should also be aware of the latest technological tools and resources that can enhance their teaching and students' learning experience. By focusing on these key areas, teachers can demonstrate effective educational leadership in the e-learning environment and help their students achieve their learning goals.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter commences by restating the overarching aims and objectives of the study. It subsequently provides a synopsis of the results in connection with pertinent literature, policy, and educational theory. Following this, an analysis of the study's principal strengths and limitations is conducted, followed by a discussion of the findings' implications and suggestions for future research.

5.1 Study aims & objectives

The overall aim of this research is to explore the experiences of HSC students studying online in order to inform future educational approaches and practice within the school and deliver more successful online learning outcomes for HSC students. The study aimed to address this by gathering and analysing a rich data set of student experiences, exploring the perceived benefits and challenges, examining external factors affecting online learning and identifying student-led solutions to any challenges.

In order to achieve this aim, the study was broken down into a number of distinct objectives. The objectives describe the activities that were completed to accomplish the aims and reflect the exploratory nature of the research. The objectives were:

1) Explore the experiences of HSC students studying online to identify the benefits and challenges associated with this method of study.
2) Examine how key characteristics of ethnicity, age & gender can affect students' experience of online learning.
3) Identify student led solutions to online learning challenges within HSC.

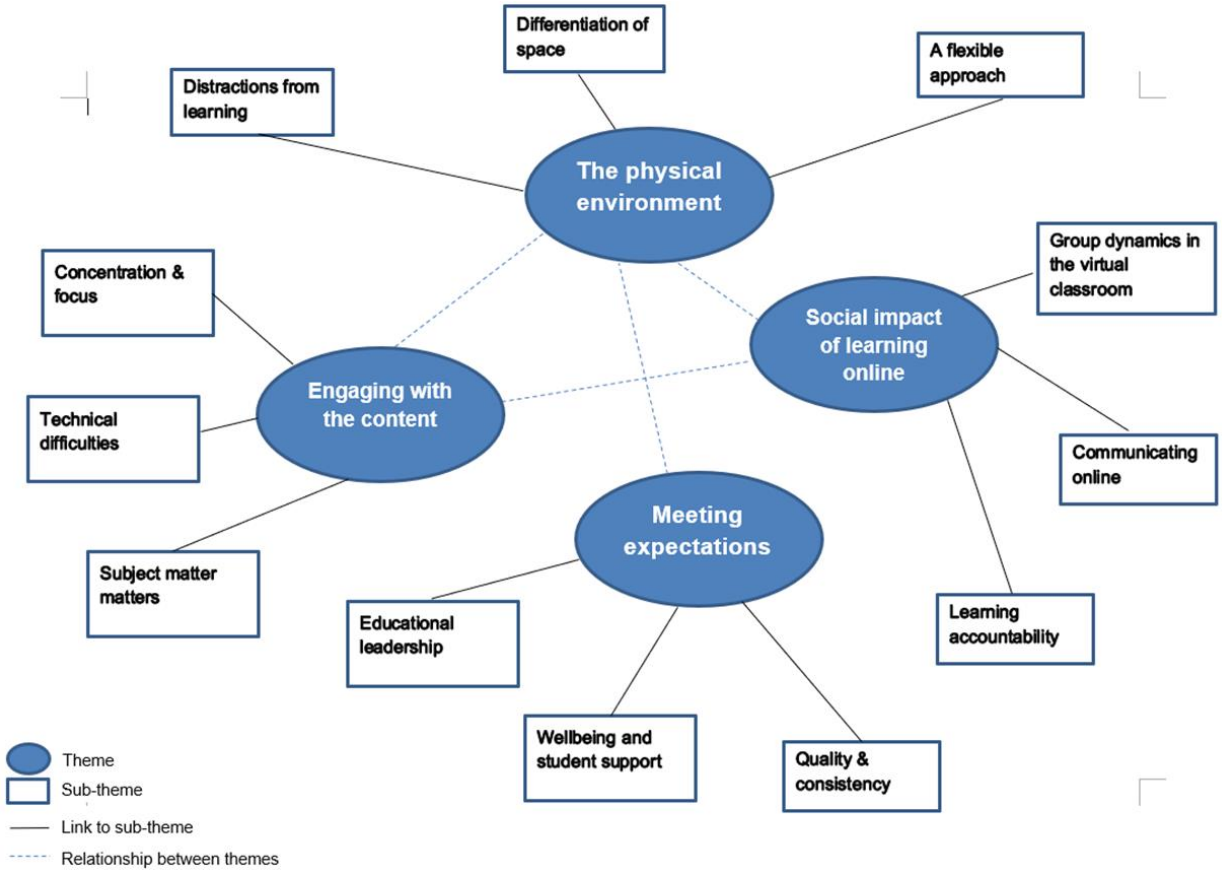
5.2 Objective 1 – Exploration of findings

This section interprets and describes the findings from the Results chapter in relation to the literature that was systematically reviewed earlier in the thesis. It contributes to new knowledge and insights that emerged as a result of this research work and explains the relevance of the results in understanding student experiences in the online learning environment.

As outlined in the Methodology chapter, thematic analysis was used to generate themes for this study. This is a valuable approach for revealing the intrinsic “meanings” present within transcribed interview data. Themes identified are intended to be discernible from one another, whilst presenting a coherent narrative (Boyatzis, 1998). However, inevitably there is always some overlap between topics discussed and codes generated. As a novice researcher, this stage was particularly challenging and required multiple attempts to define and name themes that addressed the research aims and presented a comprehensive representation of the data.

The process began by establishing a hierarchy where main themes represented broad, overarching categories, with sub-themes from revised initial codes providing more detail and specificity nested within them. The hierarchy was not just to create structure, but enabled an intuitive map of the data to be created that showcases the relationships between different aspects of the findings. A mind map providing an overview of the themes identified for this study, and how they interconnect, can be seen below at Figure 1 and at Appendix K.

Figure 1. Themes Mind Map



It can be seen in Figure 1 that the dotted line connections between themes represent the overlap or connections between them. An example of this is *Theme 3 – Engaging with the content.* Dotted lines can be seen connecting to two other themes, showing an overlap in findings/codes, but not to *Theme 4 – Meeting Expectations*, where little overlap or connection was seen in the data. Each of the individual themes will now be explored in greater detail below.

5.2.a Theme one – The physical environment

The first theme identified was the physical environment that learning takes place in whilst studying online, and the impact this can have on the overall experience for

students. This included the flexible approach it provides learners, how the physical spaces contributed to distractions from learning and difficulties differentiating key spaces.

Participants in this study accessed learning content and activities from diverse physical locations, which they described as providing greater flexibility and convenience. This flexibility has been reported as providing many associated positive benefits for learners. This was found in all of the studies identified within the literature review and within studies examining broader educational areas (Gumede & Badriparsad, 2022; Lakhey & Shakya, 2022). Similar to Kunaviktikul *et al.* (2022), participants discussed the benefits of saving time and money on commuting costs. Interestingly, similar to other studies exploring online study, the reduced travel-related stress reported by most participants, led to them having more time and energy to devote to their studies and improvements in their mental health (Abuhassna *et al*., 2022; Lakhey & Shakya, 2022; Veletsianos, 2020).

In line with Suzuki *et al*. (2022), participants also talked about how they felt that it gave them a more personalised approach to studying, that allowed them to learn at times that suited them, rather than being held to specific timetabled events. Arguably, online education has empowered students to develop personalised learning systems, that are attuned to their natural bodily rhythms and personal preferences (Abuhassna *et al*., 2022). While some students may prefer learning in the early morning hours, others may feel more motivated and productive later in the day. As seen in other themes identified, this does however change student expectations and poses new

responsibilities and challenges for teachers. Teachers are now expected to accommodate this wide range of learning preferences and organise taught sessions, self-directed activities and assessments accordingly. With limited opportunities for personal connection, and often asynchronous communication, this definitely challenges educators to adapt how education is delivered online (Hoffman, 2009; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021).

The flexibility and convenience offered by learning online has tigmatization the way students learn and acquire knowledge and shifted the traditional education landscape. It widens opportunities to access healthcare education to a much greater range of students from wider age groups and backgrounds. For many years, online course delivery has been seen to broaden participation in higher education, allowing learners such as parents and people with caring responsibilities, or those with disabilities, the opportunity to engage in learning in a way that previously didn't exist (Berge & Muilenburg, 2005). In more recent times, the added flexibility and convenience is also attracting younger learners who may have previously been deterred by the more formal and structured campus-based approach (Veletsianos, 2020).

However, the benefits of studying online in a range of physical spaces that are not dedicated educational spaces, must be balanced with the challenges this also poses. Almost all participants reported the distractions they faced studying in this way. Although not reported in as much detail in the studies identified in the literature review, Kunaviktikul *et al*. (2022) and Gumede & Badriparsad (2022) reported similar findings. In line with their findings, it was reported that distractions such as deliveries, other

family members or temptation to look at social media sites, severely affected participants ability to stay fully engaged in online learning. Interestingly, these similar findings were reported in other studies where the online learning being examined was in response to COVID-19. This possibly suggests that it is directly related to instances where the learning content and activities had been designed at short notice and pedagogical approaches were not fully adapted to accommodate this new way of learning. However, the study by Chandler (2022) was conducted during a similar period and looked at the experience of students at an institution highly experienced in online delivery. Their participants reported similar challenges with distractions, suggesting that this is a substantial challenge that remains to be addressed across the whole online learning sector.

The home environment proved the place where most distractions occurred. Considering the dates that the study took place and associated lockdowns in place at that time, this may not come as much of a surprise. However, one interesting area identified in this study, that was not highlighted in great detail any of the literature reviewed, is the difficulties posed in differentiating between learning and personal spaces when studying online. Participants reported the challenges faced when trying to “switch-off” from learning when it was happening in their own homes and how travelling to campus-based lessons allowed them to transition themselves to a learning “mindset”. This distinction has been reported elsewhere in the literature (Ng, 2021) but little is known about the psychological tools required to prepare mentally for learning within different spaces.

5.2.b Theme two – The social impact of learning online

The second theme identified was the social impact of learning online and this was shown to have significant influence on the student experience. This included how group dynamics within virtual classrooms differ, how difficulties in communicating virtually can affect the ability to learn and how students feel that accountability for their learning changes in online environments.

Findings on the impact of group dynamics in this study echoed that in nearly all of the studies within the literature review, but most notably of Langegard *et al.* (2021). It was reported that students felt that the usual social dynamics were absent in the virtual classroom, leading to a range of issues occurring. This included rudeness between classmates, extroverted or technically confident individuals dominating online conversations and the lack of in-person contact meaning that many participants reported it a struggle to fully engage in online conversations or group discussions. Issues related to lack of personal contact affecting the learning experience are reported throughout the literature in online learning but seem to appear with increased frequency within studies related to health and social care. This would suggest that students within these courses are more greatly affected, possibly due to the “human” element of these courses and the types of students that are therefore attracted to these professions.

Similar to findings reported by Gumede & Badriparsad (2022) and Kunaviktikul *et al.* (2022), participants in this study acknowledged that social isolation, and the impact this had on group dynamics, was unavoidable due to the unique circumstances driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. And similar to these studies, the overall experience of learning online had generally left them longing for a return to campus-based studies and

interaction with classmates and teachers again. Although, in direct opposition to these findings, one participant did note that they felt that some learners who struggled with in-person social interactions, such as those with anxiety or Autistic Spectrum Disorder, appeared to relish this alternative online way of interacting socially. This has also been reported in other studies and could suggest that including a range of ways for students to interact with each other, even within campus-based courses, could provide a more vibrant educational community, where students feel encouraged to contribute their ideas in an inclusive environment (Langegard *et al*., 2021).

An important factor affecting the social impact of learning online was communication. Without face-to-face interaction, participants reported struggling to interpret what was being said due to lack of nuance, body language and other non-verbal gestures. This was not just between teacher and student but between student to student during group work or discussions. These are widely reported issues within online communication and steps can be taken to mitigate, such as ensuring that video cameras are turned on or encouraging students to use headphones and microphones to improve audio quality (Chandler, 2022). However, it was shown to greatly affect the learning experience and poor communication often led to students feeling frustrated or disengaging completely from lessons.

Ineffective communication also happened as a result of other aspects unique to online learning, such as talking over one another or muting other speakers. Participants often felt this was due to usual social rules or etiquette not applying in the virtual space. Ismailov & Chiu (2022) state that, to improve online social interaction and communication, guidelines and expected behaviours within online classes (Netiquette) must be made

clear to all learners to ensure that communication is clear and discourse remains mutually respectful. Participants added that they felt teachers should be trained on how to intervene in an online discussion if it becomes disrespectful or communication breaks down. Highlighting the interplay between themes, the discussion on student expectations of educational leadership discussed as a sub-theme of theme 4, attests to the idea of developing succinct Netiquette guidelines and monitoring online communications effectively.

Another sub-theme identified was the concept of learning accountability and how taking responsibility for personal learning, and the resulting increases in pressure felt, appears to become increased when studying online. It has long been reported that the in-person classroom environment often acts as a means of diffusing learning accountability, sharing the responsibility for learning outcomes with classmates through mutual support or competition (Berge & Muilenburg, 2005). The findings of this study showed that the lack of social interaction increasing this personal accountability, made participants feel more stressed and at times overwhelmed by the amount or standard of work they had to achieve. Although not identified specifically within the literature review, this is a phenomenon well reported in online learning across numerous other subjects (Kim *et al*., 2019).

Due to this increased pressure in learning accountability caused by learning online and lack of social interaction with classmates, participants reported greater need for tutorial support and clear learning and assessment guidelines. An approach identified within the literature to assist with this is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL aims

to integrate into online education to facilitate a supportive learning environment where students with diverse learning needs can enjoy equal opportunities and inclusivity (Al-Azawei *et al.*, 2016). It also creates a learning ecosystem where students feel supported and nurtured to manage individual learning challenges and be able to fully participate in the tigmatiznal process. This approach recognizes that every student learns differently, and it offers flexibility, varied formats, and multiple means of engagement.

UDL is one approach, among several, that aims to increase the opportunities for everybody to access interactive systems to achieve learning goals. Although, the term 'universal' may be seen as slightly misleading as it actually encourages multiple, varied approaches to engaging learners, rather than one ubiquitous approach. Other similar approaches include 'inclusive design', 'accessible design' and 'design for all'. These terms are often used interchangeably, and there is very little consensus on the exact definition or usage of these approaches. Although they do all share a common goal (widening accessibility), it is important to note that different approaches to accessibility serve different purposes and these can differ between professions (Persson et al., 2015).

5.2.c Theme three – Engaging with the content

The third theme identified was how engagement with learning content in online environments affects the student experience. This included how students struggled to retain concentration and focus in online lessons, that the subject matter being taught greatly affected students' desire to engage in learning and how technical difficulties could severely affect the ability to engage with online sessions.

Participants in this study reported spending many hours spent in online lectures where they struggled to stay focused or concentrate on the learning content. Pedagogically, online learning does not commonly use the standard lecture format as it is well known that it can disengage learners. Prolonged time looking at computer screens can also decrease learner motivation, concentration and even cause health issues in some cases (Nakshine *et al*., 2022). Similar to many of the studies within the literature, the time period for this study predominately included the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. Universities therefore had to transition quickly to, and without much time to prepare for, online learning. With similar findings reported by Suzuki *et al.* (2022) & Mortazavi *et al.* (2021), it appears that many universities simply moved the standard campus-based curriculum to an online delivery method. The usual classroom-based lectures were therefore often just delivered via video-conferencing software, without consideration of and re-design to account for the completely new pedagogical approaches required to create effective and engaging online learning.

Although the issues identified above may have been a result of how little time universities had to prepare for delivering education online, it does offer a number of insights. Course content and learning materials needs to be dynamic, accessible, and relevant to changing student demands. Multi-media elements, real-world stories and case studies have been shown to bridge the gap between theory and practice, maintaining student interest and focus (Johnson *et al.*, 2023). This goes hand in hand with developing problem-solving and critical thinking skills as it encourages students to make connections with the learning materials and explore topics more deeply. Striking a balance between

independence and community, leveraging technology for effective and meaningful social engagement, and creating compelling learning materials collectively can therefore define success in the online educational landscape.

The subject-matter being taught was reported to have a large impact on the online learning experience for the participants in this study. This was not an issue picked up as a central theme within the literature review, although it has been noted in other studies. Although, Hollister *et al.* (2022) and Kunaviktikul *et al.* (2022) did report in their studies that students found it hard to relate to any theoretical content online due to lockdowns meaning that they were unable to gain the usual time in clinical practice, which meant they found it hard to relate theory to practice. With health and social care courses containing a large amount of practical and competency-based skills, the impact of learning online can be seen to have a greater affect than on many other courses. Participants in this study reported similar experiences and, although there were small isolated examples of good practice to attempt to recreate practical learning, it was largely neglected in favour of more theoretical subjects (Ismailov & Chiu, 2022).

Overall, participants found theoretical subject matter the hardest to engage with online. These sessions were described as “dry” and “boring” and, although often referred to in similar ways more generally, it was reported that this was often overcome by the “human” element of teaching face-to-face. This included the ways in which teachers were often able to use enthusiasm, humour and personality to engage learners, in ways that didn’t translate online. Conversely, two of the participants reported that they found the experience of learning the more theoretical subjects better online as they could control their learning environment and ensure silence around them

to fully concentrate. This highlights the often-paradoxical nature of measuring lived experience and how important personalised approaches to teaching and learning are to ensuring high standards of student experience in modern education.

Technical difficulties negatively affected the overall experience of learning online for all participants in this study. This is a well-known challenge affecting online education and was most notably reported by Gumede & Badriparsad (2022) and Suzuki *et al.* (2022) within the literature review. Problems with internet connectivity, hardware, and software, were all factors that meant participants were unable to engage with learning at various times. Again, due to COVID-19, the speed at which courses moved online meant that participants often did not possess the appropriate equipment to learn effectively online. This included reports of using unreliable mobile data for connectivity, rather than broadband connections, and using personal mobile phones to attend virtual sessions, rather than personal computers or laptops with greater visibility and functionality. Having the appropriate equipment has been shown to be crucial to providing an engaging and effective online learning experience (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Therefore, the findings from this study suggest that institutions may need to consider more carefully the level of equipment and support provided to students to ensure that online learning is delivered and experienced in the most efficient way.

Lack of digital skills also stood out as a significant obstacle for participants. Since online education heavily relies on technology, students reported the challenges they faced when presented with a vast array of new systems, software and technical processes they were expected to engage with. Similar to the findings of Gumede & Badriparsad (2022), this was shown to create a kind of “digital divide”, where learners

with the technical skills required to navigate online learning were at a distinct advantage to those without (Laufer *et al.*, 2021). To address these issues, and make online learning more equitable for all, institutions will need to provide comprehensive digital literacy training for students, and staff, to enable everyone to confidently use technologies required to facilitate effective education (Chan *et al.*, 2017).

5.2.d Theme four – Meeting expectations

The final theme identified highlighted how important meeting students' expectations in key areas is to providing a positive and supportive learning experience. From the systematic review of literature, it was shown how a paradigm shift to online education during COVID-19 outbreaks have made online learning the "new normal", although student experiences varied hugely in comparison with how they studied and experienced educational journeys in traditional settings. The literature provided a sense to the challenges of pedagogical transition to online and/or distance education, which required the teaching staff to upskill themselves and continually keep abreast of changes taking place (Gumede & Badriparsad, 2022; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021; Suzuki *et al*., 2022). This literary insight was further cemented through the data analysis where meeting student expectations was shown to be a major theme requiring teachers to develop and demonstrate leadership, maintain educational quality and consistency, and be mindful of student wellbeing needs.

The literature review in this study revealed a theme of "no one answer to online education expectations". This means that the complex nature of online learning cannot be designed and managed with a 'one size fits all' approach (Muir *et al*., 2019;

Veletsianos, 2020). The diverse needs and preferences of students necessitates an adaptable approach where teachers can work as ‘facilitators’ to support students meet their needs and help manage realistic expectations. All students have unique learning requirements, and a tigmatizati approach may not be suitable in meeting unique needs (Abuhassna *et al.,* 2022; Li, 2022). All participants in this study however, reported that quality and consistency of the online learning experience varied greatly. Some spoke highly of their teaching staff and quality of delivery, but many talked about the disappointment they felt. This included how little preparation there appeared to be for online sessions, how little effort there seemed to be to engage learners in this new and specific method of teaching and how that could vary from teacher to teacher or even session to session.

As previously stated, the shift to delivering consistent, high-quality education online necessitates adaptions to standard pedagogical approaches. Educators should be able to adapt to the changing pace and dynamism of online classrooms and revisit their teaching tools and resources regularly to effectively engage students in the learning experience (Al-Kumaim *et al.*, 2021). Traditional teaching approaches often don’t translate well into the virtual classrooms, hence requiring teachers to be innovative and creative in their instructional design. The need for “quality” and “consistency” in the light of student experiences discussed under this theme once again highlights the interplay between themes. It advocates the dire need for teachers to be satisfactorily equipped with the necessary digital literacy skills and be empowered with adequate technical training that was shown to be crucial to engaging students within theme three.

A cornerstone of successful student experience is the management of learners' health and well-being. Findings from the literature suggest that online education imposes additional responsibilities on educators to be adaptive and create learning environments that encourages open communications, offers opportunities for social interaction and supports student wellbeing (Abuhassna *et al.,* 2022; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021). Designing an effective online learning environment requires a supportive classroom environment where students feel a sense of belonging and community amongst other students and with teachers (Li, 2022; Muir *et al.*, 2019).

The majority of participants in this study reported frequent feelings of isolation and loneliness which affected their mental health or wellbeing. This was due to a variety of reasons and confounded by the fact that the period studied coincided with COVID-19 lockdowns. This meant that social, in-person gatherings were also often banned by the government and enforced by law. Participants also reported feeling overwhelmed with the amount of work required of them or anxious about online assessments. Some participants reported that they felt "let down" with their educational experience, and, although acknowledging that often driven by matters out of the university's control, not enough was done to support the emotional wellbeing and mental health of students. This was then reported to have a detrimental effect on the participants' motivation and subsequent academic performance.

Educators must establish explicit expectations regarding the manner in which learning will occur in order to resolve these concerns regarding student welfare. This involves the establishment of healthy boundaries for students, enabling them to maintain

a balance between academic work and personal life without experiencing burnout or overwork. Additionally, it is imperative that students are motivated and assisted in maintaining their spiritual, mental, and physical health and well-being (Al-Azawei *et al.*, 2016; Hoffman & Miller, 2020). A balanced approach is necessary for a successful and healthy learning experience, with regular communication a critical step in identifying and managing student wellbeing needs. There should also be multiple channels created for online students to reach out, such as messaging platforms, virtual tutorial meetings and anonymous phone lines. This would allow individual access to personalized advice and feedback, as well as provide necessary assistance and support (Muir *et al.,* 2019).

Another expectation of students that was often not met was that of educational leadership. In this new and challenging virtual environment, participants looked to their teachers for guidance, assurance and decision-making. Again, possibly due to the short notice that the teachers had to transition to online delivery during the period explored in this study, this was often not demonstrated. Participants felt that teachers frequently did not take enough responsibility for issues such as facilitating activities and controlling online discussions. This meant that other students would sometimes fulfill this role, or nobody would at all and lessons would become completely ineffective. Leadership is a well-established part of the educator's role, although higher education does look upon this more as facilitative or inspirational, rather than instructional (Nadelson *et al*., 2020). However, many HSC courses at university level contain a great deal of skills or competency-based training where more traditional instructional techniques are required, possibly why this finding isn't as frequent elsewhere in the literature.

5.3 Objective 2 – Exploration of findings

Another of this study's objectives was to explore how key characteristics (or social identities) affected the online learning experience for students. The characteristics of interest in this study were ethnicity, age and gender. Frings *et al.* (2020) claim that the "social identities" that students have can play a significant role in their ability to succeed at university. Benefits, such as adaption to stress or deeper approaches to learning, have been reported (Bliuc *et al.,* 2011). However, too strong a social identity with one group can have a detrimental effect, where expectations and responsibilities begin to outweigh the educational needs of the student (Frings *et al.,* 2020). It has therefore been shown that multiple social identities may help students "buffer" against the stresses of studying by providing continuity and sources of social and practical support (Amiot *et al.,* 2012).

As previously stated, it is important to remember that specific identities or characteristics frequently interact or "intersect". As a result, there can be an overlap between the social, psychological, and physical vulnerabilities experienced by individuals (Bauer, 2014). The study therefore utilised intersectional analytical tools to evaluate similarities and disparities across various categories and elements within the themes. It also helped recognise variances in experiences, opinions, and behaviours among certain groups (Hankivsky, 2014).

Although females only slightly outnumber males in terms of student numbers within higher education in the United Kingdom, the gendered experience of learning varies widely. As does the literature on the subject. Lin (2016) reported that female students

struggled learning online due to issues such as managing multiple responsibilities, support and developing confidence. However, Dennon (2020) claims that females are ideally prepared for online study due to their organsiational skills and experience at balancing multiple priorities.

Less well studied is how the ethnicity of learners affects the lived experience of learning online. Indeed, none of the literature reviewed explored the impact of ethnicity, other than listing demographic data. This is surprising given that numbers of ethnic minority students on HSC courses in the United Kingdom are higher than those of many other areas of education, yet an attainment gap continues to grow (Claridge *et al.,* 2018). However, what does seem clear is that student experience varies widely, even between learners within the same course. This experience can also vary over time in response to various personal circumstances (Li, 2022).

5.3.a Theme one – The physical environment

Two participants from ethnic minority backgrounds reported how difficult it was studying online, at home, with so many brothers and sisters in the house at the same time. Studies have shown that, often due to cultural and religious reasons, students from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to have a greater number of siblings and this is therefore likely to impact on their ability to concentrate, access IT equipment and network connectivity when learning online (Seuwou *et al*., 2023).

Two participants from ethnic minority backgrounds also reported having additional caring responsibilities for siblings that hampered their online learning. Highlighting the intersectional nature of social identities, these participants also reported

that they felt gender was also a contributing factor that affected the responsibilities they had within the household. One female participant of minority ethnic background described how the cultural and religious expectations placed upon her meant that females were expected to do all household chores, cooking and take care of siblings. When studying online, from home, this negatively impacted on her ability to access learning activities. This was something that she didn't feel as much pressure to do when studying on campus and outside of the home environment. Very few studies have examined the cultural differences that affect the student experience of, or ability to engage with, online learning. But the findings of this study would suggest that, when designing and delivering online education, it is vitally important to remain constantly sensitive to the different ethnic, cultural and gender-based responsibilities and expectations upon students when studying in non-classroom environments, especially the home.

As highlighted in the findings chapter, the home environment can lead to a great deal of distractions and issues with differentiating between work/study and personal spaces. As the period explored in this study coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, this pressure was undoubtedly increased due to the government enforcing the home-schooling of children for prolonged periods. This meant that children were often competing for time, space and equipment to learn. Although parenthood is not directly linked to age, the participants in this study who reported feeling these pressures were noticeably older. Indeed, 42% of mature students (students over 21 years old at point of entry) are reported to have children upon entering higher education and mature students

make up 59% of the overall student population in the United Kingdom (University of Edinburgh, 2018).

Mature students with children in this study did report various distractions from learning online due to parental responsibilities. However, some did also report that they enjoyed the flexibility to provide childcare and cost savings (e.g. nursery fees) it brought. This somewhat contradictory finding is common within online learning. Students often talk of the benefits it provides but also how these have to be considered and weighed up against the associated challenges. Several studies have explored this in detail and no definitive solution appears within the literature (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Dhawan, 2020).

Mature students, especially those with children, face greater challenges accessing, participating in and completing higher education (Pearce, 2017). Once again highlighting the intersectional nature of social identities, mature students are more likely to be from minority ethnic communities and lower socio-economic backgrounds. Health and social care courses also attract a larger proportion of mature students than any other educational area so this poses a real challenge to HEIs (Seuwou *et al*., 2023). Often disclosure of caring responsibilities only happens once there has been an impact on studies. So, given the impact this can clearly have on mature students ability to fully engage with learning online, it would seem prudent for HEIs to proactively seek this information from applicants in order to appropriately identify and support individuals with children or significant caring responsibilities. Interestingly, the age-related pressures of parenthood didn't apply to the much older participants, presumably because their children

were no longer of school-age or living at home. This further suggests that targeted support might need to be provided to those specifically with school-age children, especially within any future national lockdown or enforced home-schooling situations.

The profound impact of the lack tigmarentiation of space reported in Theme 1 was reported more by females overall. One female participant reported that studying at home meant that she was unable to separate from her maternal role and caring for her children's needs. This was often at the expense of her own learning commitments. This is supported within the literature where the challenges of studying online whilst parenting are reported much more by female participants, suggesting that gender plays an important role in the online student experience (Savage, 2023; Cuming, 2023).

Although benefits of flexibility and cost-saving were reported by many females in the study, almost all reported that these were outweighed by the challenges presented by gender and maternal roles and they would choose campus-based study in future if given the choice. With such a high percentage of HSC students being female, and parents, this potentially presents the biggest challenge to the delivery of online education within the sector.

5.3.b Theme two – The social impact of learning online

An interesting insight into how gender affected the social impact of online learning was offered by one of the participants. They described how the random nature through which online breakout rooms were created within video conferencing software meant that there were several times that no males were included within breakout discussion

groups. The participant described how this affected the tone and dynamic of the discussion that ensued and how that negatively affected the overall learning experience. The participant stated that this would never have happened in an tigmatient classroom-based environment as teaching staff would make a conscious effort to create mixed-gender groups in order to facilitate more balanced discussion and ensure a range of viewpoints. If HEIs wish to promote gender equality and awareness, it would therefore seem prudent to ensure that representation and gender-balance is maintained wherever possible in online learning environments.

Another indication of the social impact of online learning being affected by gender was the experience relayed by one participant. This participant identified their gender as non-binary and always displayed non-binary pronouns (they/them/their) within their online screen name. These were widely ignored by many other students, leading to multiple cases of mis-gendering and causing significant emotional distress to the participant. The participant had never experienced this during face-to-face classes on campus and they felt that the "distance" created through virtual interaction affected social etiquette, with fellow students feeling less respectful of other's views or wishes in online environments.

In recent years, the recognition of transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming identities has increased, accompanied by a heightened recognition of the obstacles they encounter on a daily basis. It has been claimed that frequent misgendering could be seen as a reflection of a broader institutional and disciplinary commitment to a gender essentialist worldview, which favours cisgender individuals

(Coley & Das, 2020). Studies have also shown that incidences of misgendering and microagressions towards non-binary individuals are increased in online environments and this is likely to apply equally to educational settings (Richardson-self, 2019). A study by Whitley *et al*. (2022) found that medical and health science courses had the highest incidences of misgendering across all of the social and natural sciences, highlighting how important an area this is to address within HSC education.

A challenge highlighted, mainly by those whose first language was not English, was the increased difficulty communicating verbally online. Whether raising questions with lecturers or communicating amongst peers, some participants recalled how other individuals reported that it was difficult to understand what they were trying to say or their accent. The reduced ability for clear communication that online learning presented, often left these participants feeling embarrassed or even unwilling to try and engage in class discussions or ask questions. Interestingly, these responses were all from female participants. Other studies have shown that females have less confidence than male counterparts when speaking in non-native languages, which has been linked to power and male dominance (Pakzadian & Tootkaboni, 2018). Highlighting how interconnected these issues are, this is also more prominent in cultures where patriarchal practices are established, highlighting again how ethnicity plays an important role alongside gender when considering student experiences.

Studies have shown that inadequate proficiency in English language can often lead to international students disengaging from learning and, as a result, lowering participation (Campbell & Li, 2008; Marlina, 2009). Ways to overcome this challenge

include pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses and increased tutorial support. However, Straker (2016) state that this has been overstated in the literature and ethnicity or cultural background is the dominant factor. They argue that sociocultural theory, specifically activity theory, offers a comprehensive perspective on participation in educational settings. It also provides a theoretical understanding of participation and its connection to learning, which is often lacking in existing literature (Straker, 2016).

Given the challenges above, higher education institutions need to be mindful of the impact ethnicity and cultural background can have on students' experience of learning online and how gender often plays a key role in this also. This is especially true if designing courses for future lockdown situations where family dynamics and pressures can highlight ethnic and cultural differences to a greater degree, potentially creating inequities in access to education.

5.3.c Theme three – Engaging with the content

Two participants in this study remarked how they felt online education proved to be more challenging for older students due to the reliance on information systems and technical proficiency. These participants remarked how the older members of their class seemed to be daunted by the technical skills required to successfully enable productive online learning. Technical or digital literacy has been shown to be a barrier to older students engaging with online learning (Pearce, 2017). This can include the need to navigate complicated virtual learning environments (VLEs), download or install various computer programs or operate video conferencing software. Although the literature

seems to be mixed on whether these issues affect the student experience at an individual level, a more personalised approach to student support would enable the appropriate technical assistance and training, regardless of age.

One of the participants offered that they felt that older students from ethnic minority backgrounds struggled the most with technical difficulties. This may have been due to language barriers, but research has indicated that the “digital divide” is even more pronounced among older adults from ethnic minority backgrounds (Goodall *et al*., 2010). An important factor may be the lack of enthusiasm among elder migrant groups to acquire ICT proficiency but Alam & Imran (2015) claim that lack of proficiency with the internet is an additional factor.

5.3.d Theme four – Meeting expectations

An interesting observation by one of the participants was that they felt that younger students, typically those in their first year of undergraduate study, were disproportionately affected by the negative mental health effects of studying online. Being surrounded by these types of students, but being older and having studied at university before, they noted how their classmates struggled due to not having time on campus to make friends or engage in extra-curricular or social activities. Although no doubt exacerbated by national lockdowns severely limiting all kinds of social contact for long periods, this is a phenomenon that is well reported in the literature.

Many studies have found that young learners find online learning to be lonely and isolating at times (Dinu *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al*., 2020). The lack of classroom

interaction can impact upon not just the learning experience, but learners' mental health and wellbeing. Indeed, some studies have shown that, for younger learners, the advantages of learning online are far outweighed by the challenges presented by studying this way (Li, 2022). This would suggest that careful consideration needs to be given to where within HEI courses online learning is delivered. Avoiding the initial entry period, where friendship and social bonds seem key to student experience, would be prudent. Where online learning is unavoidable, blended learning, where online learning is mixed with campus-based seminars or workshops, could potentially offer the best of both approaches.

Of those younger participants in the study that did report feeling lonely or isolated, nearly all were female. These findings are corroborated by Nomie-Sato *et al*. (2022), who discovered that female university students had higher levels of anxiety, loneliness, and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to their male counterparts. Many of these participants were from ethnic minority backgrounds and studies have demonstrated that individuals of Asian and Black ethnic backgrounds had a higher mortality risk compared to the White British population during the pandemic. According to one study, mortality rates in the Asian and Black populations were two to three times greater (Aldridge *et al*., 2020). In their investigation of the mental well-being of individuals between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four in the United Kingdom, Dewa *et al*. (2021) discovered that since COVID-19, those who identified as Black or Black-British had the greatest increased likelihood of experiencing poor mental health. In light of the pandemic, it is possible that students belonging to this demographic encountered elevated levels of tension and anxiety in comparison to the remaining student body

(Bhatia, 2020). This clearly underscores how important it is to fully understand the extent to which age and ethnic differences impact the mental well-being of university students.

5.4 Objective 3 – Exploration of findings

As previously stated, the concept of creating learning communities should serve as the foundation for engaging students in quality processes. This means encouraging students to view themselves as equal partners in the pursuit of quality improvement and encouraging them to participate in collaborative conversations about ways to strengthen assessment, curriculum, and instruction (Ramsden, 2008). The final objective of this study was therefore to encourage participants to suggest ways to improve the student experience of online learning within the school, overcome any barriers they may have experienced or identified and, hopefully, improve the experience for any future online learning cohorts. The suggestions provided by participants in this study will now be explored in more detail.

5.4.a Student-led suggestions

A student-led suggestion for overcoming challenge of differentiating between study and home/personal spaces was greater technical training for students on the abilities in video conferencing software to blur backgrounds or use background filters. Participants suggested that this would provide greater privacy options, make students more likely to engage in activities where cameras were required and increase student satisfaction due

to the increased flexibility and control it would provide them. In support of this view, recent studies have shown that high levels of preparation and training with the technological tools required for online learning are key to successful outcomes and student satisfaction (Pandita & Kiran, 2023).

A student-led suggestion to tigmat and promote the flexibility of online learning was greater use of this approach across postgraduate and continued professional development (CPD) modules within the school. Participants suggested that students on these programmes, often aimed at more mature students with greater family and work commitments, could benefit from the associated cost savings and flexibility, whilst potentially not being as greatly affected by the negative effects such as social isolation. University of Edinburgh (2018) came to similar conclusions, stating that online learning offered the greatest value to postgraduate students, studying on modular or part-time courses.

A student-led suggestion for tigmatiza the benefits of online approaches is to continue to film/record all taught sessions and share for future use. Participants stated that the added benefit of video content, in addition to existing audio recordings (Listen Again), appeals to modern learners and provides much greater value for revision purposes. This was reportedly due to the nuances conveyed through various non-verbal means of communication.

Building on the suggestion above, a few participants suggested that the online learning experience would be better if less of the lectures were “live” and timetabled classes were used for more engaging activities such as breakout rooms, seminars or

group discussions. These participants said that the ability to record video lectures and store these online, meant that they could be viewed by students at times convenient to them. Indeed, one of the most commonly stated benefits of online learning is the flexibility to learn wherever, whenever (Berge & Muilenburg, 2005). Participants claimed this could be done in advance of timetabled sessions, meaning that the sessions could be used for more engaging lessons that contained more participation and promoted deeper learning. This proposal aligns with the pedagogical strategy known as the “flipped classroom.” In this approach, students are introduced to the educational material before class, and class time is then used to deepen comprehension through peer discussions and teacher-guided problem-solving activities (Bergmann & Sams, 2012).

A student-led suggestion for addressing technical difficulties in online learning was to provide every student with a laptop or tablet with basic, but adequate, functionality. Participants suggested that this step would therefore facilitate full engagement with learning and ensure fair access to educational activities for all students. Although this does have obvious cost implications for HEIs, studies have shown that the type of device used to access online materials can drastically affect the learning experience (Dello Stritto & Linder, 2018). This is especially important when education transitions quickly to online delivery, such as pandemics or strike action, where learners might not be adequately prepared with the appropriate technology.

A student-led suggestion to improve the student experience and quality of teaching was to comprehensively tigmatizat all teaching staff with technological interfaces such as Zoom video-conferencing software. Participants suggested that

teachers should be able to use Zoom to its full potential within the classrooms to fully engage learners and make the sessions fun and informative. Technical proficiency of lecturers is vital to facilitating high quality online education, with studies showing that inadequate proficiency leads to poor student satisfaction and lower educational outcomes (Caena & Redecker, 2019; Rice, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the dearth of technical and digital skills in teaching faculties across higher education. HEIs were compelled to rapidly transition to online delivery with minimal time to train or prepare staff with the requisite technical skills. Badiozaman *et al.* (2022) conducted a study that demonstrated a substantial number of lecturers lacked the requisite technical and digital skills to effectively conduct online instruction during the pandemic. Badiozaman *et al*. (2022) provide a framework that sets out the necessary digital abilities required for online teachers to tackle this problem. The Online Teaching Framework enables lecturers to engage in systematic self-reflection on their digital competence and then identify training and development opportunities to enhance their abilities. The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), which provides guidance on the use of information and communications technology in higher education, also offers various evaluation tools to assess and enhance the digital and technical skills of teaching staff (Schröter & Grafe, 2020). Tools such as these could be used by HEIs to help address the additional, and often quite specialist, training required of teaching staff to deliver high quality online educational experiences for students.

Another student-led suggestion to improve the student experience and quality of online teaching was greater use of fun and engaging tools such as quizzes, games and online competitions during sessions. Participants felt that this would ensure students are given opportunities to participate and to express their thoughts, perspectives, and choices in a fear-free learning environment. This suggestion echoes the findings of studies from the literature review, where similar tools and approaches were recommended in order to motivate and engage students (Mortazavi *et al*., 2021; Suzuki *et al*., 2022). Research has demonstrated that integrating game-based learning strategies (gamification) with assessments that incorporate point-scoring and competitive elements, significantly enhances students' engagement. (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2020b). However, other studies challenge this and state that elements of competition can intimidate or disengage many learners, especially those who are weaker academically than their peers (Humrickhouse, 2021).

A student-led suggestion to improve student support and wellbeing was for the university to organise optional online drop-in sessions for social interaction. This would have been particularly appreciated by students during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social interaction was severely restricted. This assertion is corroborated by a study conducted by Pavin-Ivanec (2022), which revealed that students who perceived a larger lack of social interaction also reported more severe difficulties with self-regulation and learning. The social element of learning has been shown to be key to engaging students and providing a high quality, satisfying experience. Although social interaction is certainly harder to facilitate online due to a number of factors, it is clear that it is an important factor to address.

Little data exists to explore the effectiveness of online sessions for social interaction within educational courses. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that it is essential for students to cultivate a “social presence” in order to mitigate loneliness or isolation in online education. This can be interpreted as the capacity of online pupils to express themselves socially and emotionally (Garrison, 2007). This theory would suggest that *any* attempt to increase interaction, such as online social sessions, would therefore promote learner engagement, satisfaction and performance.

Another suggestion from students to address issues of wellbeing was increased personal tutorials and pastoral supervision for online learners, especially during times of lockdown and social isolation. This was because the loneliness and lack of learner community that is well reported in online learning generally was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, studies have subsequently found evidence of deteriorating mental health amongst young adults and students during this period, resulting in large increases in reports of depressive symptoms and decreases in happiness (Hamza *et al.*, 2021; Halliburton *et al.*, 2021). Online learning has traditionally required greater levels of structured tutor support than classroom-based education. With reasons for this being reported as the reduced opportunity to informally ask questions, communicate adequately or build rapport with teachers (Brown & Wilson, 2016). Increasing personal tutor contact with online learners, to increase the pastoral assistance provided to them, would give a clear sign of support to students, improving their mental wellbeing and allowing them to reach their full academic potential.

The final student-led suggestion on how to improve the student experience addresses the sub-theme of educational leadership. Participants felt that lecturers should be trained to establish and enforce clear rules and etiquette within the virtual classroom. This was something that was often lacking in their experience. Participants felt that teachers taking more leadership responsibility within sessions would improve the overall experience for all students, allowing them to feel supported and motivated to engage with the learning. Leadership is an essential role for all educators, given that they are responsible for addressing the social, emotional, and cognitive requirements of their students (MacBeath, 2018). Although not an easy task, it can therefore be argued that it is the lecturer's responsibility to ensure that all learners are fully aware of expected levels of behavior and etiquette within online lessons, and, importantly, take responsibility for enforcing these. This is especially pertinent where learning has moved online at short notice, such as pandemic or strike action, where learners may be unfamiliar with the learning environment.

In order to meet this student expectation of leadership in the classroom, lecturers need to be fully aware of current best practice, pedagogic advancements and organizational policies (Hartshorne, 2020). They also need to have high degrees of technical competence and familiarity with the various software and systems through which they teach online (Frost, 2012). This would give lecturers the skills and confidence required to establish clear boundaries within the virtual classroom and enforce any rules to ensure a respectful and tolerant environment for a diverse community of learners. In order to accomplish this, educators must consistently strive to expand and improve their own teaching practices.

Facilitating the professional development of teaching staff outlined above, requires organizational support, structural resources, a collaborative working culture and knowledge-building opportunities (Cheng & Szeto, 2016). An tigmatization approach to this is therefore essential to ensuring that teachers have the training and confidence required to lead effectively in virtual environments, meeting student expectations and improving the experience for all learners. Ways to help achieve this could be a unified e-learning training package for educators or organsiational policy which highlights online teaching responsibilities. Online teaching competencies could also be incorporated into existing job specifications to recognize the importance and enduring nature of online education.

5.5 Study strengths

Very little research exists exploring the online learner experience within health and social care university courses and this study looked to explore this in great detail within one setting. Although it means that the findings are very context-specific, by focussing on one HEI, a study of real depth was achieved that allowed topics raised by participants to be examined in a way that multi-site studies may not have achieved (Easterby-Smith, 2008). The phenomenological approach employed enabled the researcher to analyse and interpret subjective experiences, thereby obtaining insight into the motivations and behaviours of individuals and challenging established beliefs and assumptions (Moran, 2000). This powerful approach for inquiry allowed the researcher better understanding of meanings attached by participants and, crucially, to present findings that aim to learn from the experiences of others (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

A specific strength of the study was that it incorporated intersectional analytical techniques to explore the online learning experience of participants in a much more complex way. This was done to help address one of the key objectives, which was to explore how key characteristics affected the online learning experience for students. By focussing on the interconnectedness of various characteristics or social identities, the study was able to explore how ethnicity, age and gender affected the online learning experience (Bauer, 2014). The findings showed that this was often in ways that compounded each other and, importantly, did not seem to have been considered by the HEI. This therefore presented novel insights that should inform future policy and practice within the HEI and prompt further areas of research.

Utilising a personal reflexive journal during the study encouraged openness and improved overall credibility. This facilitated self-awareness, as discussed in the Methodology chapter, and aided in mitigating any potential researcher biases. Further to this, providing a reflexive statement within the Methodology chapter (3.2) strengthened the study by being transparent about the researcher's background and any potential biases that may have been introduced. By openly exploring researcher positionality and acknowledging the co-creation of knowledge production in line with the stated philosophical underpinnings of the study, readers can be confident about the transparency and quality of the findings.

Another step taken to enhance the credibility of the study was to complete a preliminary pilot study. This enabled the trial of crucial study procedures and the questions used within the interviews. An analysis of possible areas of failure for the main study, potential non-compliance with research procedures, and the unsuitability or complexity of suggested methodologies were some of the main advantages of doing a pilot study (Baker, 1994).

5.6 Study limitations

5.6.a Study design

The researcher's role as a lecturer within the school where participants were recruited from was an obvious limitation of this study. Although, it must be noted that, when the study began, the researcher was not in this position and was purely a student themselves on the taught element of the Professional Doctorate programme. Subsequent recruitment into an academic role mid-way through the study, and just before data collection began, changed this and the associated dynamics. As noted in the reflexive statement, participants may not have wished to provide feedback that was particularly negative for fear that this may somehow get back to those involved in their education and result in unfavourable treatment or marking.

This type of researcher bias can potentially influence the participant responses and skew the process of inquiry (Smith & Noble, 2014). In order to minimise this, and any kind of power imbalance it may have resulted in, all participants were fully informed on the confidentiality procedures used within the study before interviews began. Participants were also reminded at various stages that all responses would be

anonymised and nothing mentioned within the interviews could be used outside of the study.

An additional limitation is that it does not define a timeline on the continuum where behaviours and perceptions could be measured. This is to say that while this study explores online learning experiences, it does not emphasise or focus on which phase those experiences may have occurred: pre-adoption, use of online learning or post-COVID. Indeed, the aftermath of the COVID-19 policies and practices limited the study in various other ways also. In the absence of opportunities of face-to-face contact or limited in-person activities, the interactions between the researcher and the interviewees were limited, heavily online based, and disrupted at times. To some extent, this would limit the scope of research which would naturally, focus on students who are equipped to use the online technologies, rather than those who do not have the means or competencies to.

5.6.b Sampling issues

Twelve participants were recruited, and the sample size was within the recommended parameters (Creswell, 2013). Nevertheless, the number of students who volunteered to participate was disproportionately low in comparison to the total number of students in the School of Health & Social Care. This implies that there is room for advancement in the recruitment processes. It must be noted however that, in line with the interpretivist approach taken, no generalisations to larger populations are to be made in regards to the findings of this study.

Another constraint was that the recruiting strategies employed could have overlooked more representative experiences due to volunteer bias. This refers to systematic inaccuracy that arises when a sample is recruited consisting entirely of individuals who are willing to engage in the study (Eisner & Jones, 2009). Although, this is common in phenomenological studies such as this one and steps to address this such as assuring anonymity and confidentiality were taken to minimise the effect.

From an educational or institutional standpoint, one may argue that it would have been more beneficial to focus on examining the learning experiences of those who had greater challenges in participating online. The online aspect of recruiting and study processes may have unintentionally eliminated individuals who struggle with online involvement, potentially mirroring their feelings of disengagement. Recruitment may have been more effective if all eligible individuals were provided with various methods of participation and the option to have in-person interviews.

5.6.c Data analysis

The themes and sub-themes identified in the findings chapter reflect the researcher's analysis and interpretation of the data supplied by the participants. Alternate researchers, with diverse professional backgrounds, theoretical stances, or levels of expertise, may have construed the results in other ways. However, the potential for multiple interpretations of identical data does not inherently compromise the coherence of the interpretation (Jordan *et al*., 2007). This could be interpreted as a constraint of the interpretivist methodology employed in this investigation. However, the researcher feels this approach was appropriate as it enabled them to get a thorough comprehension

of the various social realities that emerge from human experience, some of which may be in opposition to one another, and analyse how particular social structures influence the behaviour of participants (Creswell, 2007).

5.7 Educational implications & recommendations

By focusing specifically on the experiences of HSC students and using intersectional analytical approaches to explore the effects of various interconnected characteristics or social identities, this study adds to the body of work in the field. It highlights the many challenges that students within this discipline often face, reflecting the wide range of ethnicity, age and gender profiles these courses attract.

The study essentially explores the experience for these students within the context of COVID-19. Although this added layers of complexity with regards to data analysis, it offers novel insight into a unique period of time and how online study was experienced by students as a result. Online education became inevitable during the period prior to which participants were recruited. This means student experiences may have been impacted by the lack of on-campus, in-person teaching. While some students would feel more capable to adapt to the new online learning environment, others may have coped quite differently. Due to the effects of the pandemic, this study must be considered in an environment where online learning was perceived as *mandatory* rather than a matter of choice. As a result, students' expectations could be different than what they might have expected had they chosen to study this way.

It is Important to note however that this is not specifically a COVID-19 study. The aims and objectives were set before the pandemic began. However, the massive effect

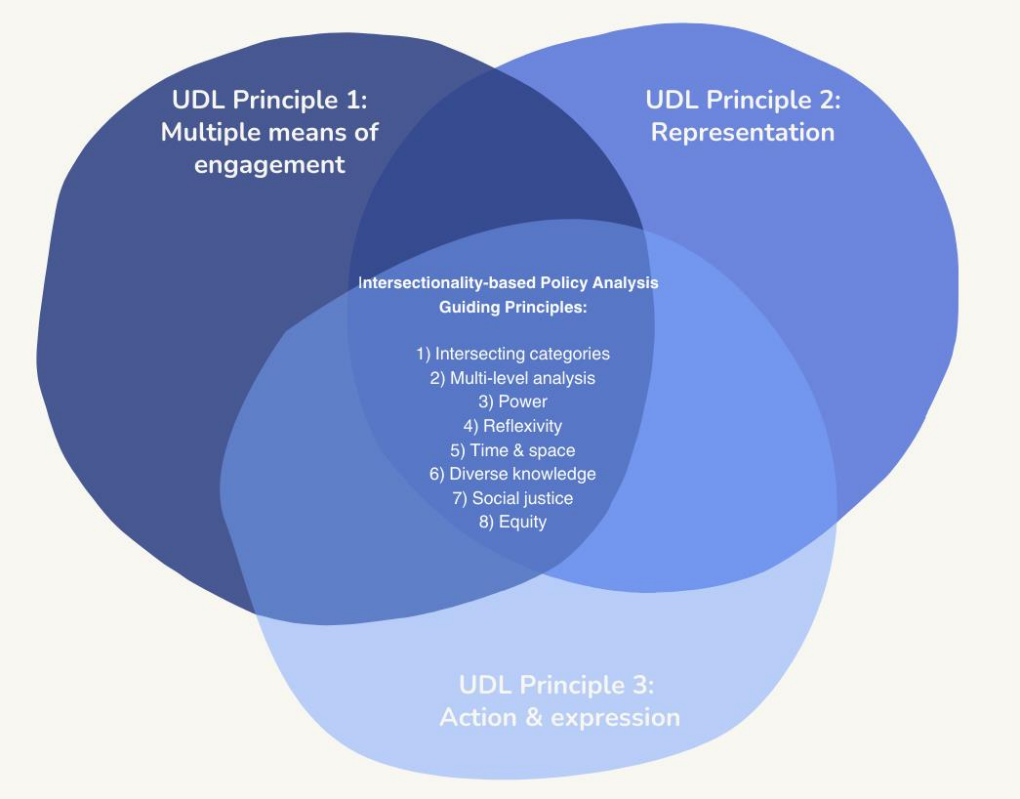
that it had upon the lives of everyone involved mean that it greatly affected the outcomes, and it must be viewed in this context. Many of the findings of the study may well have been similar if COVID-19 had never occurred, such as difficulties with focus, concentration, communication and benefits of flexibility and cost. However, some findings will be directly linked to conditions caused by the pandemic, such as enforced social isolation and difficulty accessing equipment due to others in the household. It is therefore hoped that findings can be viewed both generally, with greater transferability, as well as in the context of more specific emergency lockdown or enforced remote teaching conditions.

Given the disparity in quality and consistency reported by participants, setting a clear vision or strategy for the development and implementation of online learning within the school is the first key recommendation. By articulating a clear-cut vision and purpose, educational leaders will be able to provide a sense of purpose and direction for all staff, which will guide their professional activities and help them provide improved educational experiences and outcomes for students. In addition, developing closer ties with the university's Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) team would help to create a collaborative and supportive culture that fits with wider university policy and direction for online learning. This should also allow the school to take advantage of the specific professional expertise within that team and benefit from "economies of scale" through access to university-wide systems and software to improve the online learning experience for students.

Insights from the intersectional analysis mean that demonstrating empathy and understanding towards students' diverse challenges is an important recommendation of this study. HSC teachers should be mindful of the challenges faced by students, who are commonly mature leaners, often parents, predominately female and from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Each of these identities bring specific challenges, however, when viewed as overlapping or layered identities, they can present obstacles to learning that may not previously have been considered. In light of this, tigmatizat HSC teaching and learning methods according to students' individual needs is another key recommendation. Although limited perhaps by the professional and regulatory body oversight of many HSC courses, the researcher suggests adopting a pedagogical approach to online learning that acknowledges diverse learning needs and additionally tigmatiza and addresses the numerous ways in which discrimination and inequalities can be experienced.

Building on Meyer & Rose's (2005) Universal Design for Learning (UDL), introduced in section 5.2.b, the researcher proposes the development of a new framework that overlays this with key elements of the Intersectionality-based Policy Analysis Framework (IPAF) (Hankivisky *et al*., 2014). IPAF was created as a method for examining how power structures and tigmatization processes function in the formulation of healthcare policy. It provides a set of guiding principles to help encourage policy makers to address the challenges of inequality. Driven by the findings in this study, the researcher therefore proposes a new *Integrated Framework for Personalised Online Learning* (IFPOL) which integrates the UDL model with the guiding principles of IPAF. Please see Figure 2 (below) for graphical representation.

Figure 2. Integrated Framework for Personalised Online Learning (IFPOL)



UDL is a paradigm that accounts for the personalised needs and preferences of all learners, aiming to address the issue of creating curricula that challenges and engages a diverse range of learners. In order to do so, UDL states that curricula should have multiple means of engagement, representation, and action & expression (Meyer & Rose, 2005). IPAF contains a number of guiding principles which promote consideration of various intersectional issues and examples of previous educational outcomes include curriculum de-colonisation, case study re-design and culturally responsive teaching that validates and values the cultural backgrounds and identities of students (Kozleski *et al.*, 2014.) By combining these complimentary approaches, it is hoped that this new framework will provide policy makers and educational designers within the school with a

comprehensive tool to ensure that future online provision is inclusive and, importantly, relevant to the characteristics of HSC learners.

Providing greater support to online students is a further recommendation of this study. Offering one-on-one support, sharing concerns, asking questions, and connecting with teaching staff should reduce the feeling of loneliness and isolation that some students experience whilst studying online. Students should also be encouraged to take regular breaks to indulge in short healthy activities such as stretches, walk breaks, mindfulness exercises, meditation, deep breathing techniques and other healthy activities to maintain mental clarity and physical vitality. Students may also need additional support in managing their time and tasks effectively, creating a conducive study environment and practicing self-discipline. Course leaders might therefore consider workshops in time management and other helpful resources to provide additional guidance and practical tips for the students to develop positive learning experiences.

The final recommendation from this study is ultimately about listening to student need, giving students means to express their experiences and requirements and, importantly, acting on this feedback. A key objective of this study was to gain student-led solutions to challenges that participants faced studying online. To show real commitment to “student voice” and listening to student’s needs, the school should act upon the solutions offered by participants, making clear a position that acts upon feedback and valuing students as collaborators in their own education. By incorporating these ideas and suggestions into future practice or policy direction, the school can demonstrate a positive and proactive approach to student engagement. This approach

would be one that provides a truly transformational educational experience that recognises and embraces the diversity of students within the school.

5.8 Future research

This study looked very specifically at the online learning experience of students from within one school of health and social care. A much broader study could be implemented that examined the topic across a range of institutions offering these types of courses. This would help to uncover experiences or practices that are common to all, where institutional differences affect the student experience and promote the sharing of best practice across the sector. Similarly, the topic could also be explored across a wider range of school or departments within the same institution to explore how differences in approach or practice across disciplines affects the student experience of online learning.

Through this study, the value of involving students in applied research has been established. Students should continue to be involved in future research that is relevant to them; therefore, facilitating focus groups to identify research areas that students deem essential could be one method to accomplish this. As discussed in the limitations section though, future research in this area may benefit from attempting more meaningful ways to engage with students that typically disengage in online only activities, such as offering face-to-face interviews or facilitating focus groups.

This study took an intersectional approach to the data analysis, exploring how the multiple and interconnected social identities of participants affected their experience

of learning online. However, it was far from being a true intersectional study. Future research in this area could explore these differences, with greater focus on structures of power and populations of historic oppression, in detail by taking a more comprehensive intersectional approach. This would mean addressing intersectionality as the main topic and adopting intersectional methods throughout. Kelly *et al.* (2021) proposes such an approach, that encompasses the research questions, analysis, dissemination, and even the composition of the research team. Future research in this area could also possibly develop further the researcher's proposed Integrated Framework for Personalised Online Learning (IFPOL). Future studies could potentially investigate the implementation of this approach or it's effectiveness as a tool to increase inclusivity and promote improved online learning experiences for diverse learners.

5.9 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of HSC students studying online in order to inform future educational approaches and practice within the school and deliver more successful online learning outcomes. This was then broken down into discrete objectives that looked to explore the benefits and challenges associated with this method of study, examine how key characteristics of ethnicity, age & gender affected students' experience of online learning, and identify student led solutions to online learning challenges faced.

Although not specifically a COVID-19 focussed study, the timing of data collection meant that this was unavoidable, and all participants had recently studied online as a result of the associated government lockdown regulations. This undoubtedly

affected the experience of participants in a profound way and made analysis more challenging. For example, a challenge the researcher wasn't prepared for was trying to unpick many of the confounding effects of national lockdowns, such as home-schooling children, forced working from home and social isolation, from the specific experience of learning online. As a result, the findings and recommendations, although adding to the general body of knowledge for online learning, may be more relevant to similar situations in future where learning is forced to transition quickly online, such as pandemics or strike action.

The systematic literature review explored pertinent literature and presented various themes that emerged. These included a paradigm shift to education online resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, various psychological barriers to learning online, and online teaching skills affecting the student experience. Online study becoming the new normal and no single answer to online education expectations were also themes identified. Analysis of the specific studies identified in the literature review was also used to inform the design and delivery of this study, improving the processes and approaches taken throughout.

The methodology chapter described the ontological and epistemological stance of the researcher, along with the corresponding philosophical framework and rationale for the overarching methodology and specific methods used. This revealed a relativist ontological stance based within a constructivist framework. The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which used qualitative research methods that focussed on individuals' beliefs, motivations, and reasoning, to explore mutually agreed-upon

meaning (Morrow, 2005). In order to address any potential limitations of the stances outlined above, the researcher kept a reflexive journal, as recommended by Braun & Clarke (2013). This allowed personal views or interpretations, which could influence data or findings, to be reflected upon and “bracketed off” if necessary to improve the credibility and reliability of the study.

Braun & Clarke’s (2019, 2020) reflexive thematic analysis approach was then used to identify key themes and associated sub-themes within the data. An intersectional approach to analysis also was taken to examine patterns of intersection between various power structures and the ways in which individuals are simultaneously positioned in multiple social categories (Anthias, 2013). The results of the data analysis identified four key themes and a further twelve associated sub-themes.

The predominately home-based, physical environment in which learning takes place emerged as one of the main themes. In contrast to in-person and classroom or campus-based learning, the online learning environment gave more autonomy to students to control their routines as they wished. However, greater distractions, difficulties differentiating between home/study space and technical difficulties posed real challenges to this mode of study. The impact of gender was revealed here where females reported much greater challenges of differentiating between roles when studying online from home. Through the analysis it was shown that many of the associated benefits experienced studying online, such as flexibility and cost savings, were valued more by older students, who were more likely to have children or provide care for others. This led to student suggestions of greater use of online teaching and

learning across postgraduate and modular programmes within the school. Although, blended approaches were suggested as the optimal option, combining the benefits and flexibility of online study, with the social interaction and engagement benefits of on-campus, in-person study.

The analysis on the physical environment revealed some disparities in experience based on ethnic background, including access to equipment, distractions and increased household or caring responsibilities. These findings make it clear that universities need to be sensitive to, and accommodating of, the various religious, cultural or social expectations placed upon students of different ethnicities, especially when online study is taking place in the home environment. A number of the reported challenges due to ethnic differences were also impacted by issues of gender or age, highlighting the intersectional nature of human experience. These also seemed to be amplified by the home-based settings that study predominately took place in, further highlighting the importance of the physical environment and the support required by students to study effectively in this way.

The social impact of learning online was a key theme identified and revealed how group dynamics within virtual classrooms differ, how difficulties in communicating virtually can affect the ability to learn and how students feel that accountability for their learning changes in online environments. Similar to other studies, the overall experience of learning online had generally left participants longing for a return to campus-based studies. Participants also reported feeling lonely and lacking a feeling of learning community. Communicating online was reported as a real challenge that affected group

interaction. This was an issue where English language skills, related to ethnicity, had a greater impact. The findings of this study also showed that the lack of social interaction with classmates increased the personal accountability for learning, making participants feel more stressed and overwhelmed by the amount, or standard, of work they had to achieve.

The study showed how engagement with learning content in online environments affects the student experience. Participants reported many hours of online lectures that led to disengagement and tiredness. Analysis did reveal some potential pedagogical drivers for this, principally influenced by COVID-19, and student-led solutions to overcome this included greater use of games, quizzes and breakout group sessions. Participants found theoretical subject matter the hardest to engage with online and reported that the associated difficulties were often overcome by the “human” element of teaching face-to-face. Another student led solution to overcome the lack of engagement with learning content was to record video lectures and store these online in advance of classes so that they could be viewed by students at times convenient to them. Classes could then be used in more engaging ways such as seminars or workshops, echoing the pedagogical approach of the “flipped classroom” (Bergmann & Sams, 2012).

Technical difficulties and lack of digital skills also stood out as a significant obstacle for participants. This included issues with network connection, IT equipment and accessories such as cameras and microphones. These difficulties were experienced more by older students, suggesting that more targeted training for different age groups would be key to enabling positive student outcomes for HSC students, who

have proportionally higher mature student numbers than all other university courses. Student led solutions to these issues included improved technical training for students and staff and providing learners with the basic IT equipment required to learn online, in order to avoid a “digital divide”, where learners with the technical skills required to navigate online learning are at a distinct advantage to those without (Laufer *et al.*, 2021).

Meeting student expectations was a theme identified that explored the requirement for teachers to develop and demonstrate leadership, maintain educational quality and consistency, and be mindful of student wellbeing needs. Participants felt that teachers frequently did not take enough responsibility for issues such as facilitating activities and controlling online discussions. The need for “quality” and “consistency” in the light of student experiences also highlighted the interplay between themes. It advocated for the dire need for teachers to be equipped with the necessary digital literacy skills and professional development opportunities to adapt pedagogical practices that were shown to be crucial to engaging students.

Wellbeing and student support was identified as an important issue, with many participants recalling their disappointment at feeling this was not adequate whilst studying online, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Undoubtably exacerbated by lockdowns, participants reported that they felt “let down” with their educational experience, and that not enough was done to support the emotional wellbeing and mental health of students. This was then reported to have a detrimental effect on the participants’ motivation and subsequent academic performance. Student

led solutions to this issue included increased personal tutorial provision and pastoral supervision for online learners and online social drop-in sessions.

Overall, online learning offers many benefits for HSC students but requires a pedagogic shift to be implemented successfully. The impact of ethnicity, age and gender was shown to vary greatly, highlighting the diversity of students in the sector, intersectional considerations and promoting the proposal of a new Integrated Framework for Personalised Online Learning (IFPOL). Implementing student-led suggestions for improvements to online education should empower students as agents of change and improve the overall quality of educational experience.

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Appendix A - Systematic Review Search Strategy

Search strategy

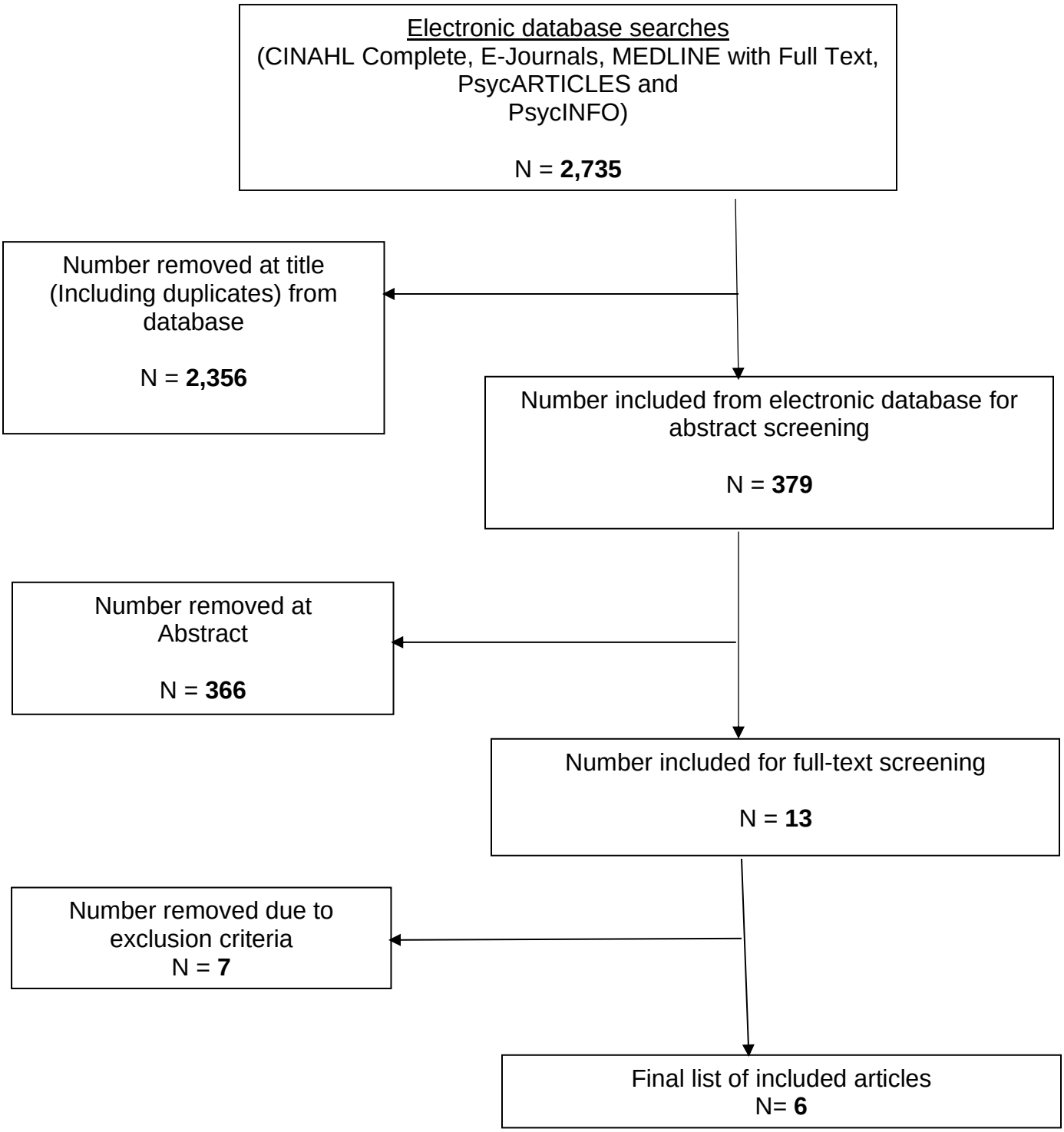
Five major electronic databases were searched in May 2022. Databases included were CINAHL Complete, E-Journals, MEDLINE (with Full Text), PsycARTICLES and PsycINFO.
Search expanders and limiters include English language, journal articles, apply related words and search within title. The search terms used were:

1. student* OR scholar* OR learner* OR undergraduate* OR postgraduate*
AND
2. Experience* OR encounter* OR perception* OR insight* OR understanding* OR view* OR lived experience* OR feedback* OR opinion* OR thoughts*
AND
3. Online learning* OR e-learning* OR distance learning OR virtual learning* OR remote learning*
AND
4. phenomenology* OR phenomenological* OR qualitative* OR interview*
AND
5. healthcare* OR health* OR medical* OR medicine* OR social care*

Inclusion / Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Justification
1. Qualitative methodology	Obtain rich, in-depth accounts
2. Higher education students	Review focus
3. Studying Health & Social Care / Medical courses	Review focus
4. Exploring online learning experiences	Review focus
5. Primary data (interview / focus group etc)	Capture uniqueness of lived experience
6. Published in English language	To allow reading and critique of paper as translation unavailable
7. Papers accessible as “full text”	To allow reading and critique of paper
7. Published and unpublished literature (theses etc)	Emerging field with limited literature
Exclusion Criteria	Justification
1. Sample only including teacher/staff experiences	Not applicable to review aims
2. Study focusing on children’s experiences	Not applicable to review aims or in line with ethical approval for this study

Appendix B – Study Selection Process (PRISMA diagram)



Appendix C – Literature Review Article Summary

Authors, Date & Location	Aims	Sample & Demographics	Methods & Analysis	Summary of Findings
Chandler (2022) UK	Explore the online tutorial experiences of 10 female undergraduate students studying a health and social care module at a large UK-based university that specialises in distance learning.	Sample 10 female undergraduate students studying a health & social care module. Demographics - Mixed ethnicity (White & Asian) - All female - Broad age range (under 25 to 56 and over)	Methods Diaries and telephone interviews Analysis Narrative analysis - Voice-centred relational method (VCRM)	Tutorial experiences are embedded in the social and cultural contexts of students' lives and are fitted around their caring roles. These students experienced variation in tutorial design and in the tutors' characteristics. Students avoided using microphones in tutorials for multiple reasons but enjoyed taking an active part via other tools. They appreciated hearing peers' perspectives and preferred small group sizes. A sense of community was missing, particularly for students with fewer supportive friends, colleagues, or family members. They long to see people's faces and build relationships.
Gumede & Badriparsad (2022) South Africa	Explore the experiences of undergraduate diagnostic radiography students of online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 lockdown period.	Sample 14 undergraduate diagnostic radiography students Demographics - Age range: 20 to 33 years old - Binary gender mix (10F & 4M)	Methods Semi-structured online interviews Content analysis	Experiences of online teaching and learning are subject to the availability (or not) of various resources. Difficulties mentioned are data, network coverage, loadshedding and being able to attend lectures while still being expected to be at their respective clinical departments. The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the participants due to the digital divide, thereby adversely affecting their academic performance.
Kunaviktikul *et al.* (2022) Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Hong Kong)	Explore the experiences of nursing students and faculty members as related to online education	Sample 52 nursing students and 28 nursing faculty members.	Methods Photovoice - Photo substantiated written reflections.	Students felt overwhelmed with their experiences of online education. They were satisfied with the flexibility, convenience and safety afforded by online education. However, concerns over practical skills and social isolation outweighed the advantages.

	during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Demographics (students) - Mixed ethnicity - Age range: 19 to 41 years old - Binary gender mix (38F & 14M)	Analysis Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke)	
Langegard *et al.* (2021) Sweden	Describe and evaluate nursing students' experiences of the pedagogical transition from traditional campus-based learning to distance learning using digital tools.	Sample 96 questionnaires completed (73% response rate) and 9 focus group interviews. Demographics Exact figures not provided but stated as roughly 90% female and vast majority between 20 and 30 years old.	Methods Mixed methods. Questionnaire (Quant) & semi-structured focus group interviews (Qual). Analysis Content analysis	Majority of students preferred campus-based education and experienced deterioration in all investigated dimensions after the pedagogical transition to distance learning. Transition to distance education reduced the possibility for students' social interactions, negatively affecting several aspects of their experience of distance learning, including motivation. However, blended learning approach may offer pedagogical benefits while maintaining an advantageous level of social interaction.
Mortazavi *et al.* (2021) Iran	Investigate the challenges of virtual learning from the students' perspectives.	Sample 52 nursing, midwifery, hygiene, and paramedical students. Demographics - Mean (SD) 20.85 years old - Binary gender mix (40F & 12M)	Methods Semi-structured group interviews – text based (Online, via WhatsApp) Analysis Content analysis	Virtual education created a negative experience among students for various reasons, including the lack of distance learning infrastructure and lack of a standard for preparing quality content. Potential solutions to the modification of virtual teaching were identified, including channel improvement, and strengthening educational content.

Suzuki *et al.* (2022) Japan (+Slovakia, Norway, and Hungary)	Investigate medical students' perceptions about positive and negative aspects of online medical education in Japan and overseas during the COVID-19 pandemic.	13 Japanese medical students AND 5 medical students from Slovakia, Norway, and Hungary. <u>Demographics</u> - Age range: 19 to 30 years old - Binary gender mix (11F & 7M)	<u>Methods</u> In-depth online interviews <u>Analysis</u> Thematic analysis	Online education was found useful in terms of saving time and creating a flexible learning environment but issues such as internet / IT access, unstandardised teaching practice and lack of quality assurance were noted. Also, social factors such as building relationships, completing research and participating in extracurricular activities were missed, detracting from the overall education experience.

Appendix D – CASP Summary

Reviewed Article	Clear statement of aims?	Qualitative methodology appropriate?	Appropriate research design?	Appropriate recruitment strategy?	Appropriate data collection?	Relationship between researcher and participant adequately considered?	Ethical issues considered?	Rigorous data analysis?	Clear statement of findings?	How valuable is the research? *
Suzuki *et al.* (2022)	0	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	Smaller and imbalance sample could have affected results. Further research areas are not identified. Implications are briefly discussed and appear quite general. Conclusive remarks are briefly presented with limited considerations of findings in relation to current practice.
Kunaviktikul *et al.* (2022)	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	Findings are adequately discussed in

										relation to existing literature base and future practical implications. Limitations and further research avenues are explicitly discussed.
Langegard *et al.* (2021)	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	Findings are related to previous research, theory, policy, and practice. Future implications for further research have not been discussed. The transferability of the findings is questionable since it was performed during a single course and only at one university.
Gumede & Badriparsad (2022)	0	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	Study aim was mentioned for the first time in the 'Discussion' section. Future implications are not explicitly discussed. Recommendations and

										conclusive remarks are limited, and neither covers the contributions to existing knowledge nor the relation to policy and practice.
Chandler (2022)	2	2	1	1	2	1	0	1	1	The connection between analysis and findings appears weak, and ethics are not explicitly discussed. Further research areas are discussed, though rather limited. Transferability of findings is questionable.
Mortazavi *et al.* (2021)	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	Findings were not discussed in relation to theory, policy, or practice. There was minimal reference to the findings in relation to previous research. Study strengths and

										limitations are only briefly touched and appear to be limited. Further research areas are discussed, though rather limited.

Appendix E - Interview Schedule

Introductory (Confirmation) Questions;

1. What course are you studying?

2. Are you an undergraduate or postgraduate student?

3. Have you studied online and in a face-to-face environment over the last year?

Main questions:

4. Overall - how have you found studying online? (i.e enjoyable / hard)

5. Are there any particular elements of studying online that you particularly enjoy or dislike?

6. Can you describe any challenges or difficulties you've faced studying online? (technical / engagement / distractions etc)
    - *How did these affect you?*
    - *How did this impact your learning?*

7. Have there been any specific parts/modules of your course that have been particularly challenging to study online?
    - *Why do you think this was?*
    - *How did this impact your learning?*

8. With regards to any challenges, do you have any suggestions as to ways the university could help students to overcome these in the future? (training / equipment etc)
    - *How would this improve it?*
    - *What impact would this have on students' learning experience?*

9. Can you describe any benefits you've experienced from studying online? (time / commuting / flexibility etc)
    - *How did these affect you?*
    - *How did this impact your learning?*

10. With regards to any benefits, do you have any suggestions as to ways the university could increase these?

11. With regards to any benefits, do you have any suggestions as to ways the university could better promote these to students?

12. How do you feel that studying online has affected your overall experience of studying at Essex?

13. Are there any other issues or points you'd like to mention about this topic or things you thought might come up?

Appendix F – Participant Demographic Table

Anonymised ID	Course	Age Range	Gender	Ethnicity
Student A	Social Work UG	26 - 40	Female	Black - African
Student B	Clin Psych PG	26 - 40	Male	Black - African
Student C	Social Work UG	41 - 60	Female	Mixed - White & Black Caribbean
Student D	Occ Therapy PG	26 - 40	Female	Mixed - White & Asian
Student E	Occ Therapy UG	18 - 25	Female	White - UK
Student F	Apprenticeship UG	41 - 60	Male	White - UK
Student G	Nursing UG	41 - 60	Female	Black - African
Student H	Apprenticeship UG	26 - 40	Female	White - UK
Student I	Nursing UG	18 - 25	Male	White - UK
Student J	Occ Therapy PG	26 - 40	Female	White - Irish
Student K	Occ Therapy UG	18 - 25	Non-binary	White - UK
Student L	Nursing UG	26 - 40	Female	White - UK

Appendix G – Ethical Approval

Dear David,

Ethics Committee Decision

Application: ETH2021-1856

I am writing to advise you that your research proposal entitled "Exploring the online learning experiences of health and social care students." has been reviewed by the Ethics Sub Committee 2.

The Committee is content to give a favourable ethical opinion of the research. I am pleased, therefore, to tell you that your application has been granted ethical approval by the Committee.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information or have any queries.

Yours sincerely,

A. Wyllie

Dr Aaron Wyllie
Ethics Officer (School of Health & Social Care)

Appendix H - Participant Information Sheet

Project title

Exploring the online learning experiences of H&SC students.

Invitation paragraph

My name is David Everiss and I am a Lecturer in the School of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and do not hesitate to ask any questions.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to explore the online learning experience of students from the School of Health and Social Care, examining the benefits and challenges associated with this method of study and identifying student-led solutions to any challenges. The study will also examine how key characteristics such as age, race and gender can affect the online learning experience.

The overall aim of the study is to inform future educational approaches and practice within the school in order to deliver more successful online learning outcomes for H&SC students.

Semi-structured interviews of around 60 mins will be carried out online to explore the experiences of H&SC students who've studied online over the last 18 months. Interviews will take place throughout Autumn and Spring term in academic year 2021-22 with analysis and writing up of findings likely to take place across the Summer of 2022. This study will be the key thesis in the researcher's Professional Doctorate submission and the full study is likely to be submitted in Autumn 2022.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You shave been invited to participate as we are looking to hear the experiences of students who have studied online recently. We are looking to hear from students from a wide range of courses, year groups and backgrounds, in order to get a broad view of how online study is experienced by students across the school and to see if there are differences in this experience affected by gender, age or race.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to take part in this research study. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to provide written consent. You are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. Withdrawal with have no impact on your marks, assessments or future studies.

If you wish to withdraw from the study, at any time, please contact the researcher directly. Any information or data provided will then be withdrawn from the study and deleted/destroyed.

Researcher: David Everiss

E-mail: deveriss@essex.ac.uk

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be asked to take part in one interview lasting up to 60 minutes during which you will be asked to reflect on studying online in a blended learning environment. The interview will be conducted using videoconferencing software (Zoom). We will also ask you to consider the benefits and challenges of this method of study and to suggest how any challenges could be improved in the future. The video conversation will be recorded and then transcribed. Your words may be used in the final project report but they will not be identifiable as your words.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Whilst there are no foreseeable risks to you from taking part in this study, it is recognised that, due to COVID-19 pandemic, any discussion about experiences over the last 12-18 months may lead to psychological distress. In the unlikely event that this occurs, and you feel you need support, a referral can be made to the university's counselling services. If you become distressed during the interview, the interview will be stopped to focus on your wellbeing. We will only recommence the interview if you wish to do so.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

By taking part, it is hoped that your input will help inform future educational approaches and practice within the school in order to deliver more successful online learning experiences for you and other H&SC students.

Confidentiality and anonymity

All interviews will be conducted using video-conferencing software. The interview will be recorded for the sole purpose of checking the accuracy of transcriptions. Recorded videos will be saved as a secure password-protected file in the University of Essex's Box storage. Once transcripts have been checked and errors edited (usually within 7 working days of the interview), the transcript will be downloaded and saved as a secure password-protected file in the University of Essex's Box storage. The video will then be permanently deleted from all servers.

No names or identifying information will be used alongside the information you provide. Any quotes from any recorded interviews will be anonymised. The information you provide us with will only be used in the study once it has been anonymised and the researcher will not provide any information about your interviews to anyone.

However, if during the interview you mention something that suggests that you or someone else is at risk of serious harm this will be raised with a Safeguarding lead.

Audio files from interviews will be stored by the researcher in a password protected file in a password protected drive at the University of Essex. This may be accessed by other members of the University of Essex evaluation team.

The information you provide will contribute towards the researcher's professional doctorate research thesis. It may also be written up for publication in academic journals, professional magazines and books. No names or other identifying information will be used.

Your rights

You may decide to stop being a part of the study at any time without explanation. You have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you.

You have the right to ask that any data you have supplied to that point be withdrawn or destroyed. Our legal basis for processing your personally identifying data is that you have consented to it. The data controller is Sara Stock, the Data Protection Officer at the University of Essex. If you have any queries the university's Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dpo@essex.ac.uk

If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, you should ask the researcher before the study begins.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you would like to find out more about the study or would like to volunteer to take part, please contact the researcher:

Researcher: David Everiss

E-mail: deveriss@essex.ac.uk

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed by the University of Essex Ethics Sub-Committee 2.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study, or you have a complaint, please contact in the first instance Dr Camille Cronin, Research Director for the School of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex, camille.cronin@essex.ac.uk. If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager Sarah Manning-Press, sarahm@essex.ac.uk. The ERAMS reference is ETH 2021-1856.

Further Information

If you would like further information, you can contact the researcher below, who will gladly answer your questions:

Researcher: David Everiss

E-mail: deveriss@essex.ac.uk

Appendix I - Participant Consent Form

Title of the Project: *Exploring the online learning experiences of health and social care students.*

Research Team: David Everiss

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet dated 22nd Sep for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these questions answered satisfactorily. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty. I understand that any data collected up to the point of my withdrawal e.g. will be destroyed; cannot be withdrawn because it cannot be identified. ☐
3. I understand that the interviews will be video recorded within video conferencing software and the footage will be reviewed afterwards by the researcher in order to analyse the responses and data collected. I understand that I am able to turn off my camera or microphone at any time and can ask for the recording to be stopped at any point during the interview. ☐
4. I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained. ☐
5. I understand that, if during the interview I mention something that suggests that I or someone else is at risk of serious harm, this will be raised with a Safeguarding lead. ☐
6. I understand that my fully anonymised data will be used for the researcher's professional doctorate research thesis. I also that it may also be written up for publication in academic journals, professional magazines or books. ☐
7. I understand that the data collected about me will be used to support other research in the future and may be shared anonymously with other researchers. ☐

8. I give permission for the video recordings and anonymised transcripts to be deposited as secure password-protected files in the University of Essex's Box storage database so that they will be available for future research and learning activities by other individuals. ☐

9. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

Participant Name	Date	Participant Signature
_____	_____	_____

Researcher Name	Date	Researcher Signature
David Everiss	22/09/21	D. Everiss

Appendix J - Participant Demographic Survey

Name**…….**

1) **What course are you studying?**

……

2) **Are you an undergraduate or postgraduate student?**

……

3) **During your course, have you studied modules online?** (Please tick)

Yes, only online ……
Yes, campus-based and online ……
No, just campus-based ……

4) **How old are you?** (Please tick)

18-25 ( ) 26-40 ( ) 41-60 ( ) 61+ ( )

5) **What gender do you identify as?** (Please tick)

Male ( ) Female ( ) Non-binary ( ) Prefer not to say ( )

6) **What is your ethnic group? (**Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background)

White

1. English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British

2. Irish

3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller

4. Any other White background, please describe

Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups

5. White and Black Caribbean

6. White and Black African

7. White and Asian

8. Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background, please describe

Asian/Asian British

9. Indian

10. Pakistani

11. Bangladeshi

12. Chinese

13. Any other Asian background, please describe

Black/ African/Caribbean/Black British

14. African

15. Caribbean

16. Any other Black/African/Caribbean background, please describe

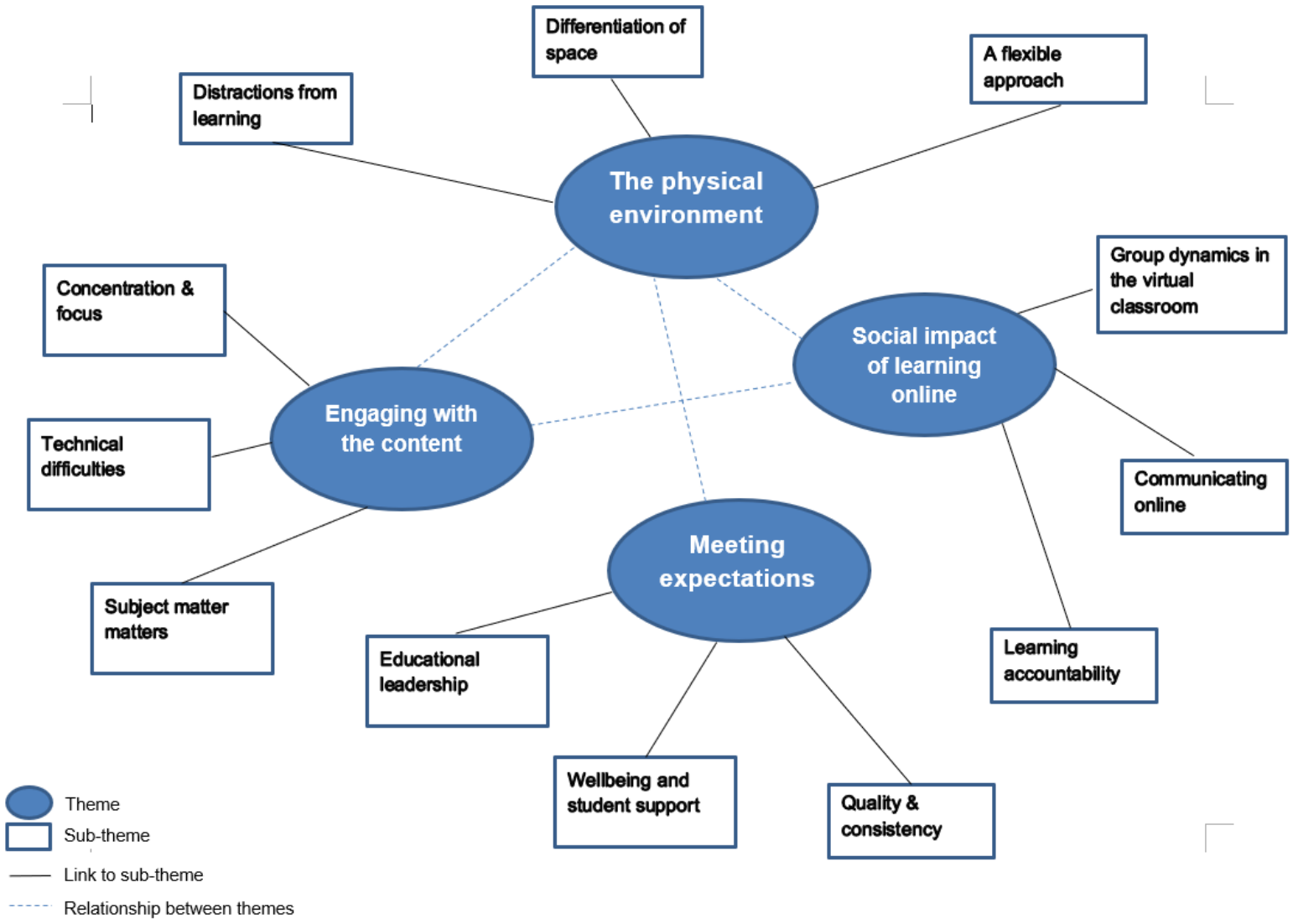
Other ethnic group

17. Arab

18. Any other ethnic group, please describe

Ethnic Group……

Appendix K – Themes Mind Map



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