Towards equity

A study of non-traditional students' experiences of engagement with their learning in their first year at university

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Abstract

This research examines non-traditional students' experiences of engagement with their learning in their first year at university, in relation to equity. In the context of the increased participation of students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, the *Review of Australian higher education* (Bradley et al. 2008) indicated the need to improve quality in Teaching and Learning by enhancing student engagement. The review recommended that student engagement be used to measure student satisfaction, given this reflects teaching and learning and by extension university performance. Thereafter, the focus has been on engaging students for success and retention.

The paradox is that as the numbers of non-traditional students have increased in higher education, they appear to continue to be associated with a discourse of deficit, rather than with what they contribute to higher education. This thesis contends that the normative tendencies at institutional level in student engagement could have a level of responsibility in not adequately addressing the capacity of these students, hence amplifying inequities towards them. The further contention in this research is that, in its close association with policy to educate for a knowledge economy, this student engagement tradition seems not to have fully considered the potentials of non-traditional students as human beings in relation to the broader world, with the possibility to make a difference for greater equity in society.

This research, emancipatory in inclination, uses Bourdieusian theory with alternative forms of capital, flexible habitus and field, for equity. First, the experiences of the non-traditional students emerged inductively through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Interviews were conducted with six non-traditional students who had completed their first year to give them voice on what mattered to them in their experiences of engagement with learning in that year. The results obtained from data analysed were then tied to theory, with Bourdieu's concepts and the literature on student engagement and the first year.

These non-traditional students showed their capacity to enact a successful first year amidst challenges encountered in negotiating their engagement with learning in the dominant university field. The capital, identity and knowledge that they deployed in the process called for recognition by the university. These students enacted a form of equity that applied to the individual in the market economy, but did not extend to the larger context of society as a broader outcome of their education. In addition to recognition, this research suggests the need for criticality in student engagement to allow non-traditional students the possibility to become part of the life of society, with a perspective on a better and more equitable world. Critical student engagement could encompass power sharing in classroom processes, collaborative enquiries with the reciprocity of care, and questioning issues for an in-depth understanding of the world.

The findings in this research, while bound to the group studied, are intended to open up different ways of thinking about non-traditional students in student engagement. Practitioners can apply what is relevant to their own context of work with non-traditional students. At a theoretical level, using the voice of non-traditional students and Bourdieu's concepts adds depth to current research related to these students. Overall, with recognition and criticality as ways ahead, this research highlights ongoing equity issues in higher education.

Declaration

Doctor of Philosophy Declaration

I, Nalenie Gungadurdoss-Ramjaun, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *Towards equity: a study of non-traditional students' experiences of engagement with their learning in their first year at university* is no more than 80,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University's Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures.

Ethics Declaration

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Project no. HRE 17-018).

Signature:  Date:10 November 2023

Dedication

For my husband who, from the time I entered early adulthood, has been the constant presence in my life.

For my sister and her two daughters, Tesha and Amisha. Together we have forged an enduring bond.

For maman and papa, in whose home in Mauritius I lived a beautiful childhood.

I love you All.

Acknowledgements

Victoria University made it possible for me to do a PhD. It has been an honour for me to study in this tertiary institution.

I am grateful to a number of people who have contributed towards my progress in the production of this thesis. First, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Gwen Gilmore and Honorary Professor Marg Malloch. I have felt the supportive presence of Dr Gilmore all along since the time I started my PhD. In my most vulnerable moments, she listened and appeased, teaching me in turn how to manage the uncertainties of a PhD journey. Fuss-free and unassuming, she allowed me to expand myself as I explored new ideas and new possibilities. Her nuanced way of giving verbal and written feedback, while to the point, never discouraged. Midway during my studies, she once said, ‘You will get there. You will get there’. Dr Gilmore has been true to her words and actions.

Honorary Professor Malloch who later joined us, gave further impetus to my work. Gradually I managed to respond to her expectations, but not after having on several occasions wondered, ‘What will Marg say now’, while pressing on the ‘send’ button! Through Honorary Professor Malloch I also understood that there is joy in engaging in scholarly work, even if it is hard work. Dr Gilmore and Honorary Professor Malloch complemented each other in supervising my PhD, and I came to view both as women of substance sincerely working towards advancing another woman in the scholarly world.

While the students who participated in this research will always remain anonymous, I would also like to thank them. They gave valuable insight into their lives as students in their first year at university. I wish them well in life. I am indebted to Dr Andrew Funston who read parts of my work and offered feedback. My thanks go to Dr Peter Thomas who, when I started my PhD, co-supervised with Dr Gwen Gilmore. I am also grateful to Professor Ron Adams, Dr Rose Lucas and Professor Deborah Zion, whose classes for all first-year PhD students I attended. I learned much from them. Later, I attended the writing retreat hosted by Professor Adams and Dr Lucas.

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Finally, I am thankful to Rosemary Viette for her editing services when I was preparing my thesis for submission. She provided feedback in accordance with IPEd Standards D and E regarding grammatical accuracy, correct use of spelling and punctuation, conformity with referencing conventions, clarity of expression and appropriate and consistent use of terms. In doing so she preserved my meaning, argument, style, organisation and voice. Although her former field is education with specialties in academic literacy and language testing, she did not furnish input that affected the substance and structure of my thesis.

Preface

The margins

Go and brush the floor she told me.

I remained quiet.

I could have replied that I know how to make the floor shine,

but I also know my own worth,

my intelligence

and my capacities.

But on that day, I said nothing.

Where was my voice? Was it stuck inside?

Unlike Nathan who valued staff members and their achievements, this one

—coming to think about it now—

was a weak character, with even weaker leadership skills.

She would surround herself with friends, courtiers and the loud ones,

and dismiss the others as insubstantial.

We were just ‘the others’.

For my professional development,

she decided that we would both take a short course,

with her as the coach all along.

The meetings with her,

that she herself initiated,

stopped after the first few.

I completed with a distinction,

but the coach had long stopped talking about the course by then.

Nothing changed after the course.

She had decided that I was one of the others,

and I remained among the others.

She would keep stressing the importance of engaging with students,

but the irony was that she herself reflected disengagement.

Being an outsider is no fun. I left to focus on my PhD.

She had to leave.

She left, blaming others.

What she will never know

is that she led me to imagine my PhD and myself

in more ways than I ever imagined.

Her insistence on that engagement

—that she herself did not embody—

brought me to consciously follow the student engagement trail

during the course

and relate it to practice.

The topic on student engagement

does not instil the same excitement

as topics on refugees making the headlines,

recounted by the no less exciting Professor X.

As I was working on student engagement

to give it a new life as a PhD topic,

I realised that I was making my voice heard

above the crowd

more often in this physical world.

Unstuck from inside, that voice was keen to be heard.

Had I found my voice?

Is the fact that I came to choose non-traditional students,

portrayed as the deficit-ridden others

(in comparison to their traditional counterparts),

to present alternative views of them in my PhD

an intellectual move only?

Or, is it not also the subconscious me making my voice heard

in my commitment to equity?

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Definitions

Widening participation	The higher education review in Australia (Bradley et al. 2008) argued for the greater participation of students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education.
Student engagement	Student engagement as conceptualised for this research is a joint proposition between student and university (Coates 2006), encompassing the student's involvement or investment in educationally purposeful activities and the university's provision of the conditions for engagement to take place (Krause & Coates 2008; Huh & Kuh 2001). Engagement itself is behavioural, cognitive and emotional (Archambault et al. 2009; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004). The student as an agent in their engagement experiences is an individual who consciously reflects on the context of their engagement to choose their course of action (Archer 2003). While the student's engagement with learning is anchored in the classroom, engagement influences extend to the institution and the world beyond (Krause 2011; Reschly & Christenson 2012; Leach & Zepke 2011; Zepke 2017).
A sociocultural dimension to student engagement	A sociocultural dimension to student engagement highlights 'the need for the institution to consider not just the student support structures but also the

	institution's culture, and the wider political and social debates impacting on student engagement' (Kahu 2013, p. 764).
Neoliberalism	The current climate of neoliberalism has turned: (i) individual rights into excessive individualism, leading to relentless competition (ii) individual freedom into the customer's freedom of choice on the market (McMahon & Portelli 2012). Associated with: (i) 'accountability (in contrast to moral responsibility)', in which accountability has led to 'a one-size-fits-all mentality or standardization', (ii) 'narrow forms of utility', and (iii) 'profits at all cost', neoliberalism would be oblivious to 'different needs arising from different contexts' (McMahon & Portelli 2012, p. 2).
Equity	Widening participation has been framed as an equity project (Bradley et al. 2008). Burke (2018) argues that Equity in higher education demands that we not only lift concrete barriers [like access] but also address the historical processes in which the knowledge, experiences and cultures of some communities across the world have been

	marginalised and silenced, whilst others have been given prestige and status. (p.12) Burke (2020, p. 64) points out that 'those who have been targeted by equity policies have often been misrepresented through deficit and pathologizing discourses' and 'This fails to acknowledge and redress deeply entrenched historical and structural inequalities.'
'Teaching and Learning' and 'teaching and learning'	In this research capital letters are used for the field of 'Teaching and Learning' and lower case is used when 'teaching and learning' is used generically.

Chapter One - Introduction

The aim of this research is to illuminate the experiences of engagement of non-traditional students with their learning in their first year at university, in relation to equity. Dominant forces within the university and influential on the university that could implicitly impact on equity for non-traditional students in their education are questioned in this thesis, and it is in that spirit that I am undertaking this research in the field of student engagement.

Widely researched, student engagement is seen as a 'critical focus for universities' (Coleman et al. 2021, p. 1). Eccles and Wang (2012, p. 137) call student engagement 'a hot topic for its association with student achievement'. Widespread interest in student engagement would be 'driven by the desire to enhance student learning' (Reschly & Christenson 2012, p. 3). Nelson and Clarke (2014, p. 23) tie a successful first year experience to student engagement, success and retention, arguing that, 'For students a successful transition into university during their first year is now regarded as crucial for student engagement, success and retention.' In Australia, student engagement came to the forefront of higher education in the wake of educational reforms for the increased participation of students who have historically not participated in higher education (Bradley et al. 2008). The *Review of Australian higher education* (henceforth called the *Bradley Review*) indicated the need to 'improve the quality of teaching and the student experience' by 'improving the engagement of students with their learning environment' (Bradley et al. 2008, p. 78).

While universities have worked at increasing their student population, student engagement became a key item on the agenda of administrators, with practitioners focussing on how to engage students for success and retention, and alongside researchers developing a large body of work in the field of student engagement. Universities Australia (2019, p. 2), prefacing its data snapshots with 'Australia has one of the best higher education systems in the world', gives figures that speak of growth in higher education participation. At 2018, 39.7 % among 24 to 34-year-olds had a bachelor degree compared to 31.9% in 2008 (Universities Australia 2019, p. 21). From 2008 to 2017, a 66%

increase of undergraduate enrolment among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and a 50% increase among regional and remote students point to increased participation among students with non-traditional backgrounds (Universities Australia 2019, p.15).

Increasing access for students from non-traditional backgrounds and a concomitant interest in student engagement, nevertheless, contains what appears to be a paradox. As subjects of the widening participation, itself framed by equity purposes, students from non-traditional backgrounds in the field of student engagement have tended towards a positioning that can 'strain and constrain' them to the margins (Kezar, Walpole & Perna 2014, p. 244). Burke (2018) argues that

> Equity in higher education demands that we not only lift concrete barriers [like access] but also address the historical processes in which the knowledge, experiences and cultures of some communities across the world have been marginalised and silenced, whilst others have been given prestige and status. (p. 12)

The author also points out that 'those who have been targeted by equity policies have often been misrepresented through deficit and pathologizing discourses' and 'This fails to acknowledge and redress deeply entrenched historical and structural inequalities' (Burke 2020, p. 64).

In this introductory chapter, I first define non-traditional students as they are the focus of this research. I then elaborate on my research journey in student engagement, during which I encountered a marginalised picture of non-traditional students with deficit innuendoes, framed in a normative university context (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis 2015; James, Krause & Jennings 2010; Radloff & Coates 2010). Extended to the broader context of the widening participation, student engagement then tends to predetermine the subjectivities of non-traditional students to serve a knowledge economy, leaving behind the moral purpose of their education (Biesta 2011; Bradley et al. 2008; Gourley 2015; Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017; Southgate & Bennett 2014; Zepke 2014). To articulate the engagement experiences of non-traditional students towards a

discourse of equity, I take a sociocultural perspective to student engagement along with the emancipatory potential of Bourdieu's field theory with alternative forms of capital and flexibility of habitus. Finally, I set out the research questions and conclude with an outline of the chapters that follow in this thesis.

1.1 Non-traditional students

It is necessary from the start to indicate how I use the term non-traditional students in this research. Non-traditional students are students who until the era of widening participation 'have traditionally been structurally excluded from such institutions [of higher education]' (Mallman & Lee 2016, p. 685). They are students who 'do not fit' with the definition of traditional university students,

> and may include: mature age students; VET pathways students; students from low socio-economic backgrounds; Indigenous students; rural students; students who are the first in family to attend university; off campus students; part-time students; and flexible entry students, among others. (Devlin 2010, p. 2)

Standing as the norm, traditional students are **'**students who have come straight from … secondary school to university and in the main, from high and medium socioeconomic backgrounds and who tend to study on-campus and full-time' (Devlin 2010, p. 2). To this can be added the characteristic of having parents who attended university (Trowler 2015). There is a sense that, in a university context with 'cultures, practices and histories that have greatly benefitted already highly privileged social groups and profoundly excluded others' (Burke 2012, p. 194), non-traditional students stand as disadvantageously positioned, thus highlighting the university as a site where the complexities of education at the crossroad of equity could unfold.

I have chosen to use the term non-traditional students instead of specific groups in the non-traditional category since there are overlaps between these groups. For example, the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE, 2016, p. 5) indicates overlaps between students from low socio-economic backgrounds (low SES students) and mature aged students. As non-

traditional students, there could be similarities in the experiences of these students in relation to student engagement and equity.

1.2 Student engagement: a research journey

My story of marginalisation as related in the preface, led me on a student engagement trail for enhanced practice during the Teaching and Learning course that I did in 2015. Doing a professional development course to learn how to engage students, while engagement with staff was not modelled by those in positions of power at the place where I worked, raised my awareness of equity for people in marginalised situations around the concept of engagement.

The purpose in recollecting this journey is to show which student engagement tradition provoked the perspective on student engagement taken in this research, that I began in 2016. As I was working at relating theory to my practice in the above course, I came to the realisation that behind most of the discourse surrounding Teaching and Learning, it was the findings of Chickering and Gamson (1987) in the form of their seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education, that functioned as the common denominator of first-year university experiences. Good practice as defined by Chickering and Gamson (1987) encourages student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, and giving prompt feedback. The definition also emphasises time on task, communicating high expectations, and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning. I found myself relating these principles to practice by comparing classroom scenarios that reinforced them and those that did not, and developing a subject as part of my assignments.

In trying to further understand Chickering and Gamson's (1987) broader relevance to student engagement, I discovered its influence in the development of the five national benchmarks of effective educational practice launched by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in America in 2000 to gauge the quality of the university student experience on an annual basis (Pascarella et al. 2006). These five benchmarks which comprise the level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student interaction with faculty members, enriching educational experience, and a supportive campus environment, have been reviewed and refined (McCormick, Gonyea & Kinzie

2013) in the light of annual survey results. Exported to Australia, the NSSE has reformulated itself through the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) which was conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) as from 2007. The six engagement scales in the AUSSE Student Engagement Questionnaire administered to first and third-year students, and whose results were intended to generate conversations aiming to enhance students' learning and development, are academic challenge, active learning, student and staff interactions, enriching educational experiences, a supportive learning environment and work integrated learning (Radloff & Coates 2010, p. ix).

The influence of the student engagement tradition set by the AUSSE for first-year higher education can be seen in extensive work on transition pedagogy, which is a whole-of-institution approach to the first-year student's learning and development via the curriculum (Kift 2009; Kift 2015; Kift, Nelson & Clarke 2010). Validation for the enterprise has been sought through alignment with the engagement scales identified by the AUSSE:

> A transition pedagogy seeks to attend to each of these aspects [the AUSSE scales] of student engagement in a coherent, embedded, and integrated way, utilising the curriculum to mediate as many student-institution interactions as possible to enhance the broader student experience. (Kift 2009, p.10)

Not exclusively focused on student engagement, but incorporating multiple dimensions of the student's experience in Australian universities, the first-year experience studies carried out by the Melbourne Centre for Higher Education have elaborated an approach to student engagement that bears similarity with the AUSSE. The students' engagement with their learning is posited as incorporating academic engagement, engagement with academic staff and engagement with peers (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis 2015; James, Krause & Jennings 2010; Krause, Hartley, James & Mc Innis 2005).

The value of the student engagement tradition as depicted so far was its focus on enhancing student learning and development, thus its relatedness to the

core business of Teaching and Learning, which was mine. It was also for Teaching and Learning purposes, and with one of their definitions of student engagement taken from the AUSSE tradition, that Zepke and Leach (2010) and Leach and Zepke (2011) have developed a conceptual organiser from an extensive literature review. The research perspectives in the conceptual organiser are: motivation and agency; transactional engagement (further expanded into students engaging with teachers and students engaging with each other); institutional support; active citizenship and non-institutional factors, accompanied by propositions for institutional action. In Zepke (2017), a reworked conceptual organiser appears with three perspectives and ten propositions; this time the three perspectives were student's investment in learning, teacher and institutional support, and enabling external environments. The understanding was that 'engaged students invest in learning; institution and classroom practices support learning; and engaging features of external environments sustain learning' (Zepke 2017, p. 38). Zepke (2017, p. 38) sought to extend engagement influences beyond the classroom to the institution and the external world, while emphasising that perspectives and propositions for enhanced engagement will acquire meaning only when 'applied to our unique context and students'.

Nevertheless, in that student engagement tradition that has had a far-reaching influence on the Australian discourse of student engagement through its large-scale dissemination of data that inform universities and policy, I was confronted with the space allotted to non-traditional students at the margins. In acknowledging the educational benefits associated with the presence of students from different backgrounds in the university context, the report on the 2009 AUSSE appears to consider such difference from a strength perspective.

> Clearly, being open to people from different backgrounds is likely to enhance students' social awareness and relations. Moreover, it also has the potential to significantly impact their educational outcomes in terms of challenging them to consider their perspectives and assumptions. (Richardson & Coates 2010, p. 9)

However, such educational benefits do not seem to substantially move beyond monitoring the frequency of students' interactions with peers having different values and coming from different ethnic, religious and political backgrounds (Coates 2009). Experiencing difference would be a more complex issue than a consideration of the frequency of interactions with non-traditional students. Added to that, there is even less said about these students, beyond a picture tending more towards generalisations that omit more refined pictures of their engagement. Thus, students seen as 'being the first in the family to attend university and (for Australian students) residing in a lower socioeconomic area – was on the whole not associated with differences in engagement' (Radloff & Coates 2010, p. xi).

The large-scale dimension of the AUSSE surveys could be a likely reason for an absence of a sharper picture of the engagement experiences of non-traditional students. However, assumptions of university education that tend to favour fitting in with the norms would take no account of who non-traditional students are in their learning and development.

> An important means of expanding higher education is to boost the participation of people from historically underrepresented groups. For higher education to be truly successful, the characteristics of students must match those of the general population.
> (Radloff & Coates 2010, p. 49)

On occasions when the focus has been on non-traditional students, the tendency has been towards a perspective of constraint that reveals little of their capacity. The home background as an individual factor has appeared to take the blame for 'differences in students' outcomes, and how these are influenced by background and the different ways students engage at university' (Radloff & Coates 2010, p. 56). Deficit thinking would consider 'students and their families as lacking the academic, cultural and moral resources necessary to succeed in what is presumed to be a fair and open society' (Smit 2012, p. 370). Regarding individual factors, Kahu and Nelson (2018, p. 3) have pointed out that, 'caution is required when implying that pre-existing factors such as SES or entry scores

are the reason for the poorer success of the individuals and the group as a whole'.

Other reference points in the student engagement discourse traced out by the AUSSE tradition equally fall short of presenting non-traditional students from a perspective departing from deficit innuendoes. In the first-year experience studies conducted by the Melbourne Centre for Higher Education (James, Krause & Jennings 2010), there appears to be a hegemonic undertone towards those whose backgrounds differ from that of the university, for them to be able to engage in university education. Thus, with James, Krause and Jennings (2010, p. 73) emphasising that 'attention might be given to ways in which students are informed of the kind of engagement that effective higher education requires', any proposition for alternative ways of engaging with university studies coming from students whose backgrounds differ from that of the university recedes from view. As argued by Smit (2012, p. 373), an uncritical acceptance of a dominant discourse, would pathologise those 'marked and separated from the mainstream.' The focus would also be less on the capacities of non-traditional students in a later first-year experience study (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis 2015). This leads to recommendations such as those made for non-traditional subgroups to be regularly monitored since 'Early identification and intervention of 'at risk' students can contribute significantly to improving retention' (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis 2015, p. 6).

The 'at-risk student' rhetoric in student engagement that has accompanied students from non-traditional backgrounds in the wake of the widening participation, could have played a role in shifting attention away from these students' contribution to higher education.

> Promoting student engagement by utilising and clarifying expectations and monitoring student at-risk behaviour emerged as significant areas of interest, particularly in 2009–2010, where attention in Australia was focused on the widening participation agenda …These issues reflected growth in a university-wide focus for research along with a more explicit focus on non-traditional and equity cohorts. (Nelson et al. 2012, p.vi)

Presented as ‘poorly equipped’ for university, students from non-traditional backgrounds have thus been positioned as ‘other and subject to deficit, leading to them being or feeling marginalised and disadvantaged by their institutions’ (Trowler 2015, p. 307). Monitoring at-risk students from non-traditional backgrounds with the desired aim to engage them would function within what could be deficit conceptions of these students in the broader context of the widening participation. A critical review of six key reports on access and equity in higher education has indicated that ‘underlying dominant discourses that are underpinning the current debates in higher widening participation agendas often adopt a deficit conception of equity groups with failure attributed to the individual rather than systems’ (Walker-Gibbs et al. 2019).

It is a reality that non-traditional students are more likely to drop out than traditional students, but an understanding of them at the crossroad of equity goes beyond the success and failure binary. In a study tracking student cohorts from commencement to completion, low SES students have been found to have a completion rate of 68.9% as compared to 77.7% for high SES students (Edwards & McMillan 2015). The more likely reasons for equity groups to consider early departure, reported in Edwards and McMillan (2015), were financial, as well as family and other responsibilities. Time constraints resulting from the necessity to take paid work for financial reasons were found to impact low SES students in their studies (Rubin et al. 2022). Finance and health issues have been cited in Li and Carroll (2017, p. 5), but interestingly it was found that ‘the disposition of equity group students towards university study reduced their likelihood of considering leaving university relative to non-equity students.’

While the NSSE in America still prevails, the AUSSE items have been reconfigured into the Student Experience Survey, considered ‘as a litmus test of student engagement, satisfaction and educational quality’ in Teaching and Learning (Matthews, Lodge & Johnstone 2022, 24 August). Nevertheless, the gap still prevails between equity and non-equity groups in students’ experiences of engagement. The *2018 Student Experience Survey national report* (Social Research Centre 2019, pp. 6-7) gives the following contrasting figures in the positive rating of the learner engagement indicator by students: 57% for Low

SES as compared to 62% for high SES, 59% for FIF (first in family) as compared to 62% for non-FIF; 63% for students under 25 as compared to 54% for students between 25 and 29, 45% for students between 30 and 39, and 41% for students 40 and above.

In its very conceptualisation, the student engagement tradition that I have traced out puts the onus on the individual to participate, 'the extent to which students are engaging in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes' (Krause & Coates 2008, p. 493). With no clear formulation of student agency in relation to the conditions offered by the university for such participation, the door is left open to possibilities to consider the student as lacking, while deflecting university responsibility. Zepke (2014, p. 701) has stated this student engagement to be a one-size-fits-all, with a tendency to 'be blind to cultural and other differences.' Later, Vallee (2017, p. 934) critiqued 'the silently paradigmatic stance of engagement' based on the normative individual 'as the archetype of the engaged human' to be 'rather exclusionary'.

There would be more to non-traditional students than 'a single and final identity destination for success' (Walker-Gibbs et al. 2019, p. 3). Overlooking the complexity of the lives of non-traditional students in student engagement would exacerbate the idea that they are problems that need to be solved (Larsen & Frost-Camilleri 2023). In the meantime, marginalising students from non-traditional backgrounds has become a matter of concern in the broader field of the first-year experience (Devlin 2013; Devlin & O'Shea 2012; 0'Shea et al. 2016); framing them as deficient instead of considering their contribution to higher education appears to be the common denominator across these authors. Portrayed more favourably, these students have for instance, shown the resources that they draw from for their success and personal growth (Funston 2011; Marshall & Case 2010) and revealed themselves to be 'hardworking, high achieving, and determined to succeed' (McKay & Devlin 2016, p. 359).

The view that I take in this research is that attributing deficits to non-traditional students in student engagement would not do them justice. Fitting them in, conflating their ability with their backgrounds, blaming them and their families,

and framing them as the other, would not adequately convey an appreciation of their capacity in their engagement experiences. I contend that the normative tendencies of the student engagement tradition that I have been discussing so far and that has permeated the discourse on how to enhance student learning and development, could have a level of responsibility in marginalising the capacity of non-traditional students in their engagement experiences, implicitly amplifying inequities towards them.

I further consider that in the direct association of this student engagement tradition with the widening participation policy to educate for a knowledge economy, it could have contributed to an education that does not necessarily address broader inequities towards students from non-traditional backgrounds. My position will become clearer in the following two sections of this chapter.

1.3 Widening participation: equity in tension with economic growth

Widening participation that has been framed by equity for the greater participation of students who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education (Bradley et al. 2008), has certainly contributed to greater access for them (Universities Australia 2019). However, what is presented as educational opportunities for non-traditional students appears to tend more towards serving economic interests. While there is an overt expression for 'the rights of all citizens to share in its [society's] benefits' (Bradley et al. 2008, p. xi), the impetus for widening participation appears to have been the growing need for a skilled workforce rather than the right to education for all. 'To increase the numbers participating we must also look to members of groups currently under-represented within the system, that is, those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth' (Bradley et al. 2008, p. xi). With its stated purpose as different from its real purpose to serve the economy, widening participation to students from non-traditional backgrounds could—beyond access—have missed some dimensions to equity. Equity in education for non-traditional students appears to take the form of 'a broader commitment to providing opportunity rather than addressing deep structural inequity' (Harvey, Andrewartha & Burnheim 2016, p, 82).

It has been argued that inequities in higher education remain entrenched because of the way widening participation has been conceptualised. In what they refer to as 'excavating policy', Southgate and Bennett (2014, pp. 25-26) trace out how widening participation 'attempt[s] to speak certain types of subjects into being' predefining 'the possible field of action for those who are the target population of the policy—non-traditional students'. In other words, the way non-traditional students' subjectivities have been moulded in policy stands as limiting their opportunities rather than expanding them. To elaborate their point, the authors focus on the notions of the 'capable individual' and 'proper aspirant' in the *Bradley Review* (2008). Southgate and Bennett (2014) argue that aiming for a higher education 'that provides opportunities for all capable people to participate' (Bradley et al. 2008, p. 6) does not give adequate attention to the developmental nature of capability, ignores the student's background and precludes the role of the institution once the 'capable' student gains access. Moreover, seeking to raise the aspirations (Bradley et al. 2008, p. xiv) of students from non-traditional backgrounds would position the latter as having little or no aspirations. In agreement with Southgate and Bennett (2014), I would also add that widening participation's focus on the 'capable individual' shifts attention away from scrutinising the broader opportunities offered to them, and that a focus on raising aspirations tends to evolve in close relation to 'the economic aspirations of the nation' (Sellar & Gale 2012, p. 98), and within 'dominant normative contexts' (Sellar & Gale 2012, p. 92).

Southgate and Bennett (2014) point out that the predetermined positions of the subjects of widening participation make an abstraction of their 'structural, socio-cultural and learning environments' (p. 29) and are 'dismissive of the knowledges and mores of those who are not its ideal subject' (p. 39). Nevertheless, the course of action spelt out by policy is 'a process that need not be inevitable and to which subjects need not be subservient' (Southgate & Bennett 2014, p. 25), implying that a different trajectory is possible and that equity for non-traditional students could be articulated differently than to suggest subservience to the dominant forces at work on them in higher education. I include the possibility of such a trajectory in relation to the non-traditional students in this thesis.

1.4 Student engagement and widening participation

I have stated that the student engagement tradition under critique in this research presents as a barrier to equity for non-traditional students in their engagement with learning, since it offers conditions of engagement that prioritise only what is normative in the university context. It was upon one of the recommendations of the *Bradley Review* (2008) that the same student engagement came to be accountable to the widening participation policy, and by the same stroke intersect with equity at a broader level. The recommendation of the *Bradley Review* (2008) was that higher education providers use the AUSSE and report annually on the findings to monitor the level of student satisfaction as a reflection of quality in Teaching and Learning. This meant that the AUSSE also became a measure of institutional performance, which was tied to funding for Teaching and Learning. As a result, universities have largely used student engagement to enhance the student experience for them to be successful, success which would serve the economy as pre-determined by policy. Student engagement has thus come to be widely considered as a 'silver bullet' (Trowler 2015), and an 'unquestionably positive' (Ashwin & McVItty 2015) strategy for success and retention. Yet, student engagement could hide injustices in its approach to foster knowledge.

The concept of education as allowing learning and development in transformative ways is put to question in the manner it is reflected in student engagement as related to non-traditional students. Student success as an outcome of engagement within current policy connects student engagement with the needs of the economy (Zepke 2014), more than with the needs of the student in relation to the world. Thus, knowledge in student engagement becomes a commodity in the market that allows one to gain a qualification and employment. The emphasis on accountability, performance and 'an instrumental view of knowledge' in student engagement would result from an alignment with current ideology favouring a market economy (Zepke 2014, p. 698), with 'the graduate as a product ready to participate in the knowledge society' (Gourley 2015, p. 405). It follows then that 'concern about diversity, purposes, values and knowledge in education' (Zepke 2014, p. 702), as well as

‘the freedom of students to learn in the face of a growing surveillance culture’ (Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017, p. 2) would be ignored in student engagement.

In addition to a technical and commodified focus on knowledge, there would also be a moral dimension to knowledge. Making reference to Aristotle’s distinction between techne (instrumental knowledge) and phronesis (practical wisdom), Biesta (2007) points out that education is moral practice rather than technical. In its aims, processes and object, education—as a moral practice—should encompass becoming a human being, becoming part of the life of society with a perspective on the future, interpersonal interaction, and social justice (Biesta 2011). Having had to sustain relations that are accountable for success and retention, has made it difficult for universities to sustain the moral responsibility to develop ‘relationships based on a shared concern for the common educational good’, explains Biesta (2004, p. 249). There seems to be a lesser concern for the moral dimension of education as related to student engagement. Narrowing down the potentials of non-traditional students as human beings by offering them an education skewed towards serving the economy stands as an injustice in denying them the freedom to become in relation to the bigger world, and the possibility to make a difference for greater equity in a society ruled by the dominant. This broader form of injustice is the second aspect of student engagement encountered in this research at the crossroad of equity. I have already stated the normative tendencies of student engagement as a cause of injustice in marginalising non-traditional students in the university context.

Trowler (2015, p. 308) argues that the non-traditional student has been shaped as ‘an essentialised being whose presence in higher education can be accommodated through carefully choreographed interventions’, and my view is that this applies to non-traditional students in the student engagement tradition that gives its impetus to this research. Any digression from the predefined choreography would entail blame on the performer, not the choreographer. An almost exclusive focus on the dominant discourse at institutional level and an overemphasis on performance to function in a knowledge economy, present as major constraints on who non-traditional students are and can become in their engagement experiences. A flattened picture of non-traditional students fitting in

the institutional culture (Funston 2011; O'Shea et al. 2016) and a performance plan that excludes their living reality (Vallee 2017), present as double injustices that demand attention in student engagement, and to which I will attend through my thesis.

1.5 The sociocultural perspective and equity

I propose a sociocultural perspective to student engagement to mediate non-traditional students' experiences of engagement and the inequities that could be impacting them. A sociocultural perspective would tie non-traditional students' engagement experiences in the classroom to the institution and the world beyond (Kahu 2013). Thus, it has the potential to consider non-traditional students with regard to institutional norms, move beyond the institution 'to capture students' socioeconomic background and the different capitals (cultural, social, and financial) students possess', and the 'norms in the broader socio-economic and cultural environment in which higher education is embedded' that are currently determinant of the scope of non-traditional students' education (Klemencic & Ashwin 2015, p. 317). A sociocultural perspective would be cognisant of non-traditional students as human beings, with their strengths and challenges without pointing the finger at them in a manner reproductive of inequities. As such, a sociocultural perspective opens the way to possibilities to engage non-traditional students with lesser constraints on their identities for them to become fully functional human beings in their professional as well as civic life.

Largely used for its deterministic perspective on the reproduction of inequities in education, the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1988; 1993; 1994) also offers emancipatory possibilities, 'new ways of relating subjective human dispositions and actions and the objective social world within which they are framed', for educational transformation and greater equity (Mills & Gale 2010, p. 20). Making reference to Bourdieu (1999) in *The weight of the world*, Reay (2004) has commented that

> there is a great deal of striving, resistance and action aimed at changing current circumstances as many of the poor and dispossessed,

> interviewed by Bourdieu and his colleagues, search around for ways of changing and transforming their lives. (p. 437)

These subjects seek opportunities to transform their situations, and as such Bourdieu has the potential to 'assist in understanding the human condition' as well as suggest 'some vision of an alternative to the present arrangements' where dominant groups control the social, economic and political arenas, and have their culture ingrained in education (Mills & Gale 2010, p.15). This relates to the stated possibility for the non-traditional students in my research to spell out an educational trajectory different to the one predetermined by institutional norms and policy norms.

Bourdieusian theory, with alternative forms of capital, flexible habitus and field, stands as enabling the disruption of the problematic construction of non-traditional students as deficient in a student engagement that makes little space for values, knowledge and experiences other than those of the dominant university culture, and largely influenced by a widening participation policy more concerned with market demands than concerns for education as a public good. In relation to inadequacies and absence of human agency, a Bourdieusian perspective has the potential to shed light on the strengths of non-traditional students in their engagement with learning, but also their challenges and struggles in face of the structural inequities impacting their education, as a way to better understand them and curtail the reproduction of inequities.

The research first allows for the experiences of the non-traditional students to emerge inductively through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) at the methodological level. IPA has a concern with experiences that mattered to the individual in the manner they lived them (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The results obtained are then tied to theory through Bourdieu's concepts, and a student engagement and first-year literature. This research gains in depth what it loses in breadth. It does not intend to generalise its findings to all first-year students from non-traditional backgrounds, but to open up new ways of thinking about them in relation to equity.

1.6 Research questions and structure of the thesis

The primary research question to guide this research on the experiences of engagement of non-traditional students with their learning is:

- How do non-traditional students make sense of their experiences of engagement with their learning in their first year at university?

Since this research seeks to distance itself from a student engagement that constrains students from non-traditional backgrounds to the margins (Kezar, Walpole & Perna 2014) and attributes deficits to them, there is a secondary question about what non-traditional students bring from their home backgrounds. The question that will additionally inform this research is:

- How do non-traditional students make sense of the strengths that they bring from their home backgrounds into their experiences of engagement with learning?

After this chapter, the thesis is organised as explained below.

Chapter Two - The literature review first gives a broad account of the field of student engagement. Student engagement is then conceptualised for the purpose of this study. Next, non-traditional students in the age of the widening participation are seen as having been unfavourably presented in student engagement. A sociocultural perspective of student engagement that would be cognisant of the engagement of non-traditional students for greater equity, questions the dominant norms at institutional level, and the dominant norms affecting the university. To theoretically bring these two strands under one equity interface, the emancipatory potential of Bourdieu's field, habitus and capital for greater equity are then elaborated.

Chapter Three – This chapter discusses the methodological approach and application in this research. A concern with the experiences of non-traditional students as expressed in the aims and the research questions lends itself to an approach that focuses on the lived experience of the individual through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). A purposive sample of six non-traditional students who had successfully completed their first year was chosen

to be interviewed on their experiences of engagement in their first year at university. The data for each interview was analysed inductively, then cross-compared to determine the final themes across the participants.

Chapter Four – The themes as presented in this results chapter take the shape of extracts accompanied by commentaries that range from the descriptive to the interpretative.

Chapter Five - In this discussion chapter, the research re-opens to Bourdieu's theory with alternative forms of capital, flexible habitus and field, together with a student engagement literature and a first-year literature.

Chapter Six - From the discussions in the previous chapter flow the implications for a student engagement for equity for non-traditional students in their first year at university. The trajectory of the non-traditional students shows their capacity to enact a successful first year amidst challenges encountered in negotiating their engagement with learning in the dominant university field. The capitals, identity and knowledge that they deploy in the process, call for recognition by the university. The experiences of the non-traditional students in this research reveal the enactment of a form of equity for self that, nevertheless, does not expand to the enactment of equity for the bigger world as a broader outcome of their education. For the capitals, identity and knowledge of non-traditional students to bear on issues that have in the first place denied them an equitable participation in education, and for them to become part of the broader life of society with a perspective on equity, criticality in student engagement could also be required.

Chapter Seven - The conclusion synthesises the major findings of this research, emphasising recognition and criticality as necessary for a consideration of non-traditional students in relation to equity, and this is the contribution of my research to the field of student engagement. As a statement of transparency, I reflect on my own positionality. Then the limitations of the study are acknowledged, and ways ahead for further research are proposed in the light of this research.

Epilogue – The epilogue to this thesis contains my reflection on reaching this stage of a journey that started with my story in the preface.

Chapter Two - Literature review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I first provide a broader view of the student engagement field. I then develop a conceptualisation of student engagement tied to student agency, that expands the spaces of influence on the student, from the classroom to the institution and beyond (Archambault et al. 2009; Archer 2003; Coates 2006; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004; Krause 2011; Krause & Coates 2008; Leach & Zepke 2011; Reschly & Christenson 2012; Zepke 2017). Next, I show from the literature that as subjects of the widening participation agenda, students from non-traditional backgrounds in student engagement have been disadvantageously positioned in relation to the institution, and the macrosocial context impacting on the institution (Coleman et al. 2021; Kezar, Walpole & Perna 2014; Vallee 2017; Weufen, Fotinatos & Andrews 2021). From a sociocultural perspective on the engagement of non-traditional students tending towards equity, I then bring to the foreground a body of work that questions the dominant norms at institutional level (Devlin 2013; Krause 2011; Lawrence 2005; Leach 2011; Zepke & Leach 2005). This is followed by a second body of work critical of the dominant norms impacting on the institution (Burke 2012; McMahon & Portelli 2012; Zepke 2015, 2017, 2018; Zyngier 2008). For the two bodies of work to function under an equity interface, I turn to Bourdieu's work (Bourdieu 1988; 1993; 1994) with his concepts of capital, habitus and field.

2.2 A view of the broader field of student engagement

In this section, I use the 'two-strand' conception of what Zepke (2015, p. 1314) calls 'mainstream' student engagement to give an overview of the field. The first strand follows the AUSSE-related research tradition, and the second one is associated with belonging for enhanced learning, through academic and social integration.

It is the AUSSE tradition and more broadly its original version, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) tradition from America that have been most widely used to research 'successful learning (and teaching) in a constructivist, learning-focused framework' (Zepke 2015, p. 1314). Nelson and

Clarke (2014, p. 29) point out that student engagement came to the forefront of higher education in the 2008-2010 period in Australia: ‘All of the activities had the ultimate aim of fostering student engagement and somewhat reflected deployment of the AUSSE’. As the AUSSE became a key indicator of university performance, engagement initiatives in the AUSSE tradition increased, and were ‘reflected in the many topics which relate to some aspect of the engagement construct’ (Nelson & Clarke 2014, p. 29). Parallel to the large-scale dimension of the original surveys, a body of literature on student engagement has kept growing, with Tight (2020) reporting the number of scholarly articles with the words ‘student engagement’ in the title had risen annually from 83 in 2008 to 404 in 2018.

Examples of scholarly work to improve the academic outcome of the student engagement experience abound. Thus, for enhanced engagement in academic activities, Xerri, Radford and Shacklock (2018) suggest fostering connectedness with teaching staff and among students, and communicating a clear sense of purpose. As a means to engage them in what they are learning, undergraduate students at the University of Notre Dame were brought to work collegially in the assessment process through authentic self- and peer-assessment (Kearney 2013). Price and Tovar (2014), on measuring the statistical relation between student engagement and institutional graduation, found that active and collaborative learning and a supportive institutional environment were positive predictors of graduation rates. Accordingly, they suggest the following as high-impact practices: collaborative learning during and outside class, learning communities and peer tutoring, and support that is embedded in the behaviour and attitudes of staff. In an empirical study of 365 students in an Australian university (Farr-Wharton et al. 2018), the lecturer and student relationship as leader-member exchange has been found to be positively associated with engagement. The authors propose enhancing such a relationship for engagement and retention interventions, rather than to reduce perceived student inadequacies. Moving away from inadequacies ascribed to students is also a direction taken by my research. With online and blended delivery expanding, Holmes (2018) offers further possibilities for engagement, with findings that careful curriculum design through continuous e-assessments

leads to greater engagement with activities in the virtual learning environment. Through their Online Engagement Framework, Redmond et al. (2018, p. 199) present five key elements - social engagement, cognitive engagement, behavioural engagement, collaborative engagement and emotional engagement - 'considered essential for effective online learning'. It is not precluded that the elements of the framework could also be applied in a face-to-face situation.

Themes have been found to recur in the field of student engagement. From Wimpenny and Savin-Baden's (2013, p. 316) review of the student engagement literature, the following four themes have emerged to characterise the student's experience of engagement. First, there is inter-relational engagement that connects engagement with the student's relations with teachers, peers, family and career. Second, engagement as autonomy refers to the student's move 'from unfamiliarity and self-consciousness to self-sufficiency in learning' through engagement. Third, emotional engagement as the student's 'íntra-personal capacity' takes the form of resilience and persistence. Fourth, engagement as connection and disjunction is presented as the parameter along which students would experience engagement. In view of their findings, Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013, pp. 323-324) suggest that to enhance engagement, pedagogy needs to consider: 'an improved communal and social connection amongst students and tutors'; 'emotions and feelings of self and others in ways that contribute to learning'; and to 'equip students for an unknowable world'.

New models of engagement have also been proposed, such as that of Kahu (2013). Kahu (2013, pp. 765-766) brings to light 'the unique nature of the individual experience' for 'a more comprehensive understanding of engagement'. There are three main elements to Kahu's (2013) model: engagement, antecedents and consequences. Engagement itself is at the centre of the model to give centrality to the individual, and is conceptualised as an internal psychological state. Kahu (2013) shows this state of engagement to be influenced by structural and psycho-social influences that she calls antecedents to engagement. She divides the consequences to engagement into proximal and distant consequences. There appears to be an element of ambiguity, though, as to whether Kahu's (2013) antecedents operate as influences on the individual's engagement or as determinants of engagement.

On one side, Kahu (2013, p. 767) argues that 'the influences are bi-directional between engagement and both its immediate antecedents and proximal consequences', and that engagement 'is not an outcome of any one of these influences, but rather the complex interplay between them'. On the other side, she concludes her framework stating that 'there is a dominant direction of influence from the antecedents to engagement, and from engagement to the consequences' (Kahu 2013, p. 768). Nevertheless, in positioning her model within a broader framework 'that acknowledges the importance of the student and the institution while recognising the critical influence of the socio-cultural context' (Kahu 2013, p. 759), the author extends the student's experience of engagement from the classroom to the institution and beyond. The engagement experiences of non-traditional students are similarly extended in my research to consider institutional norms and norms impacting on the institution.

While respectful of the AUSSE tradition, Nelson and Clarke's (2014) model offers a whole-of-institution view of the first-year experience through student engagement. Nelson and Clarke (2014, p. 23) propose the Student Engagement Success and Retention Maturity Model (SESR-MM) that 'focuses attention on the capacity of institutions to mobilise for first year student engagement' for an enhanced first-year experience. As a maturity model, the SESR-MM 'allow[s] an assessment of institutional capacity [or maturity] to initiate, plan, manage, evaluate and review institutional first year experience practices' (Nelson & Clarke 2014, p. 23). The 63 generic practices in the model are a 'comprehensive collection of institutional practices associated with student engagement success and retention' and are 'derived from empirical and theoretical literature and practitioners' (Nelson & Clarke 2014, p. 33). The advantages of the SESR-MM are its 'coordinated, institution-wide approach' offering 'a framework for action' and giving the possibility 'for sharing good first year experience practice between institutions' (Nelson & Clarke 2014, p. 33). Nevertheless, as 'an interpretation of student engagement evidence and practice' for institutional leaders to manage retention, widening participation and funding (Nelson & Clarke 2014, p. 34), the model also parallels the AUSSE in responding to institutional output while excluding student input.

The wide array of research in the field testify to the ‘multifaceted nature of student engagement’ (Krause & Coates 2008, p. 503). The relevance of student engagement endures through recommendations like Nelson and Clarke’s (2014, p. 35), that it is through a focus on student engagement that institutions could change ‘practically, structurally and culturally – the fundamental and prevailing character of the FYE [first year experience]’. Nevertheless, critics have commented on the need for **‘**more nuanced, targeted, and population-specific engagement research’ (Lawson & Lawson 2013, p. 461) as well as more holistic pictures of the student experience because as currently researched, ‘they mostly take a particular focus, and thus obscure the overall picture’ (Tight 2020, p. 697). My research on student engagement is pitched at a more modest level than Nelson and Clarke’s (2014) whole-of-institution model. While finding its premise in the tradition set up by the AUSSE, it will expand from this in its conceptualisation as discussed in the next section (Section 2.3), then in its theoretical perspective. I aim to bring to light a more holistic picture of non-traditional students’ engagement experiences. Since this section offers a broad view of the field of student engagement, I elaborate in Section 2.4 on non-traditional students as the focus of ‘this population-specific engagement research’ (Lawson & Lawson 2013), and engage with the literature in the field that is seen to frame these students negatively.

The other strand in student engagement, which is belonging, can be traced back to Tinto’s (1987) conceptual model originally directed at retention, that he developed from an analogy with Durkheim’s theory of suicide and the role that an absence of intellectual and social integration could play in an individual’s decision to leave a community. Similarly, Tinto (1987) argues that it would be when students’ academic and social experiences of university life with staff and students are impacted by adjustment problems, unclear goals, uncertainty about the future, mismatches between the students’ needs and what the university offers, commitment issues to the required effort for a degree course, and isolation, that they could decide to leave university. In what would become known as Tinto’s theory of attrition, Tinto (1987, pp. 7-10) uses the concepts of social and academic integration and community membership ‘to integrate the individual into the life of college’ and ‘heighten attachments’ to the ‘communal

nature of institutional life' 'with an ethos of caring' for a higher education committed to educate for the welfare of society. To the limitation of 'mere retention', Tinto (1987, p. 3) suggests, more holistically, the 'development of effective educational communities which seek to involve all students in their social and intellectual life' to nurture persistence and success among them.

Both Bryson (2014) and Zepke (2015) have acknowledged the association of Tinto's work to student engagement. In Tinto (2006), the author himself refers to the influences in the development of his concepts of academic and social integration of Astin (1984) and Ku (2003), the former known for the influence of his theory of involvement in student engagement and the latter known to have spelt out the first definitions of student engagement. As his work evolved Tinto's (1987) concepts of academic and social integration and community membership would explicitly be tied to engagement. Tinto (2014, p. 9) indicates that it would be through students' perceptions of their engagement or not, that they would come to see whether they belonged to the university community, arguing that 'while we should measure engagement … we should ascertain whether engagement leads a student to see him/herself as a valued member of an academic and social community'. In this particular case where he links belonging to student engagement, he acknowledges the influence of Hurtado and Carter's (1996) research on the role of students' perceptions of belonging to the university community in their decision to leave university. At another point, in linking his work to student engagement, Tinto (2014) acknowledges comparison of his own biography as a full time on-campus student with that of students now, whose many obligations draw them away from the campus. In this respect, he suggests the classroom community as central to the student's engagement experience: 'enhancing student involvement/engagement … must centre, indeed begin, with students' experiences in the classroom … to keep students attached to the institution when external communities may pull them away' (Tinto 2014, p. 9).

Tinto's work has led to the wide use of his constructs in research, and the examples that I expand on show how Thomas (2012), then Lefever (2012) articulate these constructs with student engagement. Belonging is considered

as ‘encompassing both academic and social engagement’ (Thomas 2012, p. 6), and described as ‘Students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) … and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class’ (Goodenow 1993, p. 25). Based on these considerations, Thomas (2012) suggests nurturing a culture of belonging for enhanced engagement. Her work on belonging aligned with student engagement comes in response to data indicating issues with studies, alienation from the educational context, and uncertainty about the future as the main reasons for students leaving university. Accordingly, Thomas (2012, p. 8) proposes multi-level intervention programs that would support students’ meaningful relationships with teachers to ‘provide key information, shape realistic expectations, improve academic skills, develop students’ confidence, demonstrate future relevance, and nurture belonging’, and with peers ‘through networks and friendships’.

Where Thomas (2012) considers interactions with significant others necessary to nurture belonging, Lefever (2012) examines the wider campus spaces as the centre of interactions in her study on belonging. With a definition of belonging as ‘engagement with and feelings towards surroundings and places’, Lefever (2012, p. 127) investigates students’ perspectives and experiences of belonging to campus spaces beyond the classroom, with the purpose of understanding how these spaces help or limit engagement through the notion of belonging. Lefever (2012, pp. 131-132) finds that students understand the ‘physical campus experience’ of belonging ‘as feeling part of something’, in relation to: how supportive and safe the campus environment is; the sense of being a student on campus; and knowing what is happening on campus and feeling familiar with the environment. In counterbalance, feelings of not belonging are also revealed. She points out that ‘A number raised feeling uncomfortable, unsafe, intimidated or not respected; some even felt alienated or marginalised through segregation’, hence indicating that the potential exists for some students to leave as a result of feeling out of place on the campus (Lefever 2012, p. 133). Lefever (2012) suggests that organising activities and events to involve students in the university community, and fostering respectful relationships on campus could enhance their experiences of feeling part of

university spaces. A further suggestion from Lefever (2012) is for the university to consult students in the development of these campus spaces as a way to further enable their engagement. Giving voice to non-traditional students, as my research does, will allow for an understanding of their engagement as they experienced it to enable the university to respond accordingly.

As extensive as the possibilities are to use Tinto's constructs with the aim of enhancing the student experience, his work attracts critics too, among which there are four major criticisms. First, Tinto's (1987) model makes no space for cultures other than that of the university campus, while it posits success for all, which would mean including students whose cultures and communities differ from that of the university. Missing in Tinto's model would be 'the complex ways that campus cultures interact with students' cultures of origin to mutually shape their experiences and outcomes' (Museus 2014, p. 196). Second, there is the self-deterministic nature of his model, with the onus placed on the student to integrate and no clear university input in the process. The issue arising is the risk of blame being attributed to the student and, 'not acknowledging how their institutional environments might also hinder their progress toward positive educational outcomes' (Museus 2014, p. 197).

Interestingly, Tinto (2006) has himself critiqued the omission of the institutional role in his model. Tinto's (2006) response has been to suggest the need for a multilayered model of institutional action encompassing policy, programs and effective practice for students to enhance their persistence. Tinto (2006) proposes starting with investigating the outcomes of classroom practice on the student learning experience, and out of these outcomes, working on staff development to then measure the impact of renewed practice. The third critical response to Tinto's (1987) model, questions the predictive validity of his concepts of academic and social integration in student persistence and degree completion. For example, Crisp (2010) reports mixed findings from empirical studies about whether integration can predict persistence. The last criticism is levelled at the overemphasis on the behavioural dimension of Tinto's (1987) academic and social integration while 'the psychological dimension of students' connectedness to their institutions has been lost in the vast majority of research

examining Tinto's theory' (Museus 2014, p. 199). While respectful of the tremendous work accomplished from the two strands of student engagement presented in this section, I now turn to the AUSSE-related strand and expand from there for the purpose of my research.

2.3 Student engagement: a conceptualisation

If student engagement has been widely researched, it has come to be regarded as weakly theorised. Reschly and Christensen 2012 (pp. 3-19) argue that as the field of student engagement has kept expanding as 'a necessary element for improving student outcomes', it has been accompanied by 'conceptual haziness' resulting from an absence of consensus on the nature of the concept. Bryson (2014, p. 2) points out that many studies whose 'authors claim engages students' have used the concept of student engagement 'very broadly and loosely'. It has not helped either that policy makers and pundits alike have used student engagement to 'explain everything' in the manner of 'Students are not doing well because they are not engaged. So let's increase engagement and they will do better' (Eccles & Wang 2012, p. 138). To allay confusion surrounding the nature of student engagement, Trowler (2015, p. 296) suggests the need to clarify how it is conceptualised when used, contending that 'it is necessary to agree at least within a particular context what is being denoted, and what understood, by the use of the term'. This is what I intend to do in this section, for the purpose of this research.

I have stated that this research on student engagement takes its impetus from the AUSSE, which itself imported that tradition of student engagement from the NSSE in America. George Kuh, closely associated with the NSSE, having been its founding director, has defined student engagement as 'the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes' (Hu & Kuh 2001, p. 3). Such definition of student engagement is associated with Astin's (1985, p. 38) theory of involvement as 'the student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development'. Kerri-Lee Krause and Hamish Coates, who have substantially contributed to this student engagement discourse in Australia appear to echo their American counterparts in their statement that 'the extent to

which students are engaging in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes' (Krause & Coates 2008, p. 493). As interface to the student's process of engagement there is what the institution does for engagement to take place: 'learning also depends on institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate and encourage student involvement' (Krause & Coates 2008, p. 493).

As Christenson, Reschly and Wylie (2012, p. vi) have pointed out, 'both the individual and context matter' in student engagement; Coates (2006) brings both together in his definition of student engagement as a 'joint proposition' between student and educational institution:

> The concept of student engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. Learning is seen as a 'joint proposition'… however, which also depends on institutions and staff providing students with the conditions, opportunities and expectations to become involved. (p. 26)

In that joint proposition, the final responsibility to engage would be on the student, 'However, individual learners are ultimately the agents in discussions of engagement' (Coates 2006, p. 26). The point though is that while the onus would be on the student to engage, student agency has not been given the necessary conceptual depth for it to be functional in relation to the context of engagement. I have stated in Chapter One that dominant norms at institutional level and dominant norms influential on the institution in the student engagement under discussion could be cultivating possible inequities towards non-traditional students. I have also suggested that the non-traditional students in this research might articulate their experiences of engagement in their first year at university differently from the one predetermined for them. For the non-traditional students to have enough latitude in that direction, agency would need further theorisation as is explored below.

My interest is in a form of agency that 'highlights the student's own contribution' and 'students taking responsibility for action in the face of uncertainty, whether

in the pursuit of personal and communal concerns' Kahn (2014, p. 1005), in relation to the institution. For that purpose, student agency in the conceptualisation of student engagement for this research follows Archer's (2003, p.130) consideration of agents who in 'internal conversation', 'reflexively deliberate upon the social circumstances that they confront', whether 'constraints or enablements', to determine their course of action. The conscious act of internal deliberation of the student agent will later in this chapter relate to Bourdieu's concept of habitus as used for this research.

As an individual with agency, the one-dimensional behavioural engagement prioritised in the AUSSE tradition stands as problematic for this present conceptualisation of student engagement. While the idea could be appealing that behaviours that are seen are more readily apprehended, the emotional and cognitive dimensions that accompany student involvement in the engagement construct demand attention. As Trowler (2016, p. 80) points out, involvement in educationally-focussed activities is more than measuring the behavioural dimension of what 'students do, and don't do'. Going beyond the AUSSE behavioural measurements has also been a recommendation from Leach (2016a).

Seeing engagement as a meta-construct that offers a broader picture of how students think, feel and act than any dimension taken separately (Fredericks, Reschly & Christenson 2019) makes it possible for the learning experience of the student to be addressed as a whole. In Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004, p. 60), the authors first consider the three dimensions of engagement separately: behavioural engagement is 'participation … involvement' in educational activities for academic outcome; emotional engagement 'encompasses positive and negative reactions' to peers and agents of the university and is 'presumed to create ties to an institution and influence willingness to work'; and cognitive engagement is 'investment … to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills' (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004, p. 60). Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) then contend that all three dimensions taken together, would make of engagement a single construct that would be responsive to context, thus offering useful insights for university

intervention for enhanced educational outcome. Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) were later backed by Archambault et al. (2009) who in their study on drop-outs had the engagement construct manifested separately as behavioural, affective and cognitive when measured psychometrically, to then finally converge into one single construct. The three dimensions as constituents of the engagement construct were reiterated in Archambault et al. (2019, p. 14): 'these dimensions of student engagement are interrelated, as student affect and cognitions regarding school- and learning-related variables contribute to their behavioural engagement'. As related to my research, an engagement construct with behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions together, would be relevant to the student as an individual with agency, who has their lived experiences examined for the purpose of this research.

In the conceptualisation of my research, I also extend the spaces of engagement from the classroom—as the centre of my interest in student engagement—to the institution and beyond, as places of influence on the student. In what she calls a 'holistic life cycle' Krause (2011**)** considers extending the spaces of student engagement beyond the classroom to include institutional cultures, practices and communities, and the broader socio-cultural-political context where she places the family, the community and aspirational influences. Reschly and Christenson (2012, p. 3) argue for a view of student engagement 'that links important contexts - home, school, peers, and community - to students and, in turn, to outcomes of interest'. Leach and Zepke (2011) present non-institutional factors influential on student engagement as the family, friends and the employer, and later Zepke (2017, p. 38) refers to non-institutional influences as 'engaging features of external environments' that 'sustain learning'. Extending spaces of engagement connects with my research since I have indicated in Chapter One that non-traditional students could be impacted by inequities within the university and from outside influences impacting on the university.

Overall, student engagement as conceptualised for this research takes the shape of a joint proposition between student and university (Coates 2006), encompassing the student's involvement or investment in educationally

purposeful activities and the university providing the conditions for engagement to take place (Huh & Kuh 2001; Krause & Coates 2008). Engagement itself is behavioural, cognitive and emotional (Archambault et al. 2009; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004). The student as an agent in their engagement experiences is an individual who consciously reflects on the context of their engagement to choose their course of action (Archer 2003). While the student's engagement with learning is anchored in the classroom, engagement influences extend to the institution and the world beyond (Krause 2011; Leach & Zepke 2011; Reschly & Christenson 2012; Zepke 2017).

While I have drawn from the AUSSE tradition to conceptualise student engagement for the purpose of this research as I have traced out a trajectory along the AUSSE in Chapter One to explain the inception of my research, I need to acknowledge that contestations surround the AUSSE. My research has already attended to a major criticism levelled at the AUSSE regarding its exclusive focus on the behavioural dimension of engagement (Leach 2016a; Trowler 2015). Of the AUSSE, Bryson (2014, p. 7) has argued that 'These surveys do not uncover the richness and diversity of the student experience, or very much about the perspective of students.' To this, Kahu (2013, p. 760) adds, 'A single wide-angled snapshot … misses much of the complexity of the construct: engagement is both dynamic and situational'. As already stated, my research is on the experiences of engagement of non-traditional students with their learning. Their experiences as they lived them in context will be examined through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), on which I will elaborate in Chapter Three, where the methodology used in this research is discussed.

Of those who have worked closely with student engagement in the AUSSE tradition, Krause and Coates (2008, p. 503) claim that as a survey the AUSSE makes a broader contribution to student engagement, and they gauge that 'incorporating qualitative data elements to the data collection through the course of the year' is likely to give further depth to student engagement. Similarly, Coates Radloff and Strydom (2014) suggest enhancement strategies at the level of the institution and locally, for respondents to see that their voice is being

heard. These propositions from Krause and Coates (2008), and Coates Radloff and Strydom (2014) could be implicit pointers to the necessity for new meanings in student engagement to emerge, not broadly but contextually, to make the voice of students heard more sharply than would be feasible in research pitched at a wider level. My research, through the use of IPA makes space for the voice of non-traditional students to be heard on their experiences of engagement.

2.4 Engaging students from non-traditional backgrounds in the age of widening participation

I am cognisant that in the past decade universities have had to enrol more students, and engage them to retain them while at the same time 'addressing the socio-political influences of funding, regulation, accreditation' (Nelson & Clarke 2014, p. 34), amidst increased staff workload (Crawford et al. 2015). Nevertheless, as subjects of the widening participation agenda, students from non-traditional backgrounds have tended to be positioned in student engagement in ways that 'strain and constrain' them (Kezar, Walpole & Perna 2014, p. 244) in relation to the institution and/or the macrosocial context impacting on the institution. As shown in this section, non-traditional students in student engagement have been considered as lacking in ability, seen as the problem that prevents retention, given sole responsibility for their success, rendered almost invisible by the norm, had their needs subsumed to economic imperatives, with narrow interventions reserved for them.

Academics participating in an engagement and retention program (Coleman et al. 2021), on reflecting on their expectations of students, recognised that they were constructed within a discourse of deficit that viewed students in the program as lacking in ability, instead of being based on these students' diverse needs. Regarding their practice as academics, they found that they had 'a top-down approach in which we set the "rules" for student engagement' (Coleman et al. 2021, p.10). They recognised that a one-size-fits-all approach to student engagement did not respond to these students' needs and showed no understanding of their lived experiences. They reflected on the need in future programs for 'a positive positioning of students as individuals with diverse

strengths, motivations, and life trajectories' (Coleman et al. 2021, p. 12). At a broader level, these academics viewed the program, in its standardised form, rule-governed and with a student-deficit positioning, as possibly economically motivated by the institution's need to mitigate attrition while increasing enrolments in response to the climate in which higher education currently evolves. This last point brought the academics in the engagement and retention program to question, 'whether the program was 'fair' to our students': 'is it the right thing to do to push them on at all costs?' (Coleman et al. 2021, p. 9). To this I would also ask whether it was fair to push these students at all costs in a direction that did not frame them positively and was not responsive to their own reality. The perspectives of the academics in Coleman et al. (2021, p. 14) come with the realisation that they had contributed to the program in the way they did—despite their own backgrounds related to education, inclusive education and diversity—possibly with 'our own sense of pressure to retain as many students as possible' within an institution with a similar sense of pressure.

Similarly, on using Kahu's (2013) model of student engagement, Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews (2021) have found that staff in a student support program tend to view students from a deficit perspective. As Weufen, Fotinatos and Andrews (2021, p. 120) indicate, economic imperatives impacting on institutions would position students as the problem whereby 'students' personal circumstances and academic abilities are understood as fixed concepts preventing retention'. At the same time, they are seen as consumers bearing the responsibility for their own academic success. With the onus placed on the student to engage, and with reduced institutional responsibility, the way would be paved to 'legitimizing provision of remedial forms of support to address student deficits' (Weuffen, Fotinatos & Andrews 2021, p. 121), hence reinforcing inequities towards those labelled as deficit-ridden. Like Coleman et al. (2021), Weuffen, Fotinatos and Andrews (2021) indicate the need to understand the complexity of students' lives in order to better address their teaching and learning needs.

Taking the stand to critique student engagement as a normative construct, Vallee (2017, p. 928) argues that an absence of critique has led the construct to

‘conveniently become co-opted in the neoliberal practice of pathologizing of the individual’. In its current state, student engagement would ‘serve to reproduce the exclusive policies and practices of schooling’ for a ‘technocratic model of education’ more than to ensure ‘the inclusion of all individuals in public schooling’ (Vallee 2017, pp. 929-933). The author goes further by arguing that the issue of social and economic inequality (macro social) would not be addressed but transferred onto a pathologized individual for whom ‘tailor[ed] interventions [would be applied] narrowly and potentially harmfully’ (Vallee 2017, p. 934). Vallee (2017, p. 932) finds it ‘both unfair and culturally myopic’ that findings in student engagement, which is ‘normed on White, middle class, most likely suburban students’, would be generalised to student populations that do not constitute the norm. A reframing of student engagement that would keep its ‘utility but not its exclusionary qualities’ would require expanding student engagement from the classroom to consider the institution and its macrosocial context, in which the student’s education is nested (Vallee 2017, p. 933). Such reframing could expose in student engagement ‘an assemblage laden with a teleology of employment in a competitive global economy, and the management of middle- and working-class [able] bodies in public schools’ (Vallee 2017, p. 928).

With a focus on low SES students, Kezar, Walpole and Perna (2014) point that the problem of marginalising students by marking them as deficient lies in the hidden barriers in institutional structures, policy and processes that constrain these students’ engagement experiences. In remaining unquestioned, institutional structures, policy and processes that favour the elite have been normalised, and ‘campus structures (just like societal structures) are often set up to promote the success of elites and consider only what has worked well for this group’ (Kezar, Walpole & Perna 2014, p. 243). Addressing the marginalisation of student groups would require ‘deconstruction of who has benefited from a concept like engagement, and how various campus structures limit the opportunity for certain populations to be engaged’ (Kezar, Walpole & Perna 2014, p. 243). Exposing these inequities would be followed by reconstruction, that is, a reframing of institutional structures, policies and practices towards greater equity.

Lawson and Lawson (2013, pp. 461-462) have argued that 'engagement-as-technical-problem-solving-approach' with 'ready-made intervention solutions' should be taken with caution, suggesting the need for 'more nuanced, targeted, and population-specific engagement research'. In that respect they see the engagement construct of affective, cognitive and behavioural as a 'conceptual glue' that connects the student's 'ecological influences (peers, family, and community) to the organizational structures and cultures of school' (Lawson & Lawson 2013, p. 433). The idea would be that engagement aimed at synchronising the sociocultural influences from outside with the sociocultural dimension from inside the university could be less 'constrained' for students from non-traditional backgrounds.

2.5 Engaging students from non-traditional backgrounds: a sociocultural perspective

In this part of the literature review, I examine a sociocultural stance as possible mediator for greater equity for non-traditional students in the field of student engagement. A sociocultural dimension to student engagement would, according to Kahu (2013, p. 764) in referring to non-traditional students, highlight 'the need for the institution to consider not just the student support structures but also the institution's culture, and the wider political and social debates impacting on student engagement.' Kahu (2013) appears to lay emphasis on dominant norms at the institutional level and influential on the institution, affecting the experiences of engagement of students from non-traditional backgrounds. I have stated in Chapter One that these dominant norms could be considered as potential sources of inequity towards non-traditional students.

2.5.1 Dominant norms at the institutional level

I was first brought to consider a sociocultural stance on the engagement of non-traditional students with their learning through the extensive work of Devlin (2010; 2013; Devlin et al. 2012; Devlin & O'Shea 2012; McKay & Devlin, 2014; McKay & Devlin, 2016) on the first-year experience of low SES students, and the need that she argues for greater equity towards them within the institution. To draw from the blame conundrum, low SES students who 'are rarely

recognised for the contribution they make to higher education' (McKay & Devlin 2016, p. 350), Devlin (2013) proposes bridging the socio-cultural mismatch between low SES students and the university. This would be done through a conceptual frame with both student and university in a 'joint venture'. That joint venture would see the university teach the 'student role' by making explicit what is implicit in its discourse, while 'students would need to be prepared to take risks and opportunities inherent in joining a new community, and to persevere in order to ensure the learning required to function effectively in that community' (Devlin 2013, p. 946). Devlin's (2013) bridge to re-dress the socio-cultural incongruence echoes Lawrence's (2005) study of students she identifies as coming from diverse backgrounds. Lawrence's (2005, p. 248) 'deficit-discourse shift' would be 'a process of [students] first familiarising and engaging with the discourses of those cultures [the university], and eventually mastering and demonstrating those discourses through perseverance'. This process would require that academics 'make explicit the hidden curriculum, the implicit expectations as well as the expected (but not stated) behaviours intrinsic to achieving success in their discipline' (Lawrence 2005, p. 248).

Although Devlin (2013) as well as Lawrence (2005) are keen for students from non-traditional backgrounds to be treated more equitably by framing their educational experiences as not resting solely on their shoulders, there is a matter of significance on which they remain silent. The missing point in their argument would be that while they acknowledge the different cultures of students from non-traditional backgrounds and appeal for institutional support to foster these students' understanding of institutional norms and culture, they make a limited case for the recognition of these students' culture in their educational experiences. The university culture would still stand as the only culture into which students from non-traditional backgrounds would be required to fit. Lawrence's (2005, p. 245) assertion that deficit perspectives are representatives of 'models of pedagogy that have emerged from the idea that cultures and languages other than those of the mainstream represented a deficiency', gives cause to search (often unsuccessfully) for the active role of other cultures in her deficit-shift model. In working at giving non-traditional students access to what matters to the university, their own ways of being and

what matters to them appear to have been forgotten. My research, with a focus on the experiences of non-traditional students goes some way in addressing what matters to them.

Arguably, non-traditional students in their learning experiences would more equitably be envisaged by also giving legitimacy to their cultures of origin. Zepke and Leach's (2005) findings of the New Zealand government-commissioned work on how universities might improve student outcomes, have identified two approaches adopted by universities. The first is what the institution does to fit students into their institutions 'through the distinctive lens shaped from a western cultural and epistemological perspective' (Zepke & Leach 2005, p. 55). As such, the student's success would be contingent on their integration into the university environment, with the student's own identity receding in the background. The second, lesser-known approach would validate students' diverse cultures and strengths that they bring with them from their respective backgrounds. As an adaptive model, the second approach would see the institution make changes to respond to the needs of students with cultures different to that of the university.

At a broader level of the adaptive model, Zepke and Leach (2005) see changes in institutional culture being played out—slowly and gradually one would concede—through university interaction with each student. 'Changes will play out in each contact students have with the organization' (Zepke & Leach 2005, p. 54). Here I would take distance from Tight's (2020) dire predictions from too literal a reading of Zepke and Leach (2005). 'With class sizes for many first-year undergraduate courses in the hundreds, it is simply not possible to give each student regular individual attention in any meaningful way, so a lower percentage retention rate is to be expected' (Tight 2020, p. 695). At the level of Teaching and Learning of the adaptive model, Zepke and Leach (2005, p. 55) suggest changes to 'teach for different approaches to learning; recognize the existence of knowledge other than academic; include voices', and to respect students' own cultural capital when interacting with them and in assessment designs.

Aware of the need to respond to an increasingly changing student population, Krause (2005) has argued against the student engagement concept as too positivist, calling for a more complex view of the concept as comprising conflicts and challenges that the student would be called upon to negotiate. While Krause (2005) could have appeared to link challenges in learning and development exclusively to 'the others', with the underlying indications that 'the others' would be students from non-traditional backgrounds, she drew attention to the unfamiliar context into which these students would be brought to engage with their learning. 'But engagement is a multidimensional concept which is at once positive for some and a battle for others who may not be familiar with the rules of engagement in the university setting' (Krause 2005, p.12). Her later attempt at being responsive to non-traditional students, with 'the broader institutional cultures and practices into which students need to be inducted if they are to benefit fully from their learning experience' (Krause 2011, p. 205) resembles the proposals for change of Devlin (2013) and Lawrence (2005). In further suggesting 'engagement strategies that recognize the diverse social and cultural capital resources which characterize first-year student cohorts', Krause's ideas (2011, p. 203) are more closely aligned to suggestions made by Zepke and Leach (2005).

Unsurprisingly, McCormick and McClenney (2012), who have been closely associated with student engagement surveys, have not shown a clear inclination for new space to be made for the sociocultural dimension. To Dowd, Sawatsky and Korn's (2011) argument that engagement surveys fail to measure inclusivity in educational practices despite the presence of a culturally diverse student population, McCormick and McClenney (2012, p. 319) concede that the incorporation of a culturally-oriented indicator would benefit research and practice. However, they have wondered whether a climate assessment survey would not be better-suited for such investigation instead of student engagement surveys, thus adroitly distancing the notion of inclusivity from student engagement. As Zepke (2015, p. 1313) aptly remarks, in a one-size-fits-all approach, the potential to consider 'cultural, socio-economic and emotive diversity' is likely to be side-tracked in student engagement. My interest in this research centres on the sociocultural in student engagement in a manner unlike

the arguments of McCormick and McClenney (2012) but more responsive to Zepke's (2015) position. It seeks an understanding of students' experiences that will inform us how to draw students from non-traditional backgrounds away from the margins at institutional level, recognising them and their contribution to higher education.

There are variations of models of cultural adaptation in addition to the ones already presented; these variations give value to and accommodate students from non-traditional backgrounds. Tierney (2000, p.129) has suggested, in his framework for the success of minority groups, that 'negotiation of identity in academe [is] central to educational success' with students' 'identities being affirmed and allowed to evolve into the organisation's culture'. Tierney (2000, p. 215) has foregrounded his framework with a definition of culture as 'cultural construction', 'not inherited out of whole cloth and unchangeable' but crafted from 'the partial and mutually dependent knowledge of each person caught in the process and depend[ent], in the long run, on the work they do together'. Culture then is 'polyphonous and multi-vocalic; it is made of the voices of many, each one brought to life and made significant by others' (Bakhtin as cited in Tierney 2000, p. 215).

Having the voice of minorities heard within democratically constructed cultural parameters would therefore be the likely intent behind the five pillars in Tierney's (2000, p. 219 - 220) framework. The first pillar in Tierney's (2000) framework is what he calls 'collaborative relations of power'. The power element gains relevance in that the state of interdependence in the construction of culture would see that students 'are empowered through their collaboration such that each is more affirmed in his or her identity and has a greater sense of efficacy to create change in his or her life or social situation' (Cummins 1997, p. 424). The second pillar in the model considers that where individuals come from, that is, their home, community and schooling backgrounds, demand acknowledgement. Thirdly, students' identities shaped by the said backgrounds are seen as necessitating incorporation into the curriculum, teaching and the organisational structure. Fourthly, the model presents learning and success as expected and attainable goals for all students. Fifthly, the student's potential is

affirmed instead of seen as requiring remediation of perceived or real academic shortcomings. Overall, while Tierney's (2000, p. 217) model is of relevance in considering how to think and work with students from non-traditional backgrounds in a way that 'enables voice and empowerment', his work makes abstraction of the reality of a pre-existing institutional culture. Moreover, his view of culture as having one of its pillars as 'collaborative relations of power' appears to oversimplify the teaching-learning nexus into a power-neutral domain.

With a cultural foregrounding different to Tierney's (2000) but from a similar student-affirming stance, Leach (2011) argues for a combination of the universal, group and individual positions in responding to students from diverse backgrounds. Drawing from Banks' (2006) assimilationist-pluralist dichotomy which, on one side privileges the dominant culture and on the other side recognises differences in cultural history and experiences, Leach's (2011) investigation of the teacher's approach to diversity points in the direction of a combination of the university and student's cultures through the universal position and group position. Through the universal position, differences between students are ignored and the role of the teacher is to 'socialise students into the common culture' (Leach 2011, p. 258). If Leach (2011, p. 258) notes that the benefit of this approach is to connect students across their differences, she nonetheless emphasises that teachers may 'consciously and unconsciously, privilege the dominant cultural patterns' and be blind to the cultural difference of other groups. In counterbalance, Leach (2011) finds that teachers with a group position have a focus on cultural differences which is likely to promote democracy and equity. Such teachers give value to 'students' identity as members of specific groups' making these teachers 'see students as different rather than deficient and teach to include their cultural history and differences' (Leach 2011, p. 259).

A third position, outside Banks' framework, which evolves from the group position is identified in Leach's study as the 'individual position'. The idea is that within groups there are individuals whose identities will diverge from that of the group. Leach (2011) argues that teachers with an individual position would cater

to the needs of the individual, but that in the process may become oblivious to the benefits of the group position. ‘Like those teachers at the ‘universal’ position, these teachers may also be ‘blind’ to forms of group identity and not see opportunities to encourage students to learn together’ (Leach 2011, p. 260). The tension remains to be managed between the universal, the group and the individual positions, and Leach (2011) proposes merging the best from the three positions to develop a workable approach towards diversity. Leach’s (2011) proposition rests on a form of cultural co-habitation that attempts to close the cultural difference gap. This contrasts with Tierney’s (2000) focus on the co-construction of a common cultural fabric by the institution and student. Leach (2011) offers a more flexible model for teachers to work with diversity. Nevertheless, for such a model to endure it would have to be nurtured at the broader institutional level, to then spread across the institution.

A compromise between Tierney (2000) and Leach (2011) could be found in how Kuh and Love (2000) see the possibility of reshaping institutional culture. Rather than conceiving culture as a fairly stable product, Kuh & Love (2000, p. 198) view culture as a process whereby ‘culture is constantly evolving, albeit imperceptibly, shaped by interactions between old and new members and contact with other people from other organisations and cultures’. Kuh and Love (2000, p. 199) argue that students’ experiences are forged by such interactions, but are also inextricably linked to cultural forces coming from previous experiences with families, schools, and the community, and in anticipation of future experiences in ‘groups and organisations that individuals hope to join, such as institutions, major fields, social clubs or organizations, and socially-oriented affinity groups’. Just as they affect students, the interactions between old and new members within Kuh and Love’s (2000) conception of culture as process are also likely to influence the institution and help it evolve. From there it is logical to infer what is not explicitly said in Kuh and Love’s (2000) juxtaposition of the product and process dichotomy, that is, through culture as process, culture as product undergoes change leading to changed identities for both students and institution. The degree of change would nonetheless also be dependent on the power element at play between students and the institution. In this respect, Kuh and Love (2000, p. 219) acknowledge the tension between

an institution ‘encourag[ing] student development and personal transformation’, and at the same time ‘maintain[ing] a steady, clear focus on what is to be learned’ and ‘maintain[ing] a curriculum with integrity’.

2.5.2 Dominant norms from beyond the institution

So far, I have reviewed different avenues that could render more equitable the experiences of engagement of students from non-traditional backgrounds in relation to dominant institutional norms. Nevertheless, a sociocultural perspective to student engagement as argued by Kahu (2013) would also consider dominant norms influencing the institution, and in turn impacting on the engagement of non-traditional students. I have stated in Chapter One that an education skewed towards serving the economy in student engagement (Gourley 2015; MacFarlane & Tomlinson 2017; Zepke 2014) is an injustice to non-traditional students, denying them as human beings the moral dimension of an education facilitating their becoming part of the life of society—in which dominant groups have the power of decision—with their own considered perspective on the future, interpersonal interaction and social justice (Biesta 2007, 2011).

In the context of a higher education impacted by current policy (itself driven by a market economy that serves the interests of dominant groups), dominant influences upon student engagement that represent the utilitarian nature of education have been criticised (Zepke 2017). Questioning student engagement ‘for whom’, ‘to what purpose’ and ‘to what end’, Zyngier (2008, pp. 1767–1774) argues, would allow ‘the empowerment of individuals and groups to critically reflect on and remake their society’ for greater equity. Criticality in student engagement looks at the ‘connection between student engagement and learning, democratic practice and social justice’; it ‘approaches a more socially grounded construction of engagement’ (Zyngier 2008, pp. 1766-1767). A critical student engagement would allow the student to rethink their engagement experiences in relation to hegemonic structures ‘for the creation of a more just and democratic community and not just the advancement of the individual’ (Zyngier 2008, p.1772), thus giving traction to the non-instrumental dimension of their education. As will be seen in this section, through Zepke (2015, 2017,

2018), Burke (2012) and McMahon and Portelli (2012), the scholarship of criticality would be directed primarily at neoliberalism, as the overarching force impacting higher education. While I acknowledge this tendency, my purpose in this research is not to reject all aspects of neoliberalism but to aim for greater equity for non-traditional students in student engagement in regard to the dominant forces in their education, one of which happens to be an educational policy heavily influenced by neoliberal thinking.

In his later works in student engagement, Zepke (2015, 2017, 2018) expands the territories of student engagement, critiquing student engagement's 'affinities' with neoliberalism, with its resulting focus on performance to respond to the economy (Zepke 2017). The author makes it clear though, that he does not reject student engagement as currently construed, but is intent on including critique for students to be prepared 'to be thoughtfully and actively engaged as citizens with critical awareness, compassion and a willingness to act in the world to achieve social justice' (Zepke 2017, p. 204). Through this move, Zepke (2017) helps student engagement move from its mainly instrumental focus on knowledge, towards a moral focus that I argued in Chapter One to be missing in the education of non-traditional students in the context of widening participation (see also Biesta 2011). Thus, in response to a student engagement with purposes bent on instrumentality, performativity and accountability in a market-driven economy, Zepke (2017 as cited in Zepke 2018, p. 443) contends a more expansive purpose for critical student engagement that would include 'learning to critique accepted norms, practising democracy, valuing diversity, and practising active citizenship'. In lieu of learning as being only performance-driven for a market economy, Zepke (2015, p. 1317) proposes learning that is 'participatory and dialogic leading not only to academic success but also to success as citizens'.

Zepke's (2015, 2017, 2018) work on critical student engagement emerged largely from the need that he saw for students to benefit from an education that would prepare them as future citizens, yet his work on criticality could also serve the purpose of my research on inequities as related to non-traditional students. In considering the teaching-learning space as a place where students

would question the world they live in, non-traditional students could be brought to question the wider societal hegemonies impacting on their lives that particularly affect people from their backgrounds. While neoliberal influences present as deeply embedded in the current socio-economic fabric, as in student engagement, Zepke (2018, p. 443) argues that it 'can be challenged and changed at a local level by the actions of teachers and students working individually and together'.

Similarities to the form of criticality propounded by Zepke for student engagement, are also found in the way Burke (2012) conceives widening participation. To move beyond the current hegemonic discourses impacting on universities, Burke (2012, p. 185) suggests a participatory pedagogy that prioritises pedagogical relations between teachers and students 'with an explicit plan of the ways they will work together ethically, critically and inclusively'. When related to students from dominated groups 'whose knowledge and experiences have been socially, culturally and historically undermined', participatory pedagogy would 'recreate knowledge and meaning through critical, collaborative and educational dialogue' to challenge inequities (Burke 2012, p. 185). Framed by such pedagogy, students would refute inadequacies ascribed to them, by engaging with knowledge and practices of dominant groups, 'whilst simultaneously critiquing, problematizing, interrogating and unsettling those very practices and epistemologies', 'to develop alternative ways of doing and knowing' (Burke 2012, p. 186). The operation of power between teacher and student would be more fluid than monolithic in the classroom: 'The teacher is not seen to 'have the power' to give to the students but rather power is generated, exercised and struggled over within lived social spaces' (Burke 2012, p. 184). Burke (2012, pp. 184-187) also sees in the pedagogical relation 'a sense of care and attention to the emotional', 'compassion for the perspectives, experiences and lives of others', together with the understanding that 'Pedagogies both shape and are shaped by complex identity formation'.

Aiming for greater equity in the learning space, McMahon and Portelli (2012) challenged the status quo for a student engagement beyond market needs. They proposed a critical democratic student engagement that would be

generated by a shared ownership of the learning process: ‘the interactions of students and teachers, in a shared space, for the purpose of democratic reconstruction, through which personal transformation takes place’ (McMahon & Portelli 2004 as cited in McMahon & Portelli 2012, p. 4). As such, a critical democratic student engagement would disrupt the production of knowledge that tends to serve the laws of the market and favours dominant groups, to instead consider the real educational needs of all students and the potentials that they bring to class. McMahon and Portelli’s (2012) argument is that the current climate of neoliberalism has turned individual rights into relentless individualism (McMahon & Portelli 2012, p. 2). Geared by market driven principles of success, standardization (one-size-fits-all) and accountability (in contrast to moral responsibility), neoliberalism is oblivious to ‘different needs arising from different contexts’ (McMahon & Portelli 2012, p. 2). Neoliberal notions of success would not fully ‘engage individuals and communities in meaningful ways’ and would belie the democratic aims of education as a ‘hopeful endeavour which has the potential to transcend worlds and transform lives’ (Armstrong & McMahon 2012, p. ix).

Criticality also includes in its scholarship the transformation of students’ identities. While Burke (2012 p. 184-187) has argued in the context of her discussion on participatory pedagogy that students ‘shape and are shaped by complex identity formation’, McMahon and Portelli (2012) see student transformation taking place in critical democratic student engagement. By this, McMahon and Portelli (2012) add an ontological dimension (the student as being) to student engagement that resonates with Barnett’s (2007) view of education. In place of a view of education resting on epistemological (knowledge) and practical (skills) dimensions only, Barnett (2007) proposes a third pillar as an ontological dimension to education, that focuses on who students are and who they are becoming. This would allow the student to make a contribution to this complex world, but also move to a ‘new phase of human being’ (Barnett 2007, p. 1). Beyond changing their life conditions, such an education would change the person into a new state of being with a ‘will to learn’, whereby they would go on learning for the rest of their lives (Barnett 2007, p. 7), thus moving to further states of being, for an enriching life.

A will to learn would be a readiness to leap into the unknown, with passion and excitement for discovery and self-discovery. It would imply that a pedagogy for a will to learn—considered beyond market needs—would allow the student as a human being to cultivate their relationship to the world into 'forms of human disposition, a readiness to keep going, a willingness to open oneself to new experience, a propensity critically to be honest with oneself and critically to interrogate oneself' (Barnett 2007, p. 7). Here an evolving human disposition is associated with the agency of the non-traditional students in this research, and the possibility for them to articulate a trajectory different from the one prescribed for them.

Student engagement explicitly intersects with ontology in Barnacle and Dall'Alba's (2017, p. 1326) appeal for an education that encourages students to 'take a stand on what they are learning and who they are becoming'. Barnacle and Dall'Allba (2017) extend the ontological possibilities of student engagement through the lens of care 'as a mark of personhood' drawn from Noddings (2005, p. 24). A commitment to care stands in contrast to the deficit models of non-traditional students from which this research wishes to distance itself. A university that cares would do so without domination; it would use care that liberates students by respecting who they are and who they want to become. To a single model of the ideal university-educated person, Barnacle and Dall'Allba's (2017) ontological view would therefore present multiple models of the educated person. While Barnacle and Dall'Allba (2017, p. 1336) contend that no care recipe exists, care would be manifested in an 'attuned responsiveness' to the students' experiences, with the university targeting students' interests and capacities. 'By encouraging, capturing and extending the ideas and things that hold students enthralled, as teachers we have considerable potential to enhance their learning, as well as their commitment to this learning' (Barnacle & Dall'Alba 2017, p. 1331). Broadening those interests and capacities in relation to the world through reflexivity, would be seen as necessary to allow students to move beyond present interest, towards a complex world in which they would be called to make a contribution.

Overall, Barnacle and Dall'Alba (2017) propose a view of student engagement that cares for what students value in their becoming, as these students themselves learn to care for this world. Such a view of student engagement 'has the potential to support an educative process that promotes creativity, critical judgement, and ethical and social understanding towards a more just and caring world' (Barnacle and Dall'Alba 2017, p. 1336). More closely related to this research, as the university provides the non-traditional students in this research with the conditions for them to engage, the possibility is opened to gauge the extent to which the university makes space for these students' different views of the world as a mark of respect for who they are, and how these students are allowed to grow, connect and contribute to this world in which they are called to live.

2.6 Bourdieu revisited and equity in student engagement

In the wake of the sociocultural that has appeared to offer possibilities to non-traditional students in the field of student engagement at the double crossroad of this research with equity, the work of French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu can offer an equity interface to tie theory to an understanding of the experiences of these students with regard to the structural conditions of their engagement. I draw on the theoretical work of Bourdieu because the central tenet of his work is the inequities people experience in society which he contextualises in school. My work follows Bourdieu's work in that I have posited that non-traditional students could be experiencing inequities in their engagement with learning.

Bourdieu's (1984) theory of practice and its associated concepts of cultural capital, habitus and field as elaborated in this section would point in the direction of greater equity, instead of the reproduction of inequities as more often done with the same concepts. In addition to the equity factor, what makes Bourdieu particularly valuable for my research is his theoretical dialecticism between subjectivity and objectivity, 'new ways of relating subjective human dispositions and actions and the objective social world within which they are framed' (Mills & Gale 2010, p. 20), and agency and structure. The non-traditional students in their engagement with learning have been conceptualised as having agency in this research. They could articulate a trajectory different

from the one traced out for them in a student engagement that tends towards an educational system in favour of dominant groups. Mills and Gale's (2010) comment on Bourdieu is of significance here:

> He [Bourdieu] argues against what he calls the meritocratic illusion … he argues that it is the culture of the dominant group—that is, the group that controls the economic, social, and political resources—which is embodied within schools. (p.14)

Bourdieu's work can offer equity-related insights on the non-traditional students in my research in that they have been seen in student engagement as more deficit-ridden than capable (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis 2015; James, Krause & Jennings 2010), when it is the culture of dominant groups that has legitimacy within the university to determine their success and achievement. What is more, student engagement has served policy for an education beneficial to the laws of the market (Zepke 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018) more than the society in which these non-traditional students are called to live, and where cultural and socioeconomic hegemonies that could have caused their own oppression keep reproducing.

Bourdieu's (1994) theory of practice—as opposed to theory and practice—is deemed fitting for this research which, with a phenomenological approach at the methodological level, shares the characteristic of being sceptical about predetermining human experience. Unwilling to theorise for the sake of it, Bourdieu wanted his concepts to be seen as 'a response to an actual practical context' in his 'mission to explain the social, political and cultural practices that surround him' (Grenfell 2014b, p. 15).

> I wanted to abandon the cavalier point of view… [that] … draws up plans, maps, diagrams and genealogies. That is all very well, and inevitable, as one moment … But you shouldn't forget the other possible relation of the social world, that of agents, really engaged in the market, for example, the level I am interested in mapping out. (Bourdieu 1994, pp. 20–21)

As such, Bourdieu's concepts would be seen as 'tools to understanding the logic of fields of practice' and not 'concrete entities' (Grenfell 2014a, p.10), as

inductive mechanisms rather than deductive. At the same time though, in contrast to the 'non-theoretical, partial … relation of ordinary experience,' Bourdieu (1994) wanted a layer of detachment and impartiality;

> And one must also establish a theory of the theoretical relationship, a theory of all the implications, starting with the breaking off of practical belonging and immediate investment, and its transformation into the distant, detached relationship that defines the scientist's position. (pp. 20 -21)

This detachment in Bourdieu's (1994) theory of practice gives it further relevance at the broader level of discussion in this research, once the lived experiences of the non-traditional students' engagement with learning have been presented at the results level.

2.6.1 Habitus and agency

For the purpose of this research, student agency would be located in the conscious dimension of the habitus in this framework. Before elaborating on the theoretical relation between agency and the conscious habitus, I will address the concept of habitus as more widely used. Habitus relates to the individual's subconscious and manifests itself in the physical world as 'a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 214). Habitus is acquired 'through repeated experience of the particular social relations, material circumstances and practices that prevail in the part of the social field in which the individual is located' (Sayer 2010, p. 110). From this perspective, habitus stands as product of an individual's social context, and thus dispositions of the habitus would reflect the structures of the individual's society. Viewed as durable and transposable (Bourdieu 1993, p. 87), habitus would demonstrate similarities of dispositions in different social contexts. When such habitus is ascribed to non-traditional students, the difference of their dispositions acquired from their home backgrounds may be exacerbated in the university context, taking them on the trajectory of the student who does not fit in (O'Shea 2020), more acted upon than agentic in their engagement with learning. However, I

have indicated that non-traditional students demand a better consideration, and I have conceptualised them as agentic in their engagement experiences.

As an alternative to the tendency to present the relationship between habitus and field as unconscious (Bourdieu 1993), is a view wherein habitus would not be immutable in the field. '[H]abitus is not static, not categorically immutable; its properties can evolve by degree in response to changing experiences and circumstances' (Edgerton & Roberts 2014, p.199). Though clouded by its unconscious dimension, a conscious dimension to habitus is possible in Bourdieu's work, especially when there does not appear to be a perfect fit between habitus and habitat. '[The habitus] may be superseded under certain circumstances – certainly in situations of crisis which disrupt the immediate adjustment of habitus to field – by other principles, such as rational and conscious computation' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 108). Wacquant (2016, p. 65), Bourdieu's closest advocate, later indicated the creative aspects of the individual's habitus as 'propensities to think, feel, and act in determinate ways, which then guide them [the individual] in their creative responses to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu.'

A conscious dimension to habitus emphasises a flexible habitus that could expand the possibilities of non-traditional students in the university field. It would be within the conscious dimension of the habitus, 'the life to the mind' (Reay 2004), that agency would be located. Reay's (2004) understanding of habitus as not exclusively unconscious, accords the habitus agentic possibilities:

> Bourdieu sees habitus as potentially generating a wide repertoire of possible actions, simultaneously enabling the individual to draw on transformative and constraining courses of action … While the habitus allows for individual agency it also predisposes individuals towards certain ways of behaving. (p. 433)

As conceptualised for student engagement in this research, the student would exercise agency as a reflexive individual in internal conversations (Archer 2003, 2007). For Archer's agency to be located in the conscious dimension of the

habitus, Archer's reflexivity would nevertheless first have to be reconciled with the more widely used unconscious dimension of Bourdieu's habitus. The reason is that Archer (2010) tends to think of Bourdieu's habitus (the unconscious one) as of little relevance because of the ever-changing nature of modern life, and has persistently rejected it—arguing against the absence of a clear distinction between subject and object in Bourdieusian theory.

Such a reconciliation with habitus would take place by putting Archer's reflexivity itself under the critical lens. Farrugia and Woodman's argument (2015) is that

> Archer evacuates embodied dispositions from late modern subjectivities, but does not replace them with any account of why differently positioned subjects adopt different life projects in sociologically intelligible ways … her narrative of social change becomes uncritically optimistic, unable to understand the material inequalities which continue to structure late modern subjectivities. (p. 627)

From Farrugia and Woodman's viewpoint (2015), in dismissing Bourdieu's habitus, Archer would be dismissing the individual's relation to structural conditions, and would be blind to social inequalities. Dismissing structural conditions altogether would above all grant unrestrained agency to Archer's reflexivity, and as Schirato and Webb (2003, p. 540) point out, 'There is no such thing as pure agency'. An exclusive focus on reflexivity would also, according to Pollman (2016), fail to acknowledge the pre-reflexive aspects of agency. Farrugia and Woodman (2015) hold similar views,

> Archer's rejection of any pre-reflexive dimensions to subjectivity and social action leaves her unable to sociologically explain the genesis of 'ultimate concerns', and creates an empirically dubious narrative of the consequences of social change. (p. 626)

Sayer's (2010) argument is that there could be a point of reconciliation between both the unconscious of Bourdieu's habitus, and Archer's reflexivity.

> The semi-conscious responses that arise from the dispositions of our habitus merge into the conscious monitoring of our internal conversations, [since an understanding of an individual's relation with the world is] not merely one of practical engagement [Archer's reflexivity], or indeed contemplation [Bourdieu's unconscious disposition], but of concern. (Sayer 2010, p. 117)

At the same time though, Sayer (2010) supplements his argument with indications in Bourdieu's work of internal conversations. For this, he refers to *The weight of the world* (Bourdieu et al. 1999) in which interview participants express their inner dialogues. With a similar focus Sayer quotes the French philosopher, 'It is, of course, never ruled out that the responses of the habitus may be accompanied by a strategic calculation tending to perform in a conscious mode the operation that the habitus performs quite differently' (Bourdieu 2000 as cited in Sayer 2010, p. 111). Sayer (2010) concedes, however, that since Bourdieu's main focus was on social suffering rather than on why people suffer, the conscious dimensions of the habitus and its associated internal deliberations were understated in Bourdieu's work.

Internal deliberations and embodied dispositions brought to connect through a critical engagement with Archer's reflexivity, would nevertheless require that Archer's reflexivity as a conscious dimension be conceptually tied to the conscious dimension of the habitus, where the agency of the non-traditional students in this research might be located. Internal deliberations are seen within a habitus inclusive of the conscious and the unconscious, in Atkinson's (2010) conception of agency. Such agency operates across a multi-layered form of consciousness and knowledge that underpins 'a variety of forms of action from consciously deliberated projects … through habitual or routinised modes of conduct … right down to the "completely autonomized" elements of action … [like]walking, standing, and so on' (Atkinson 2010, p. 14). Thus, from a conceptualisation of student engagement as a joint proposition between student and institution (Coates 2006), and student agency as individual reflexivity (Archer 2003, 2007), I theoretically locate agency in the conscious dimension of the habitus in Bourdieu's framework. As an agentic concept, the conscious dimension within a flexible habitus can relate non-traditional students'

subjectivities to structural constraints and/or enablements coming from within as well as from outside the university—in this study their experiences of engagement with their learning may be the site of tension between aspects of agency and constraint.

2.6.2 Capital amassed and alternative forms of capital

The interrelatedness of habitus with capital and field is seen in Bourdieu's equation in his theory of practice, '[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice' (Bourdieu 1986a, p. 101). Non-traditional students' agentic moves in an initially unfamiliar field, could lead to the strategic accumulation of capital valued in the field, as well as alternative forms of capital largely unacknowledged in the university context, in their engagement with learning.

Like for habitus, locating the concept of capital in this research would first require an understanding of the concept from its better-known deterministic perspective. 'Cultural capital' (e.g., taste, aesthetics, forms of knowledge) which is demarcated from the materialistic conception of 'economic capital' (Bourdieu 1986b) has been a conduit for Bourdieu to explain that social inequity, power and dominance have other derivatives than economic ones. Capital would determine an individual's position in the field: 'all agents within a particular society have an objective position in "social space" in virtue of their … capital' (Crossley 2014, p. 86). Bourdieu's (1988) diagrammatic representation of a magnetic field, setting positions of advantage and disadvantage along axes as per the amount of cultural capital and economic capital would offer little leeway for movement along the axes, pointing to a discourse of reproduction of inequities. 'At one pole, the economically or temporally dominant and culturally dominated positions, and at the other, the culturally dominant and economically dominated positions' (Bourdieu 1988, p. 270).

However, the possibility also exists in Bourdieu's work, through his analogy of a game in the field, to amass capital and evolve one's position in the field. Initial unfamiliarity with the 'unwritten rules of the game' (Bourdieu 1994) in the field would convey a positioning at the margins of the field, presuming the lesser amount of capital valued in the university field that the non-traditional students in this research would have at the start of the game. Yet, as Thomson (2014, p.

70) argues, ‘One of the sites of struggle within a social field may be at, and about, its borders and the value of its capital’. Non-traditional students exerting agency in the field could experience a shift in their position, from the risky borders of said field to a more advantageous one, through the accumulation of capital valued in that field.

If positions in the field could change for non-traditional students, capital would still maintain a level of exclusivity given it is the only form of capital validated in the field. With a commitment to greater justice in society, Yosso and Solorzano (2005, p. 128) have made a critique of the middle and upper class as having appropriated Bourdieu’s cultural capital in order to set their culture as the standard: ‘while Bourdieu’s work sought to provide a structural critique of social and cultural reproduction, his theory of cultural capital has been used to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor’. In echo, Pollman (2016, p. 6) has decried the use of Bourdieu’s capital as ‘differentially valued capital resources’ to construct ‘imageries of cultural inferiority and superiority’. Instead of privileging a narrow range of cultural assets and characteristics, Yosso and Solorzano (2005, p. 128) argue that it would be ‘better to understand how cultural capital is actually only one form of many different aspects that might be considered valuable’.

Thus, Yosso and Solorzano (2005, p.128) bring to the foreground the idea that there are likely to be ‘forms of cultural capital that marginalized groups bring to the table that traditional cultural capital theory does not recognize or value’. Drawing from their work with communities of colour, they propose community cultural wealth as ‘an array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups’ (Yosso & Solorzano 2005, p.129). Community cultural wealth thus encompasses forms of capital that these groups have. Yosso and Solorzano’s (2005) critical scrutiny of cultural capital as a differentiating tool suggests that the non-traditional students in this research may be able to activate capitals from their background in their engagement with learning.

2.6.3 The university field

With conceptions of capital as not fixed and exclusive, and habitus as not immutable and unconscious, this study on non-traditional students' engagement with their learning could better understand the full range of tensions and possibilities in their experiences, and thus better identify how the university could learn to change. As agentic players in the field, the non-traditional students in this study could 'transform, partially or completely, the immanent rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 99). Thus, to a reproduction of the tacit rules of the game, the field could have to establish 'alternative goals and more or less completely ... redefine the game and the moves which permit one to win it' (Bourdieu 1988, p. 172). With emphasis on the transformative potential of Bourdieu's concepts, Mills (2008, p. 87) points out that 'transformation occur[s] when there is no longer acceptance of the rules of the game and the goals proposed by the dominant'. As an alternative goal and for a transformative education, agents of the field (like teachers) could have to consider 'how different voices can be constituted within specific pedagogical relations so as to engage their histories and experiences in both an affirmative and critical way (Giroux 1990 as cited in Mills 2008, p. 84).

Theoretically connecting the engagement experiences of non-traditional students with a perspective on Bourdieu different from the traditional one could work towards greater equity. Nevertheless, I do not lose sight of the possibility that the alternative to greater equity might still prevail. As already stated above, 'pure agency' (Schirato and Webb 2003, p. 540) would not exist, and denying it would deny the existence of the agency-structure relation altogether. Despite the emancipatory tendency of this research, in their engagement with their learning the non-traditional students in my research could also reveal themselves in states of compliance to dominant norms in the field through doxa or symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977). 'Doxa, as a symbolic form of power, requires that those subjected to it do not question its legitimacy or the legitimacy of those who exert it' (Deer 2014, pp. 116-117). In a similar vein, symbolic violence as a subtle system of domination, takes place when both the dominant and the dominated see that system 'to be legitimate, and thus think and act in their own best interest within the system itself' (Schubert 2014, p. 180). Whether

out of complicity with the dominant or because of seeing no alternative to their current state, the dominated would perpetuate their own suffering through doxa or symbolic violence.

2.7 Summary

In this chapter, I have given an overview of the field of student engagement. Student engagement as I have conceptualised it for this research is a joint proposition between the student and the institution, with the student as an individual with agency, and this relates to my consideration in Chapter One of non-traditional students as non-deficit, with the possibility to trace out a trajectory different from the one pre-determined for them. Further conceptualised, student engagement extends the spaces of engagement from the classroom to the institution and beyond, to allow for an examination of the inequities at institutional level and from above the institution, that could be impacting on non-traditional students. From the literature on student engagement, I have then shown how non-traditional students have been framed negatively, with their needs attended by narrow retention interventions and subsumed in economic imperatives, which leaves institutional structures, policy and processes mostly unquestioned. A sociocultural perspective to student engagement appears to offer possibilities to non-traditional students at the double crossroad of this research with equity, bringing on one side, institutional norms, cultures and practices and on the other side, macro social norms impacting on universities. I propose for this research a common equity interface through the work of Bourdieu, to tie theory to an understanding of the engagement experiences of the non-traditional students in this research.

Chapter Three - Methodology and methods

3.1 Introduction

In determining how to examine the experiences of engagement of non-traditional students in my research, I took into consideration the research positioning in Chapter One and the research questions. As stated in Chapter One, the primary research question is: 'How do non-traditional students make sense of their experiences of engagement with their learning in their first year at university?' The secondary question is: 'How do non-traditional students make sense of the strengths that they bring from their home-backgrounds into their experiences of engagement with learning?' The normative tendencies at the institutional level in relation to student engagement (Krause 2011; Vallee 2017; Zepke 2014) could have a level of responsibility for the marginalization of non-traditional students, hence amplifying inequities towards them. Similarly, at a broader level, dominant forces impacting on the institution regarding student engagement (Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017; McMahon & Portelli 2012; Zepke 2017) could have contributed to an education that does not necessarily address broader inequities towards students from non-traditional backgrounds. I thus set out to consider these matters as I examined the engagement experiences of non-traditional students in their first year at university. In this chapter, I first develop the rationale for the methodology to this research. I then move to a discussion of how I proceeded with the application of methods of recruitment, data collection and analysis to examine the experiences of non-traditional students in their engagement with learning. A section on research quality follows, and I complete the chapter with reference to ethics, as related to this research.

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Qualitative research on the student's experience of engagement with learning

Chalmers (2010, p. 6) has argued that qualitative approaches in student engagement would contribute to bridging the interpretation gap left by large-scale, quantitative research more focused on cross-institution comparisons. Student engagement as 'performance to be measured, recorded, reported and

valued' is likely to have offered 'a feeling of certainty' (Zepke 2015, p.1315), that has at the same time limited the possibilities for the expansion of the frontiers of student engagement. Closely associated with AUSSE-related quantitative student engagement research, Krause and Coates (2008) have nonetheless flagged the need for the complementarity of qualitative data sets.

A qualitative methodology offers the alternative for deeper interpretations of student engagement to emerge (Leach 2016a; Leach & Zepke 2011; Zepke, Leach & Butler 2014; Zepke & Leach 2010). Taking an interpretative view of student engagement, Kahu, Stephens, Leach and Zepke (2015) used Kahu's (2013) model to establish the link between emotions, engagement and learning. By then reworking the same model, Kahu, Nelson and Picton (2017) uncovered new insights on the significance of student interest towards engagement. These qualitative research models share in common a sensitivity to context, have taken the investigation of student engagement far deeper than quantitative research while keeping the focus on the student. These are commonalities that resonate with the methodological approach of this present research. To uncover the nuances of non-traditional students' engagement with their learning, my research adopted a qualitative methodology with a focus on the student's experience.

A preoccupation with the student experience is obvious from Chapter One through my wording of the research questions. The study of experience is suitable for educational research because of the 'deep interrelatedness between experience, education and life' (Marshall & Case 2010, p. 493). Sims and Barnett (2015) have noted omissions in the literature regarding the experiences of non-traditional students, which 'silences their voices' and devaluates them. It is concerning that non-traditional students have been framed as the problem where teachers' perspectives have been prioritised. Thus, teachers on an engagement and retention program described in Coleman et al. (2021) have revealed their assumptions of student deficits through personal reflections and group conversations. A better understanding of the student's experience, 'capacities' and 'motivations' through conversations between students and staff as argued by O'Shea et al. (2016, p. 333), could see

the emergence of the student's voice. Riddle et al. (2021) included conversations with students, teachers, school leaders and parents to understand the school's commitment to the engagement of students in marginalised communities.

Nevertheless, as argued by Bryson (2014, p. 17), 'Student engagement is located in the individual'. Kahu (2013, p. 766) refers to 'the unique nature of the individual experience' in engagement. Understanding students' experiences demands that I foreground their voices to bring out rich pictures of their engagement. Funston (2011, p. 226) uses the 'strong presence' of the student's voice to bring to the foreground the experiences of non-traditional students. Kahu, Picton and Nelson (2020, p. 660) indicate the far-reaching possibilities of the student's voice as, 'a valuable tool for understanding student engagement, conveying how different factors might influence engagement and why particular issues are important to students'. They add that giving voice to the student also aligns with student agency (Kahu, Picton & Nelson, 2020).

Kahu, Picton and Nelson (2020) have developed a theoretical frame for an understanding of the student's experience, but where I differ from them is that I will not map Bourdieu's concepts for equity as developed in Chapter Two onto the subjectivities of the participants to this research to examine their engagement experiences. In Chapter Two, I have indicated that while Bourdieu (1984) wanted his concepts to be used inductively, he also wanted a level of theoretical detachment from the practical world. Therefore, to 'avoid overlaying Bourdieu's framework onto my data' (Macqueen 2018, p. 52), I utilise Bourdieu at the discussion level, after the experiences of the non-traditional students have been analysed. To analyse their experiences, I take the direction suggested by Gale and Parker (2014), since there is a level of similarity between my positioning for this research and their arguments in favour of the student's lived experience.

While not discarding 'structures and processes' Gale and Parker (2014) found that 'normative assumptions regarding preferred and ideal student experiences and trajectories' based on the traditional student, and 'institutional narratives and histories' have marginalised students from non-traditional backgrounds

‘rendering them voiceless, unable to speak in … [their] own names’. Failure to capture the lived experiences of non-traditional students would according to the authors be counterproductive to understanding their first-year experience. Therefore, Gale and Parker (2014, p. 747) recommended that ‘future research in the field [of the first-year experience] needs to be cognisant of students’ lived reality, not just institutional and/or systemic interests’. For the purpose of analysing data on the engagement experiences of non-traditional students in this research, as they lived it, I have used a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is about lived experiences; it has ‘a concern with phenomena, that is, the things we directly apprehend through our senses as we go about our daily lives’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p. 21).

3.2.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to investigate the student’s experiences

Going to the core of the phenomenon itself, that is, the lived experiences of engagement of non-traditional students with their learning, is central in this research. To this end, I use one of the variants of phenomenology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which takes into account that people ‘are inextricably involved in the world and in relationships with others’ (Larkin & Thompson 2012, p. 102). As related to this research, the interplay between individual and context, extending from classroom to institution and beyond has been presented in the conceptualisation of student engagement in Chapter Two (Coates 2006; Huh & Kuh 2001; Krause 2011; Krause & Coates 2008; Leach & Zepke 2011; Reschly & Christenson 2012; Zepke 2017).

Since IPA is an approach that is also ‘concerned with experience which is of a particular moment or significance to the person’ (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 33), it is well suited to the non-traditional students in this research at the key phase of their first year at university. Additionally, with its focus on lived experiences, IPA allows for an exploration of non-traditional students’ engagement with learning on its own terms, rather than based on a presupposition of what these experiences could look like.

3.3 Methods

3.3.1 Recruiting and sampling

Following ethics approval (see Section 3.5), students at Victoria University, Australia who had completed their first year, were invited to participate in a phenomenological reflection on their experiences of first-year engagement with learning. In targeting students who had successfully completed their first year, I was influenced by Devlin (2013) who has argued against the deficit discourse for greater equity towards low SES students, and her ensuing methodological choice of participants who had successfully completed their first year of study (McKay & Devlin 2014; McKay & Devlin 2016), to examine their first-year experiences. Such a methodological stance was, 'premised on the need to provide balance to the concentration in the extant research on the barriers facing these students' and the need 'for a more affirmative and nuanced conception of students from low SES backgrounds' (McKay & Devlin 2016, pp. 347-350). Likewise, examining the experiences of non-traditional students who had successfully completed their first year in this research allowed for an appreciation of the trajectory of these students and how they worked towards success and dealt with challenges in the face of what could be inequities in their education.

In line with IPA's idiographic commitment to understanding a particular phenomenon in a particular context (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009), the sample size was small to maintain the focus on individual experience. Purposive sampling was chosen 'in order to access "knowledgeable people", i.e., those who have in depth knowledge about particular issues' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p. 157). In Section 3.5.1, I show how I sought voluntary participation. Of the fifty students who expressed interest, twenty confirmed. Of these, data was sought from six of them as they met the definition of non-traditional students employed in this research. Also taken into consideration was Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009, p. 51) suggestion 'that between three and six participants can be a reasonable sample size … Indeed many studies by experienced IPA researchers have numbers in this range'. The profiles of the participants are elaborated in Section 3.3.2.

The number of participants being small, homogeneity among participants was sought (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 49). Therefore, as this research was undertaken in education, an invitation to participate was sent to preservice education students only. Leach (2016b) too has conducted research in student engagement with students from a college of education, relating engagement perspectives from Leach and Zepke (2011) to postgraduate and doctoral students. Zepke, Butler and Leach (2012) have suggested the need to conduct student engagement research at a sub-institutional level, as different courses have been shown to give different results in how students perceive teacher and institutional support of their engagement. Leach (2016a) found differences in students' engagement across disciplines with the AUSSE scales, recommending a more holistic definition of student engagement to the AUSSE, 'including their emotional engagement, the impact of non-institutional factors and antecedents on their engagement, and their engagement with active citizenship'. She also advocated different modes of investigation to surveys (Leach 2016a, p. 784). Student engagement as conceptualised for this research (Archambault et al. 2009; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004; Krause 2011; Christenson, Reschly & Wylie 2012; Leach & Zepke 2011; Zepke 2017) appears to relate to Leach's holistic definition of student engagement. At the methodological level too, this research draws on Leach's (2016b) work. With IPA as mode of enquiry, this research gains in depth what it loses in breadth. As a lived experience, the student's experience of engagement is contextual, and as such this research intends to open up new ways of thinking about non-traditional students and has no ambition to generalise its findings to all first-year non-traditional students.

3.3.2 The sample of non-traditional students in this research

In Chapter One, I presented an understanding of who non-traditional students are for the purpose of this research. Prior to the widening participation, non-traditional students had 'traditionally been structurally excluded' from higher education institutions (Mallman & Lee 2016, p. 685). In my study the non-traditional participants were variously from low socioeconomic status (low SES) backgrounds, first in family (FIF) to attend university, mature aged, and took

‘alternative (i.e., non-school leaver) pathways to higher education’ (Pitman et al. 2016, p. 21).

Participants in this research classify as low SES in accordance with the postcode methodology used in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018) and the educational attainments of their parents (James et al. 2008). While non-intrusive, the postcode criteria have been considered as not adequately reflecting a person’s socioeconomic status, with Bradley et al. (2008, p. xviii) recommending a ‘measurement based on individual circumstance’. Therefore, also considered for low SES participants, was parental education, which James et al. (2008) have suggested as a better predictor of socioeconomic status. Overlaps exist between low SES and other categories such as FIF to the extent that the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE, 2016 p. 5) refers to FIF as a subgroup to the low SES equity group. The NCSEHE (2016, p. 5) also refers to the mature aged group as a subgroup of low SES, while pointing out that there is a ‘relatively high proportion of mature aged among FIF’ (p. 10).

Below is the participants’ profile, according to their belonging to non-traditional student groups.

Table 3.1 Summary of participants’ profiles

Participants’ chosen pseudonyms	Low SES	FIF	Mature-aged	Non-school leaver pathway
Samara	✓	×	✓	×
Cassie	✓	✓	×	×
Bob	✓	✓	✓	×
James	✓	✓	×	✓
Rachel	✓	×	✓	×
Henry	✓	×	✓	×

Table 3.1 shows that all the participants are low SES. Where Cassie, Bob and James are first in the family to attend university, Samara, Rachel and Henry are

the first generation in their family to attend university following in the footsteps of another sibling still at university or who has recently completed university. With the exception of Cassie and James, the other participants were mature-aged, that is 21 and above in their first year at university, with Samara being 21 years old, Rachel and Henry 25, and Bob above 40. Bob's profile appears to tally most with the description of mature-aged students with 'little recent involvement in formal learning structures, and having additional responsibilities and pressures outside university' (Mallman & Lee 2016, p. 685). He has a family, worked as a security officer at night and studied full time. James was the only participant to use sports school as a non-school pathway to university, the other participants having completed high school. After completing Year 11, James went to a sports school as an alternative senior secondary school provider. The said sports school focuses on students' passion for football, allowing them to later choose to either do further studies—as James did—or join the workforce.

The parents of the participants mostly have year 10 or 12, with two having vocational qualifications at certificate and at diploma levels respectively. They work as tradespeople, in lower administrative jobs and in the service industry. In Appendix A (Table A1), a comprehensive table on the participants' profiles includes parents' educational attainments and occupations.

While a picture of the participants' backgrounds has been given whereby their belonging to particular non-traditional student groups has been shown, the participants are investigated under the overarching non-traditional student category in relation to equity in their experiences of engagement.

3.3.3 Interpretative phenomenological analysis and the semi-structured interview

As stated in Section 3.2.1 of this chapter, in examining the experiences of non-traditional students through IPA, I follow Gale and Parker's (2014) suggestion to focus on the lived experiences of students in their first year. The lived experiences of first-year students at university have also been examined by the following authors. Denovan and Macaskill (2013) used IPA to develop an understanding of the experiences of stress and coping of first-year students.

Moving away from the deficit discourse associated with widening participation students, and to understand the aspirations of these students in one study and examine their resilience in another study, Gauntlett et al. (2017, p. 67) reported on the use of IPA 'to get close to the … inner world' of 'those who are often least heard'. It is equally with the purpose to give voice through IPA that Sultana (2014) looked at how the education context impacts the achievement and identity of successful ethnic minority students, and Wheatley (2020) examined what contributes to the success of non-traditional students. In this research I give voice to non-traditional students through IPA for an understanding of their lived experiences of engagement with their learning in their first year.

In order to obtain 'detailed stories, thoughts and feelings' from the participants during the data collection process, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews are often preferred in IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 57). Like Denovan and Macaskill (2013), Gauntlett et al. (2017), Sultana (2014) and Wheatley (2020) discussed above, I used the semi-structured interview to collect data from the six participants in this research. An IPA interview reaping rich data relies on the researcher following the participants—who are the 'experts' on their lived experiences—and not the reverse. The point is that the researcher needs to explore the participants' views of their own experiences, and not what the researcher thinks those participants' experiences have been. While the participants, as the 'experts' on the lived experience, are to be given much leeway to talk about their experiences, an interview schedule as one would like to use it 'in an ideal world' (Smith Flowers & Larkin 2009) is advisable in IPA. Its use though is to be limited to what Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 59) call a 'virtual map' that can be drawn upon 'if things become difficult or stuck'. The interview schedule that I developed (see Appendix B) allowed me as interviewer to manage the tension between following the participants in the meanders of their experiences and being focused on the phenomenon being studied.

As suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, pp. 59-60), in constructing the questions for the semi-structured interview in this research, I used open questions to encourage the participants to talk at length. Moreover, the interviews were started with a question allowing participants to 'recount a fairly

descriptive episode or experience' for scene-setting before moving to more analytical questions. Since it is deemed unhelpful to directly ask research questions 'pitched at the abstract level' in an IPA interview (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 58), I had to avoid asking the participants to respond directly to the phenomenon under scrutiny, that is, the meaning that they would ascribe to their experiences of engagement with their learning. Thus, I came to the research questions 'sideways' by bringing the participants to reflect on topics that would allow the same phenomenon to be delineated later via analysis.

The topics of conversation for the interviews in this research flowed from a number of considerations already expressed in this research. I came to this research from Chickering and Gamson's (1987) work and with a preoccupation with Teaching and Learning, which took me to the AUSSE-related student engagement research tradition. Of the engagement themes in that research tradition, three themes namely, active and collaborative learning, student interaction with staff, and academic challenge (ACER 2012, Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis 2015; NSSE 2011; Radloff & Coates 2010) are directly related to the student's experience of engagement with their learning. These engagement themes have appeared as effective classroom pedagogy among Leach and Zepke's (2011) research perspectives, which perspectives were also applied in Leach, Zepke and Butler (2014), and Leach (2016a). Chalmers (2010), who has pointed to the need for qualitative research to bridge the gap left by large-scale surveys (see Section 3.2), also indicates the need for a more contextual use of indicators as a conduit to deeper understanding.

While I have developed a conceptualisation of student engagement for the purpose of this research, described in Chapter Two, the foundational definition of AUSSE-related student engagement research—with students becoming involved and the institution providing the conditions for engagement to take place (Huh & Kuh 2001; Krause & Coates 2008) —is also constitutive of that conceptualisation. Underpinning the choice of the three identified engagement themes for this research is that while the experiences would be the student's, the conditions offered for engagement would be the institution's, in the provision of active and collaborative learning, student and staff interaction and academic

challenge. I have used these three themes as topics of conversation during the interviews on which the participants could then elaborate with the uniqueness of their experiences, to open new avenues of meaning regarding student engagement. As a fourth topic of conversation for the interviews in this research, the strengths that the participants thought they brought from their home backgrounds into their experiences of engagement with learning, were also included. The strength-based topic was included with the main topics on engagement since this research premises non-traditional students as not deficit-ridden (Devlin 2013; McKay & Devlin 2016; Smit 2012).

A number of key processes related to the IPA interview were taken into consideration during the interview in this research. In-depth personal conversations on one's own experiences do not flow out easily from an individual. Therefore, as the interviewer, I took care to first establish rapport with the interviewee (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 64). I adopted a casual approach in the way I spoke and dressed, and while being friendly and respectful, I took care to maintain professional boundaries. During the interview, I practised active listening so as to give the interviewee space and time to speak. Approaching the interview with genuine interest, diligence and rigour was of utmost importance for me, since the ensuing IPA analysis was reliant on the narrations provided at that stage. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 58) point out that, 'Unless one has engaged deeply with the participants and their concerns, unless one has listened attentively and probed in order to learn more about their lifeworld, then the data will be too thin for analysis'. With the prior consent of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate data transcription, before coding at the analytical stage (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, pp. 73-74). For each interview, which was face to face, I booked a study room in the university library to which only the participant and I had access during interview time.

The transcriptions were shown to the participants (Funston 2011, p. 77) for them to confirm authenticity, but also to give them the possibility to correct impressions provided, which on reflection they would have liked to add to, remove or redirect so as to convey more succinctly their lived experiences of

learning engagement. The participants were pleased to be shown their own interviews, but none of them expressed the need for correction. There were two 60 to 90-minute interviews per participant, reflecting Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009, p. 60) suggestion for interview duration. The first interviews took place in April and May 2017, and the second interviews took place in August and September 2017. The two rounds of interviews combined gave me one complete set of data from each participant.

At the same time though, a preliminary analysis of the first round of interview transcripts was a necessary step to the second round of interviews. This allowed me to make a first note of matters of concern for each participant, and consider potential material for comparison across the participants. I used the information thus obtained to probe further into data obtained from each participant from the first round of interviews. The interview questions at the second round were participant-specific and related to areas where I wanted to probe further. For example, the following from Henry (2017, 4 September) is what I set to the participant during my second interview with him: 'Henry, in the first conversation, when working with your peers, you talk about numbers as follows: 'I'm good with numbers … I know numbers inside out …' You showed that you were using your knowledge to advance your teammate's understanding of the task. Please talk about how in your experience you developed that expertise with numbers.'

Extending data collection through the second interviews completed information obtained during the first interviews in areas of interest, but further offered a level of repetition of information as the participants re-reflected on their first-year experiences of engagement with their learning, both of which served to validate the overall data obtained from each participant. This is an element of research quality (Yardley 2000) in data collection, discussed in Section 3.4.

3.3.4 The analytic process in IPA

The power of IPA rests on its analytical focus; its investigative process 'is about exploring meanings' and 'not about collecting facts' (Larkin & Thompson 2012, p. 104). Investigating the experiences of the non-traditional students' engagement with their learning in this research was, therefore, about

developing an understanding of their experiences of engagement rather than finding reasons for their engagement. During the interview I took care to be non-intrusive. The salient part for me was to decipher meaning from within what the participants themselves said. A successful IPA, according to Larkin and Thompson (2012, p. 101) would include 'giving voice (capturing and reflecting upon the principal claims and concerns of the research participants) and making sense (offering an interpretation grounded in the accounts)'.

What follows indicates how I proceeded with each participant's interview transcript, completing each one before moving to the next, in line with IPA's idiographic commitment. Appendix C contains a sample of data analysis. I first read and re-read the interview transcript to allow myself to be immersed in the data. I then did a line-by-line analysis (coding) of the participant's experiential claims and concerns (Larkin, Watts & Clifton 2006). This involved making exploratory comments on what mattered to them, 'objects of concern such as relationships, processes, places, events, values and principles' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 83). Line by line analysis also involved making comments on the meanings that the participant might ascribe to those matters of concern, 'what those relationships, processes, places, etc. are like for the participant' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 83). This second more interpretative annotation allowed me to 'understand how and why … [the] participant has these concerns' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 83). Interpretative comments would at times take an interrogative form since they would open up a range of potential responses rather than offer a single answer.

I made use of Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009, p. 84) suggested tools, which are descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments to support the analytical process. The conceptual comments were the ones requiring more interpretation:

> a move away from the explicit claims of the participants, conceptual annotation will usually involve a shift … towards the participant's overarching understanding of the matters that they are discussing ... As long as the interpretation is stimulated by, and tied to the text, it is legitimate. (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, pp.88 – 90)

All along, I also worked at divesting my own biographical presence from the analytical exercise, by ‘checking one’s reading again against the local text itself, and verifying it in the light of the larger text - what is said elsewhere’ (Smith 2004, p. 46).

This enters the domain of research quality (see Section 3.4) in data analysis. Once the line-by-line analysis of the participant’s transcript was done, I proceeded to put similar extracts and their related comments together to create the emergent themes, constituting an inductive development of themes. Since an IPA analysis is ‘an inductive and iterative cycle’ (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 79), it was also by cycling my way forward and backward through the analytical process that greater insight was obtained into the participants’ experiences.

I first completed the process described above with the interview transcripts of three participants. Then I made a cross-comparison of emergent themes for the three participants so as to make connections that would establish the themes to be considered for the results in Chapter Four. A theme at the results level would encompass variations on the same symphony—similarities and differences, and the nuances in between— since ‘how participants manifest the same theme in particular and different ways … [a] nuanced capturing of similarity and difference, convergence and divergence is the hallmark of good IPA work’ (Smith 2011, p 24). I repeated the whole procedure with the interview transcripts of the three remaining participants.

To constitute the final themes for the results chapter, I considered the themes across the two sets of themes obtained from the six participants. A theme, Smith (2011, p. 24) advises, would contain evidence from no less than half of the participants for a sample size of four to eight. In this research most of the themes have evidence from half or more of the participants. There is one exception though, and in that I follow Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012, p. 4) who indicate that ‘a single case may be well justified if rich and meaningful data has been collected, which allows the researcher to present original problems, mechanism, or experiences.’ In Chapter Four, Section 4.2.2, the theme of

‘Class values’ emerging from one participant has been included for the unique perspective it brings to the discussion.

The themes as they unfurl in Chapter Four, take the shape of extracts accompanied by commentaries that range from the descriptive to the interpretative. For the purpose of clarity in Chapter Four, where the participants have elaborated at length on a theme, the theme is presented under the names of the related participants. Conversely, where the participants have talked briefly under a theme, the lesser amount of information meant that the theme is presented with the names of the relevant participants within the paragraphs that make the text.

Only in Chapter Five, the discussion, do I reopen the research to perspectives from Bourdieu’s theoretical constructs, together with the student engagement and first-year literature. ‘Aspects of this interpretative work may also be informed by direct engagement with existing theoretical constructs … and the process is sometimes directed towards answering a preformed research question’ (Larkin, Watts & Clifton 2006, p. 104). Thus, while bound to the group studied, the discussion on non-traditional students’ engagement with their learning is broadened into an equity discourse through Bourdieu. In this way, this research is connected with the bigger world, and echoes Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2009, p. 38) assertion that, ‘The specifics are unique, but they are hung on what is shared and communal’.

3.4 Research quality

If this qualitative research is to lay any claim to quality it needs to be legitimated by a set of criteria. I have chosen Yardley’s (2000, pp. 215-228) quality framework which contains four characteristics of good research, namely, ‘sensitivity to context’; ‘commitment and rigour’; ‘transparency and coherence’; and ‘impact and importance’. Yardley’s (2000) framework is deemed to be appropriate insofar as it is broad enough to be applicable to qualitative research irrespective of the theoretical orientation (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009, p. 175). Applying Yardley’s (2000) criteria to this research stands as a demonstration of research quality.

First, Yardley's (2000, p. 220) concept of 'sensitivity to context' takes into account the 'context of theory', whereby the researcher is encouraged to have a 'fairly extensive grounding in the philosophy of the approach adopted' that they will use as 'scholastic tools to develop a more profound and far-reaching analysis'. As a researcher using the IPA approach, I focused on developing a thorough grasp of the approach as propounded by Jonathan Smith from Birkbeck University of London (Smith 2004; Smith 2007; Smith 2011; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), the father of IPA, so as to apply a sound methodology. The dictum, 'To understand the part, you look to the whole story; to understand the whole, you look to the part' (Smith 2007, p. 5) kept my analysis, by its very circular movement through the transcripts, grounded in the students' experiences as I kept digging deeper. Although there is no theoretical lens to look through for the analysis—since IPA's focus is on the individual's experience as they lived it— 'context of theory' in this research would also consider the Bourdieusian theoretical constructs for equity, together with the student engagement literature and the wider first-year literature, that contribute to extend the borders of this research at the discussion level. There is a level of relatedness between IPA and Bourdieusian thinking: both indicate a concern for the individual in the social context, and have affinities with inductive mechanisms to understand the individual's experience (Bourdieu 1994; Grenfell 2014a; Larkin &Thompson 2012; Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009).

Additionally, Yardley's (2000, p. 220) 'sensitivity to context' takes into account an 'awareness of the socio-cultural setting of the study' that could influence 'the beliefs, objectives, expectations and talk of all participants'. With regard to this, I took care not to set value-ridden questions during the interview. As the interviewer, I was also conscious of putting a check on my own values, beliefs and assumptions that could impact on the students, by assuming a policy of minimum intervention when interviewing the participants. When relating and writing to the participants I also abstained from using the term 'non-traditional students' preferring to use the term 'students' (see also Section 3.5). Equally at play for the interview was another of Yardley's (2000) aspects of 'sensitivity to context', which is the 'social context'. For a relation based on free choice, prior to the participants' involvement in this research 'explicit procedures for eliciting

and incorporating the opinions of those studied' (Yardley 2000, p. 221) were clearly stated to them. This is also pertinent to ethics, discussed in Section 3.5. During the interview itself, for an atmosphere free from any threats, I was friendly and respectful while keeping professional boundaries.

Second, 'commitment and rigour' in Yardley's (2000) framework as applied to this research, took shape in my prolonged engagement with the data collection, transcription and analysis so as to get an in-depth and complete picture of the participants' experiences, or what Yardley (2000, p. 222) calls 'completeness of interpretation'. Developing themes inductively and cycling forward and backward in data analysis also allowed me to work at distancing my own biography from that of the participants.

Third, 'transparency and coherence', is found in my commitment to the rhetorical power of argumentation in reporting the research so as 'not to describe but to construct a version of reality' (Yardley 2000, p. 222), thus convincing the reader about the meaningfulness of that reality. Coherence of the reality so constructed is also dependent on the fit between the formulated research questions, the investigative approach adopted, and the theoretical constructs and substantive literature used to broaden this research.

Yardley's (2000, p. 223) ultimate criterion to gauge the quality of this research, however, rests on its 'impact and importance', that is, the degree to which it would open up new meanings in the field of student engagement as related to non-traditional students. This last dimension of Yardley's (2000) quality framework in this research can be gauged by relating the purpose of the research as stated in Chapter One, with the outcomes of the research, that is, its contribution to knowledge as stated in the Conclusion.

3.5 Ethics

Human participation in this research entailed ethical considerations for the protection of the rights and well-being of the participating students, according to the principles elaborated in the *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (NHMRC 2007a) and in compliance with the *Australian code for the responsible conduct of research* (NHMRC 2007b). Since I conducted research

as a Victoria University student, this research needed to comply with the university's research integrity and ethics processes, underpinned by the two aforementioned documents.

3.5.1 Seeking voluntary participation

This research sought participants aged 18 and above, 18 being the age at which one is legally responsible for oneself (NHMRC 2007a). The recruitment and participation of students for this research was 'voluntary, and based on sufficient information and adequate understanding of both the proposed research and the implications of participation in it' (NHMRC 2007a, p. 16). Following ethics approval from Victoria University, I made flyers stating the title, aim and method of my research, inviting students 18 years old and above who had completed their first year to express their interest to participate in it (see Appendix D). I used that flyer to first seek consent from education staff to briefly address targeted education classes. An individual copy of the flyer was left with each student to give them 'sufficient time to make up their mind' (Oliver 2010, p. 27). After the first contacts with potential participants, they were asked to fill in a personal information sheet asking them for their name, contact details, age group, address, their level of education and that of their parents, as well as whether they were first-in-the family to attend university (see Appendix D). The information gathered assisted in building the sample of non-traditional students for this research, as seen in Section 3.3.2.

3.5.2 Gaining the participants' consent

Once the sample was selected, the process of informed consent became the guiding principle for the involvement of the participants in this research. Macrina (2014, p. 139) argues that 'consent should be thought of as an ongoing process rather than the one-time signing of a document'. The use of the Victoria University consent form (see Appendix D) was the formal mechanism used to bind the researcher to the participants in protecting them and their rights from the start and throughout the research. The freedom of choice and autonomy of the participants in relation to this research was guaranteed in the sense that on signing the form on their free-will, they were also guaranteed the freedom to withdraw from the research without any repercussions. Simultaneously, the

consent form became tangible evidence in case of complaints, and for research audit purposes. No withdrawals or complaints were made by the participants during this research.

While it was clearly stated in the consent form that the interviews would be audio-recorded, transcribed and then shown to the related participants to confirm authenticity, there was a threshold of information with regard to the aim of this research that had to be managed so that the 'informed' criterion was respected. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p. 83) state that 'If researchers do not want their potential hosts … to know too much about specific hypotheses and objectives, then a simple way out is to present an explicit statement at a fairly general level'. Therefore, the aim of this research in the consent form was stated as an exploration of students' engagement with their learning, without using the term 'non-traditional students'. I also abstained from using the same term during the interviews. The intention behind partial disclosure was to create a neutrally-oriented environment, which in turn would positively affect data. Limited disclosure is ethically possible since the participants are low risk (NHMRC 2007a, p. 20). In view of what has been said and to match accordingly, the title and aim of this research on the flyer, consent form and information sheets made no use of the term 'non-traditional students'.

There was a confidentiality clause to the consent form that bound the researcher and the participants in a relationship of trust. The formal promise not to divulge the source of information was another measure to minimise risks for the participants, and at the same time alleviate fear of disclosure that could compromise the integrity of data. An additional data management, access and storage information sheet was given to participants to show them the confidentiality and integrity with which their data would be managed. In terms of risk-benefit assessment or what Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1992) call the costs/benefits ratio, this research stood as ethically feasible for its beneficence (NHMRC 2007a, p. 10). The benefits of human participation in this research were highlighted to the participants as part of shared information between researcher and participants, and in recognition of the help that they were providing in advancing knowledge. This was also a way to validate the role

of the participants in the research and to set the scene for a ‘cooperative relationship’ (Oliver 2010, p. 31) between the participants and me.

3.5.3 The ethics of data collection

When discussing the interview in Section 3.3.3, the importance was covered of acting genuinely by establishing rapport, engaging in active listening, and approaching the questions ‘sideways’ in a non-confronting manner. The ethical requirements for this research, nevertheless, demanded further sensitivities to the situation of the participants so as to generate an atmosphere of ease, free from any appearance of intimidation during the interviews. Therefore, the participants were given the opportunity to ‘rephrase anything they have said’ (Oliver 2010, p. 34) on occasions when they had ‘residual concerns’ about an aspect of the conversation as it unfolded. During the interviews one of the participants indicated that they would drop a line of conversation when they became mixed up with their ideas. I nodded in agreement, and they carried on, reworking on their ideas as the conversation unfolded. Care was additionally taken in managing the audio-recorded aspect of the interview. I followed Oliver’s (2010, p. 47) suggestion of ‘giving absolute control over the recording process’ to the participants, leaving it possible for them to press on the button if they wished anything they had said to go off-record. No participant felt any need to stop the recording during the interviews in this research.

3.5.4 The ethics of data management and storage

Through the Victoria University Research Data and Materials Plan, consideration was given for the responsible management and storage of data, essential for the protection of the participants’ rights to privacy, and more broadly for research integrity. To operationalise the plan, I applied for and obtained space in the Victoria University R: Drive for the safe storage of all data and material generated by this research. Information access was restricted to three persons only, and they are the researcher and the two supervisors who are now custodians of the data and material. Moreover, since ‘custodians should take every precaution to prevent the data becoming available for uses to which participants did not consent’ (NHMRC 2007a, p. 29), data obtained for this research has been used exclusively for this research. These same data will

be retained for the standard period of five years after completion of the study as stipulated by the *Australian code for the responsible conduct of research* (NHMRC 2007b).

With regard to the confidentiality and privacy of research participants, Oliver (2010, p. 90) contends that, 'one of the most desirable elements in any storage procedure is that all individuals should be anonymized as effectively as possible'. I took the necessary precautions by de-identifying all participants, with their names being replaced by fictitious ones of their choice while interacting with and referring to them during the recorded interviews and in all associated writings for the research. It was also out of consideration and respect for the participants that verification of 'accuracy and completeness of each interview transcript' (NHMRC 2007, p. 26) from related participants was carried out. A last point to be made, but no less important, is the association of ethical data management with the integrity of the researcher's report, which contributes to bestow to this research its overarching merit and integrity for the advancement of knowledge.

3.6 Summary

A qualitative methodology was used for the deeper layers of non-traditional students' engagement with their learning to emerge. A concern regarding the students' experiences meant that I sought in this research to give voice to non-traditional students on their lived experiences of engagement through IPA. Purposive sampling resulted in six non-traditional students—as defined in this research—to participate in semi-structured one-to-one interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Analysis was closely tied to the texts of the transcripts to capture what mattered to the students and the meaning that they ascribed to what mattered to them. Out of these analyses, themes emerged. A cross-comparison of themes across the transcripts led to the final themes that are presented in the results chapter of this research. Since IPA's concern is with experience on its own terms, it is only in the discussion chapter of this research that connections are made with Bourdieu's theoretical constructs regarding equity, together with the student engagement and first-year literature. The use of Bourdieu's theory of practice through the concepts of

capital, habitus and field at that point, thus balances his scepticism about any predetermination to human experience with the detachment of the scientist that he also wanted (Bourdieu 1994). Yardley's (2000) framework for research quality and its four characteristics, which are 'sensitivity to context', 'commitment and rigour', 'transparency and coherence', and 'impact and importance', have been stated as applying to this research. Considerations have also been made for the ethical treatment of the participants in this research, for their rights and well-being to be respected and for the ethical conduct of research. In Chapter Four, which follows, I present the results obtained from an analysis of the experiences of engagement of the non-traditional students in this research.

Chapter Four - Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results from an analysis of the participating non-traditional students' lived experiences in their engagement with learning. Matters of concern to them related to their first-year engagement with learning and how they lived them unfold theme-wise over Sections 4.2 to 4.6. The themes, as a 'capturing of similarity and difference, convergence and divergence' among the participants (Smith 2011, p. 24), unfold through extracts from the participants' interviews, accompanied by comments.

Section 4.2 concerns the mediating role of the home background in the participants' engagement experiences. The themes under this topic elaborate on the challenges that the participants encounter in an unfamiliar university context and the resources that they use from their background in the face of these challenges. While coming from the data set obtained from the second research question which is 'How do non-traditional students make sense of the strengths that they bring from their home-backgrounds into their experiences of engagement with learning?', the themes in Section 4.2 also act as an introduction to the participants in this research, hence their position in the ordering of the sections in this chapter. Sections 4.3 to 4.6 contain themes obtained from data addressing the first research question, which is, 'How do non-traditional students make sense of their experiences of engagement with their learning in their first year at university?' Section 4.3 is on the change in self, resulting from the participants' first-year engagement experiences in the university context. Section 4.4 focuses on interaction with teachers, Section 4.5 on collaborative work with peers and Section 4.6 on academic challenge, in the participants' first-year experiences of engagement.

4.2 Experiences of engagement with learning: the role of the home background

This section reveals the participants' experiences of the challenges of the unfamiliar in their first-year learning and development, and the contributions from their backgrounds to mediate their engagement with learning. These have emerged as commonalities from the analysis of the lived experiences of

Samara, Cassie, Bob, James, Rachel and Henry, as indicated in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 Challenges of the unfamiliar and background contributions

Participants	Theme 1 - The uncertainty of unclear expectations	Theme 2 - Influence of the family and its immediate circle	Theme 3 - Work and life experience	Theme 4 - Class values
Samara	✓	✓	×	×
Cassie	✓	✓	×	×
Bob	✓	✓	✓	×
James	✓	✓	✓	×
Rachel	✓	✓	✓	×
Henry	✓	✓	×	✓

As the table above shows, the more common themes among the six participants are the uncertainty of unclear expectations, and the family and its immediate circle. Work experience is specific to Bob, James and Rachel. A fourth theme emerged mainly in the analysis of Henry's lived experiences, taking the shape of the values of significance to his class origins.

For the purpose of clarity of presentation, for themes where the evidence obtained from each participant is substantial, the results are presented under the name of each participant. This applies to 'Influence of the family and its immediate circle' (Section 4.2.2.1), 'Work and life experience' (Section 4.2.2.2), and 'Class values' (Section 4.2.2.3). Where the evidence obtained from each participant is less substantial, the results are presented with the names of the participants within the text in the paragraphs. This applies to 'University ways: the uncertainty of unclear expectations' (Section 4.2.1).

Further in this chapter, in Sections 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6 the results are presented on the basis of strength of data for a specific theme, as explained above for Section 4.2.

4.2.1 University ways: the uncertainty of unclear expectations

The participants expressed various levels of unease in recounting the start of their journey as first-year students. They described the university as a different world with expectations that were largely left to themselves to delineate and enact. ‘They expect you to know,’ said Samara (2017, 7 September), and ‘they don’t really explain that to us.’ Beyond Samara’s expressed nervousness at the uncertainty of whether what she was doing was ‘right’, there was Samara’s deeper need to know whether she was doing it ‘right’ in accordance with university requirements. ‘Sometimes I feel nervous because I’m not sure if I’m on the right track; if it’s the right answer ... From an intellectual perspective, I like to see if I’m on the right track’ (Samara 2017, 7 September). Samara’ s reaction to an unknown university environment was similar to that of Cassie. Cassie (2017, 10 May) realised that university has ways of doing that she was unaware of: ‘University’s very different to high school, so I didn’t really know how to go about.’ Not knowing whether the academic behaviour that she exhibited in her learning and development demonstrated competence within an academic culture, she was ‘Confused and worried that I’m getting off track or I might do something wrong’ (Cassie 2017, 10 May). Likewise, Rachel (2017, 20 April) found that ‘having all this stuff put on you … it’s very stressful and it makes me a little bit anxious … All the stuff would just be the expectations of the students.’

In the absence of explicit models, Cassie used the trial-and-error approach in the enactment of an understanding of the university culture. She discovered how ineffective it was to use high school learning to define university learning when she applied memory work from high school to university.

> In high school … it’s all about memorising and regurgitating … When I started uni. I’ll spend an hour at home, going over what I learned in class and remembering it, so that I would then be able to use it in an assessment or an essay … We did have one maths exam last year, so I needed it for that, but other than that, no. (Cassie 2017, 10 May)

Bob too had the experience of trial-and-error. What appeared to him as sound opinion based on scholarly reading, had to be re-stated as an academic opinion according to university requirements.

> They're asking for you to give opinions … or responses to questions in assessment and then backing up your opinion from references … Even though I wasn't directly quoting somebody, I was talking about something that they had said, but in my own words. To me, that was sufficient, but I was being told, 'No, you still have to go, "This person said this," and then expand it.' (Bob 2017, 19 April)

Imagery to convey the helplessness associated with not knowing the what and how of being a university student, along with a direct critique of the university, demarcates James' views from the other participants' more covert remarks on the same. James elaborated his state of discomfort at the start of his first year, as having his sense of direction blurred, indicating little control over his situation and the uncertainty of reaching his destination. 'It doesn't feel good at all. If you don't know what you're doing, you have no idea of getting there. It doesn't feel good at all. You feel helpless' (James 2017, 13 May). He used images of water overflow to convey his predicament.

> At university, it's like a waterfall. You have a waterfall of information and you're sitting here with this little bucket, trying to find the good bits of information that you could use … the university has their own way of throwing content at you and drowning you in information.
> (James 2017, 31 August)

As a result, James directly pointed the finger at the university for not offering him the key to understanding the university's 'own way' to facilitate his journey as a student, while holding the ultimate power to decide whether he would obtain a university qualification.

> And that's not something that the university will help you with. They have their own way of doing things … It's your job to … figure out your own path. It's not really helpful at all. It's almost like the university's ... It's not a guaranteed piece of paper. It's like another sieve. It's like another hurdle and a way of sorting through all the bad bits.
> (James 2017, 13 May)

Nevertheless, unfamiliarity with the university culture appears to have had a comparatively lesser impact on Bob than on the other participants. Where Samara felt nervous, Cassie was worried, and Rachel and James expressed being overwhelmed in different ways, Bob's level of incommodity was to be 'annoyed' (Bob 2017, 19 April). His background in the police force and in the army seemed to have forged in him strength of character, 'I have a very strong personality because of my background, and I'm a slightly bigger person so I don't generally get a lot of people giving me grief' (Bob 2017, 19 April).

4.2.2 The participants' own ways

Notwithstanding the absence of clear indications to the participants for them to understand the university ways, the participants revealed ways of their own to comprehend scholarly life. They all appeared to bring influences from outside, namely the family and its immediate circle, their work and their class, in the development of their own system of meaning-making in their first-year experiences of engagement.

4.2.2.1 Influence of the family and its immediate circle

Samara

Samara (2017, 8 May) might not have had her university transition already traced out by tertiary-educated parents, but she indicated a level of preparation from home, 'it was nerve-wracking but I felt prepared from home.' Samara's support network (having at the centre her sister and her mum, and further extended to friends and cousins) appears to have significantly contributed to demystifying the university for her. 'All their support helped me in my first year, knowing that it shouldn't be that bad. It's something that I should be happy with and everything like that' (Samara 2017, 8 May).

Her mother's familiarity with university was by proxy. She had witnessed Samara's elder sister's experience of a first year at university and she used this understanding of university to encourage Samara. 'She explained to me how different it was here because she watched my sister go through it … My mum would always encourage me and just tell me how it is … how it should be here' (Samara 2017, 8 May). While no-one in her family had completed university so

as to act in a mentoring role, Samara's sister who was two years ahead of her seemed to have been ascribed the position of 'someone above' to facilitate Samara's first-year experience. Knowledge acquired from Samara's sister's stories of teaching placement helped Samara to understand how to function in similar situations. 'She [the sister] showed me … so I had a knowledge when I was reading her plan of how to do it and what they expect me to do ... So, I had an idea of how it works' (Samara 2017, 7 September).

Both short-term and long-term goals appeared to underlie the group support that bound Samara to her cousins. The short-term goal was to complete university, and the long-term goal was to establish a different future via the inter-generational change that they were making in the family now, by having a university education.

> Even though we're in different courses and universities, we all try to help each other ... We all support each other knowing that we're going to have a good future. It will be secure. We've got our certificates, something our parents don't have ... So, we're trying to make a change.
> (Samara 2017, 8 May)

In sharing experiences with friends Samara had kept from high school and who like her were studying at university, Samara used another thread from her network as a conduit to better apprehend the requirements of her university studies.

> I feel like my friends, we're all the same level … my friends have always been with me since high school ... We still talk about each other's experiences, even though some of them have stopped studying ... So, the ones that are still studying, I meet up with them here because some of them are here. (Samara 2017, 8 May)

Samara's own reproduction of her home support network within the university was evident when she extended her support to her peers for the benefit of their learning and development.

> The students that were struggling and nervous, I told them that I've got my sister to support me. Every time they needed help, I would ask my sister to help us ... She would say, 'Oh, I did this or similar. This is what the teacher expects and this is what it means.' That was really helpful. (Samara 2017, 8 May)

At a broader level, Samara's reproduction of the social network from home appears to be reflected in her view of learning as inherently social. 'It's always that social interaction that would help you learn because if you're not really that social, then it's very hard to come across learning' (Samara 2017, 8 May). Ultimately the support network that she brought from home into her learning, appears to have prevented her from struggling in the same manner as students who do not know how to ask for help.

> When you're social, you get to ask more around you … You get to learn more from others, but when you're not social, it's very hard to interact with people. You're left alone … I've noticed a few people struggle because they can't ask for help. They like to do it alone. They don't really have someone to ask. (Samara 2017, 8 May)

Cassie

Cassie (2017, 10 May) describes her parents thus: 'My parents, they didn't do university but they're well-educated in terms of the world.' They appear to have nurtured in her qualities that transcend cultural borders, allowing their daughter to trace out her way in the unfamiliar university environment. The strength that Cassie brought from her home into the university appears to have been the inspirational force of her parents, who encouraged her to go into the world and explore the limits of her capacity.

> You know what? Just go out there and do what you can. Make sure that there's nothing left in the tank at the end of the day. As long as you've done your best, we're happy and you should be happy with yourself. (Cassie 2017, 10 May)

Consequently, when faced with the unfamiliarity of the university environment, Cassie took the challenge to expand herself by doing her best in her first year,

for her to achieve. Doing her best recurred in her conversation: ‘I want to do the best that I can in this course (Cassie 2017, 31 August); ‘I want to do the best that I possibly can, so I’m going to do this and I’m going to do it well’ (Cassie 2017,10 May); ‘I just always, always want to do my best and see how far I can go’ (Cassie 2017,10 May).

James

James acknowledged family influence—though in a manner that is not as clearly defined as with Samara and Cassie. Where the families of the latter two appeared to be clearly aware of what was happening in their lives, James (2017,13 May) balanced his parents’ ignorance of what he did in class with his own independent nature, ‘They had no idea what was going on … I don’t need a lot of support. I’m quite an independent person.’ This in turn could be the result of growing up surrounded by adults, ‘I’d spent my whole childhood talking to adults … My brother and sister are 30 and 40 … I’d always be talking to older people’ (James 2017, 13 May). James (2017, 13 May) further described his parents as neither encouraging nor discouraging him in becoming a teacher, but as being supportive of his life choices since his father’s previous attempt to encourage his elder brother into the teaching profession ‘fell into a screaming heap.’

If James’ family does not appear to have had a direct influence on his studies, he nonetheless appeared to have derived implicit strengths from coming from a stable family, and he used his parents as role models.

> You learn from your parents: not just what they teach you but what they do. There’s different sorts of fighting. There’s fighting like you disagree with something and you think the other person’s an idiot … my parents are like that. They wouldn’t get too excited. I can’t think of the word, but they wouldn’t be too reactive about anything. (James 2017, 13 May)

James’ description of his parents as non-reactive, thinking the other person is ‘an idiot’ in times of tension, led him to play at being ‘an idiot’ one day to liven up the atmosphere and clarify the concept of ‘humanistic learning’ for class learning.

> I went and lay down on the table and presented my bit. It was an extreme form of humanistic teaching. If you become a lot more 'human' it's a lot easier for people to understand you and connect with you … They're not going to forget about what humanism is because there was some idiot lying on a table in front of them and talking at the same time.
> (James 2017, 13 May)

Henry

Henry seems to have drawn influences from his home and its immediate circle, that in turn impacted on his first-year learning and development. When in the classroom Henry asked questions to learn more, he appeared to do this from habits nurtured from home as a place that encouraged discussion to better understand the world. 'We talked about everything at home. Everything was up for discussion. Coming to class with that … I was always really keen to talk about stuff ... I'm here to learn and I want to ask questions' (Henry 2017, 28 April).

It appears that a shortage of money in Henry's childhood may have been at the root of Henry's fascination with numbers. From his childhood, numbers had kept his world together through carefully calculated budgets.

> Numbers annoy me but they also fascinate me ... I guess it's just something that I've always had to think about … we never had a lot of money growing up so everything was really carefully budgeted. I probably picked it up from my mum as well because she was always a really careful budgeter. I guess it always fascinated me because I suppose in my own sense, numbers are what made my world go around.
> (Henry 2017, 4 September)

To overcome the boredom of a childhood limited by lack of money, Henry used his fascination with numbers to expand his world through his imagination by counting street lights and letterboxes.

> I'd always enjoy counting and I'd just count stuff—driving in the car, I'd count things. I knew the amount of street lights on my street and the

> amount of letterboxes and just weird stuff … It's probably just a boredom thing. I didn't have a lot going on so I had my imagination.
> (Henry 2017, 4 September)

That ability to use his imagination with numbers would not have been exploited at school since he admitted not having done well in Maths at school: 'I always really enjoyed counting as a child, even though I was horrible at Mathematics' (Henry 2017, 4 September). Later, however, his imagination would find an outlet while doing Maths at university (Section 4.4).

Henry's mother appears to have been influential in Henry getting into a teacher education course, recognising in him the patience and talent to impart knowledge and skills to others: 'My mum always said I'd make a good teacher and I've always listened to my mum. Even though it might have taken me a while to come around to the idea, it was always in the back of my head' (Henry 2017, 4 September). Gradually, Henry himself recognised that he displayed the capacity to impart knowledge and skills to others like a teacher.

> The older I got, the more I realised that I'm actually pretty good at it [teaching]. There's always been an aspect of teaching going on in my life, whether I've been teaching drums or teaching people how to drive. It might be small things, but I've been told that I'm a pretty good teacher when it comes down to it. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

There also appears to be a connection between the patience to teach Henry's mother had discovered in him, and his own childhood anger at not having been understood and attended to with patience at school.

> I want to be the teacher I needed ... I always got stuck with really angry teachers, for some reason. I was a pretty angry child. We just butted heads all the time. My perfect teacher would have been a patient one who understood why this young boy was so angry, not that they need to, but I think a good teacher understands that even kids have stuff going on. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

From the classroom to the school yard, the angry child developed the capacity to appreciate and recognise the uniqueness of those who are different, by relating to them with patience to bring out what is interesting in them.

> I always used to hang out with some of the mentally challenged children at our primary school ... I didn't really think that they were any more challenged than I was … I just enjoyed hanging out with them ... They were all really unique and really wonderful ... Even though I wasn't the smartest kid myself, I was always really patient with children who were—for want of a better term again—not as capable as me. I just had patience. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

Rachel

Rachel recognised that her parents provided her with a home environment that was free from unnecessary demands and distractions that could keep her from studying.

> They provided an environment where I could go off and do the learning I needed to do … They'd leave me alone to let me do my work so I could get the best out of what I was researching or learning about, rather than having them pester me to do things or distract me from what I was learning. (Rachel 2017, 20 April)

At the same time though, Rachel credits another significant other in the person of a knowledgeable teacher, for her desire to be doing teacher education. Where impatience appeared to have bred patience in Henry, a knowledgeable teacher who was also a 'lovely teacher' (Rachel 2017, 17 April), appears to have led Rachel to wish to emulate this level of knowledge and respect for students. 'She made me want to be a very informative teacher because she was very knowledgeable in her subject and she just made the class seem so easy to be part of' (Rachel 2017, 17 April).

Bob

Similarly, one of Bob's high school teachers appears to have influenced his current learning and development trajectory. While Bob mentioned his family no further than saying that he left home at fifteen, he talked about a significant other from that time. Bob's Polish high school teacher in Maths, who could not impart knowledge despite being a genius, appears to have inspired Bob to become a teacher as knowledgeable as that teacher, but with the capacity to reach students at their own level.

> Because he was doing such big stuff, he was expecting us to just understand what he knew. That, whilst being a negative, has given me a positive approach … my goal is to be a Maths teacher at the same level that he was teaching. I know that I can go, 'Alright, you're having trouble getting that concept, I can scale it back and bring it to a size that you can comprehend. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

4.2.2.2 Work and life experience

Bob

It has been seen that Bob's background is likely to have forged strength of character (Section 4.2.1), but there are other strengths that he put to use in his first-year learning and development. While Bob dismissed the idea of parental influence, his time in the police force and in the army seemed to have greatly impacted him.

> My past experiences from leaving home to now ... That would be where I draw my influences from … when you're a police officer and when you're a soldier, that is your community. You are a part of that group and the things that you learn in that group are the things that you take away with you when you move on to other things. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

Bob appears to have developed a number of skills that helped him to find his bearings in his first year at university.

> Coming to university, there are challenges involved in figuring out … what you need to do, how the system works, what you've got to do for assessments, time management—all those sorts of things … What I've done previously made it quite easy for me to walk in the door and get on with what I needed to do. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

His approach to problem-solving in the army were similarly applied in his approach to his first-year subjects, from learning objectives to achieving the best outcome in assessments.

> When we were on deployment, we'd be given the mission … there was a whole process of how to go about achieving our mission … approaching a unit is the same: you need to know what it is you're going to learn; you need to know what materials you need to know… you need to know how to put all of that together to reach the final objective of HDs in your assessments ... The things that I learned out there in terms of how to approach a problem is the right word, how to approach a task and how to get a successful outcome for that task, I've learned a lot of strategies and methods on how to do that from my work history. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

Given such experience, learning at university was not likely to be an isolating experience for Bob. Compared to Samara who has been seen to experience a support network at home that she drew on in her approach to learning in her first year, Bob saw himself as confident in a leadership role for the peer group in a manner similar to his experience as a police officer. He demonstrated such leadership when working with his peers (Section 4.5.2 for further detail).

> You can't be shy in what I used to do. You've got to be outspoken. You've got to be very confident and project confidence … because people are looking to you for reassurance in whatever the situation is … you've still got to be standing there and projecting to the people around you that you're in control and everything's cool and they're all going to be okay. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

In addition to skills developed at the workplace that Bob used as assets in his first year at university, Bob explained life experience itself as having given him the capacity to voice out his views in the university context.

> I've got life experience, so when the tutor poses a question about whatever topic, I have had either direct involvement in that throughout my life, or I have an understanding of that ... I've got no qualms about saying … I don't agree with it and then having the debate that comes with it. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

James

James came to university with an understanding of others' difference from his own experience of working as a sports coach during his time at sports school. In designing a teaching activity in his first year, he considered the importance of including people with disabilities by not making them feel different.

> I've had to work with people with disabilities. The way some people's activities were run, it included the disabled people but it still excluded them because it gave them a different target … So, it still made them feel different. From my experience, you don't want to do that … if the activity that you're doing makes them become part of everyone else, they really enjoy that. (James 2017, 31 August)

His experience at sports school also appears to have helped James acquire the skill of relating to kids at primary school level, which he used when he went on teaching placement in his first year.

> We'd also run clinics, sporting clinics in primary schools, for kids. Work experience is just the best experience … I couldn't talk to little kids at all … Two years you spend learning and gaining experience of talking to kids. Now I've got a placement at a primary school and it's so much easier. (James 2017, 13 May)

Rachel

Rachel (2017, 20 April) revealed that she brought into her first year the work ethic that she had developed while working in the retail industry: ‘I'm talking about my place of employment’s work ethic … there were a couple of challenges. It wasn't really until second semester last year that I really brought that work ethic in.’ Where Cassie would associate doing her best with her parents’ verbal affirmations, Rachel associated doing her best with her work ethic that she used to discipline herself in her studies.

> I would probably say, in regards to work, my work ethic, just because I like to do the best that I can in everything. Obviously bringing that over to my learning, like when I do my assessments ... Just doing the best that I can in my assessments ... Even with the homework that we do after class, being able to complete that. (Rachel 2017, 20 April)

4.2.2.3 Class values

Henry

Henry explicitly called himself working class as opposed to the upper class who for him have money but would be self-centred. The presence of money like that apparent in the upper class was replaced for Henry by the working-class team spirit which gives importance to supporting each other in attaining life’s goals. For that, Henry believed, the working-class people command respect.

> I’m a working-class guy … I guess there is a lot of respect for the working class because there is the working class as a team. You can’t achieve one thing without the other … the upper class seem like they’re always stabbing each other in the back and it’s all about money and more money, more problems. It’s hard to know who your friends are at the top … but as a working-class guy, there’s always respect there. If you’re wanting to help out the team, the team’s always going to be willing to help you out. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

Endowed with that working-class team spirit, Henry showed that he already had a predisposition to help and seek help in order to attain his goals as a first-year

student in the university context, this in turn indicating that his overall learning experience was not likely to be an isolating one.

> You can't do everything by yourself. Everyone likes to perceive themselves as the cool loner … but we're human; we need people. The worst thing that you could do to anyone on this planet is isolate them from everyone else ... Whether you like it or not, you need the help of people and you need to be helping other people … I think we're all programmed to need each other and if you're going to be nasty and throw that back in people's faces, you're going to wind up very lonely one day. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

Thus, when in the classroom Henry asked questions to learn more it is likely that he was doing this in that same working-class spirit already demonstrated to help his peers not bold enough to ask questions. 'I'm here to learn and I like to think that through discussion and through the questions I might help the other students that don't want to ask questions, but I'm asking those questions that need to be asked' (Henry 2017, 28 April).

A point of comparison with Samara would be pertinent here. Though Samara talked extensively of the support network in her home background to help her as a first-generation student entering an institution traditionally frequented by middle and upper-class people, she made no direct mention of class belonging like Henry. When she mentioned wishing, together with her cousins, to make an inter-generational change in the family, she gave indications of desiring socio-economic advancement. All the other participants revealed unfamiliarity with the university context, but they made no explicit reference to their socio-economic backgrounds like Henry.

Altogether, the results in Section 4.2 speak of the strengths that the participants brought from their home backgrounds in their experiences of engagement, when faced with unclear university expectations. While the results in Section 4.2 flow from data obtained from the secondary research question, the results in the following sections flow from data obtained from the primary research question.

4.3 Experiences of engagement with learning: change in self

The non-traditional students in this research lived their first encounter with university, an experience that mattered to them. From their experiences of engagement with their learning, changes occurred in how these students saw themselves. The results in this section first indicate that the participants in this study saw themselves as academically successful and as having grown personally by the end of their first year. They are then seen to project their academic success to an imagined future of betterment. Table 4.2 below shows the occurrence of these experiences among the participants under two themes.

Table 4.2 Academic success and imagined future

Participants	Theme 1 - Academic success, personal growth and agency	Theme 2 - Imagined future
Samara	✓	✓
Cassie	✓	✓
Bob	✓	✓
James	✓	✓
Rachel	✓	✓
Henry	✓	✓

The table above shows that the two themes are present across all the participants to this research. Nonetheless, there were marked variations in Bob and James's experiences of academic success (Theme1), and in Bob and Henry's imagined future (Theme 2).

4.3.1 Change: academic success, personal growth and agency

The participants underwent a process of change, resulting from their first-year experiences of engagement with learning. Their discourse around academic success revealed their ease with the university culture with which they were initially unfamiliar, as well as their sense of personal growth. They also indicated their agency in that change.

Samara

Where at the start of her first year Samara showed nervousness in the university context, her understanding and performance of university expectations at the end of the year was a form of achievement that made her feel strong and ready to face ensuing years in the university culture. ‘I know what they expect of me. I look at it as an achievement. I’ve completed my first year …The way I see it is never look back. Always look forward. Be strong’ (Samara 2017, 8 May). Samara considered herself as agentic in her success at university, having intentionally worked at it in her first-year learning and development. ‘I wanted to be successful and I always put that in my head. I would try anything … anything I would do I would just make sure that it’s correct, that it would help lead me towards that success’ (Samara 2017, 7 September).

Change had taken place in Samara, as her family noticed that she now used the university’s ‘big words.’

> I started to become more confident and everyone at home would notice that. They would tell me, ‘Oh you’ve changed. Now you speak big words … Before I used to just speak simple words, but then later I started to develop more educational words, just bigger words and just things like that. They told me I’ve changed, I’ve become happier and more grown up. (Samara 2017, 7 September)

As she brought the university’s ‘big words’ to her impressed family, association is made with Samara and her cousins in her network of support (Section 4.2.2.1), all of whom, Samara said, shared with her the long-term goal of making an inter-generational change through educational advancement.

Cassie

Cassie credited herself for her success, and that success in turn rested on the choices that she made to work hard and to steadily act upon that choice to achieve the desired results in her learning and development in her first year. ‘I think that I’m proud of how I went in my first year because I did a lot of it

independently and I took it upon myself to actually work really hard … It's all your choice. I just chose that I wanted to do that so I did' (Cassie 2017, 31 August). There is a sense of accomplishment in having successfully completed a first year and set the foundation for her coming years of study, implying her ease with the university culture. 'I definitely felt accomplished, like I'd done something meaningful that year and that I would be able to bring it forward with me' (Cassie 2017, 10 May).

Personal growth had also taken place for Cassie. After a first year at university, she appeared to better understand where to situate herself on that world stage, initially inspired by her parents. As a result, she had developed a better understanding of herself, and had become more understanding of others.

> I found that I was making more friends because I knew how to talk to them; knew how to talk to people better. It's not like I've ever struggled with making friends or anything ... At the end of the first year, I was probably a lot more confident, understanding of who I am and more accepting of others as well. (Cassie 2017, 31 August)

The overall effect was her self-affirming belief that she had become a better person, which she equally associated with the enrichment accorded by her university experience.

> I think that it [university experience] helped me to become a better person because not only am I learning about something that I love, which is teaching—and it's my passion—I feel like it's made me a better person for it … It just helped me understand who I am a bit more.
> (Cassie 2017, 31 August)

Rachel

Rachel associated the process of acquiring academic knowledge with moving from a state of not knowing and being in the darkness, to a state of knowing that would prepare her to step into the world. 'I think about how I was at the beginning of last year, I didn't know anything … I know now that if I were to go out there, I would be okay as opposed to being in the dark' (2017, 1

September). She now had greater faith in her intellectual capacity, ‘And also seeing that with my grades, I’m much smarter than I think of myself’ (Rachel 2017, 1 September). She was at peace to have set the foundation for her degree ‘knowing that I passed the first year that I’ll be fine for the rest of my degree’ (Rachel 2017, 1 September). The choice that Rachel made with regard to her studies can be related to Cassie’s choice to work hard for success to ensue. Thus, Rachel (2017, 1 September) ascribed her own success to her determination ‘to stick to a choice of doing this degree and seeing it through’.

Rachel further ascribed the different experience at university as leading to personal growth. Hence, after having completed her first year, she felt more confident, ‘It made me more confident. Because I was able to put myself and get through the first year of something that is very different to what I’m used to’ (Rachel 2017, 1 September). From ‘I’ve always been someone that’s been quite reserved’ Rachel (2017, 1 September) had become more outward looking, ‘Just having that change to talk to someone and be friends with them and keep in constant contact’ — albeit as a logic of necessity — ‘with people that you may not necessarily like but you have to for the sake of maybe getting through an assessment.’

Henry

Just as Cassie talked of the choice that she made to work hard to succeed, and Rachel talked of her determination to stick to her choice to follow through with her studies, Henry talked of his choice to go to university and his commitment to the hard work required in his first year to sustain that choice.

> When I decided to go back to uni, that was just it … If I said, ‘No, screw it,’ and not do the work, I would have just been letting myself down ... So, the only way for me was to try and make it, put in the hard yards and do the work. (Henry 2017, 28 April)

His view of the university as ‘throwing work at him’ was one where the responsibility to learn was all his, and in response to that he chose to keep doing this and to ‘kick goals.’

> The uni's throwing work at me and I'm more than happy to do it because this is what I want to do. … It [the university] never really embraces you and tells you that you're doing a good job. It's just like, 'Just keep doing it'. And then at the end of it, it's going to be like 'Good job, mate' … I think for me personally there's nothing that they can really throw at me that's going to stop me, so I guess I'm just going to keep kicking goals. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

However, unlike Samara, Cassie and Rachel, who, through end of year academic success from their engagement with learning, indicated they had become familiar with the university, Henry indicated that he had wanted to be part of the university from the start.

> I wanted the good grades, but I also wanted to be a part of it. I think in my first year, I definitely became a part of my course … I definitely feel like after my first year, as far as success goes, I've successfully shown myself that I'm doing the right thing and I'm in the right place. (Henry 2017, 28 April)

That desire to set down roots within the university is possibly a reaction to his past of school failure.

> I hated school … All the smart kids are thinking about university and all I was thinking about was, 'Do I want to work in the burger shop or do I want to work in the surf shop when I leave school? … It's like I've got something to prove to the university. I'm here to do it; you're not going to stomp me out. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

Now that he had proved to himself and to the world that he had an academic side, he was pleased that his scholarly 'coat fits'.

> I've discovered a side of myself that I never really knew. I'm someone who enjoys writing papers, has been told that they're pretty good at writing papers. It's just a different branch of intelligence that I've never really dived into or noticed on myself and I really like how that coat fits. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

Henry (2017, 4 September) associated feeling intelligent with greater confidence, ‘I guess it’s just a confidence boost, really.’ Having fulfilled himself, the angry schoolboy that was Henry no longer appeared to harbour anger towards the world, ‘Even on the emotional level, it’s funny how passive I’ve become … I might be angry but then I’ll be like: ‘Why did I get angry? Was it really worth it?’ I never used to question myself about that’ (Henry 2017, 4 September).

James

As compared to the above participants, James’ level of commitment to his first-year learning and development tallied with his lesser standard of achievement, and was also in direct relation to his main concern with getting a teaching job**.** ‘To be honest, uni., I just want to pass. That’s my achievement. My achievement standard is not very high … you can get high distinctions and it’s still about the person behind the paperwork that gets the job’ (James 2017, 31 August). While James showed his gradual understanding of university expectations, his level of engagement was, ‘Just getting used to university, getting used to the way that they like to do things’ (James 2017, 31 August).

As a result, he became selective in what he did, ‘Most of it you don’t need to do, but there’s only a few things you need to do and you should actually focus on them’ (James 2017, 13 May). Classes that James saw as engaging in his first year were those that he saw as models for his future practice.

> That activity was definitely engaging. For me, it was good because you could observe how people did things: whether they took it seriously or not; how they behaved in a classroom and how does that relate to myself as what I want to be. (James 2017, 31 August)

The non-engaging classes were those he considered to be of no use to his future practice or not directly related to assessments, which for him were conduits to the paper qualification that would allow him to get the teaching job. **‘**I couldn’t see a relevance a lot of the time [in other classes] to the assessment or if I could even use it in the classroom myself in three or four years’ (James 2017, 31 August).

This led, by the end of the year, to James showing greater awareness of how to teach but giving less indication of his first year as an academic experience. ‘At the start of the year, you don’t realise that there’s as many intricacies in teaching. You just do things naturally ... It’s realising that those different things have a name and how you’re teaching them’ (James 2017, 31 August).

Bob

Though Bob could draw parallels from past experiences, he acknowledged that learning at university also required him to negotiate his learning in a new field. ‘I don't pretend that I know all of this stuff because this is a new field for me, so there's a lot of stuff I'm learning. I can draw parallels with what I've done elsewhere, but it's a new field for me’ (Bob 2017, 19 April). He had the attitude of ‘working hard to get it done’ as well as a pragmatic approach to life, ‘I like learning lots of different things but … I learn A, B and C because A, B and C help me do whatever it is I'm doing’ (Bob 2017, 19 April). This could explain his approach towards his first-year learning and development.

> I want to come here and learn to be a teacher. Teach me how to teach … I'm coming here and I'm doing this stuff here. It's like I was saying, it's nice to know this stuff but it's not ‘need to know’. Give me the stuff I need to know and then, if there's time, give me the ‘nice to know’ stuff. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

Overall, Bob’s first-year learning and development appeared to be less of a scholarly experience, but more a conduit towards Bob’s goal to work as a teacher after university. ‘The first year is starting to expose you to what being a teacher really is as opposed to when you first start with that preconceived idea of what teaching is or what a teacher is’ (Bob 2017, 28 August). Thus, Bob’s first-year experience became largely a means to an end for him rather than an end in itself. ‘Most of year one—I'm basically just happy to have it done and done well because it's a necessary step to becoming a teacher … Because the material being taught is ‘nice to know’, not ‘need to know’ to be a teacher’ (Bob 2017, 19 April).

Bob and James' experiences of their first year are similar in that they are less of an academic experience as compared to the other participants, though their motives differed. Where Bob was committed to his studies and driven by his target to become a teacher, James appeared to be less committed to his studies and more interested in getting a teaching job.

4.3.2 Imagined future

The participants in this research mostly foresaw a future of socioeconomic betterment, with the exception of Bob who wanted a future beyond structural boundaries, focussing on what he wanted as an individual, and of Henry who appeared to be shaping a more altruistic future.

Now that Cassie had become successful in her first year at university, she wanted to channel her choices towards the stable future she imagined, which is characterised by material well-being. **'**So eventually when I finish uni, I'd like to earn a stable income, have a house, have a family and just be stable the whole time and comfortable … I think it depends on who you are and the choices that you make' (Cassie 2017, 10 May). The stability of material well-being was also echoed by Samara's (2017, 8 May), 'I've always wanted a bright, safe future with success,' as academic success had become a reality that she wanted to imprint on a photo to mark her biography, 'I always wanted to do something that I've never done before and take a photo of it and be like, 'I finally did it'. Rachel also linked the more knowledgeable state she had reached at university to a better future and a 'proper job.' 'It's made me much more knowledgeable in what I'm going to become in the future … I now have this information that I can use … when I finish and get a proper job, it's going to help me with that' (Rachel 2017, 1 September). That 'proper job' would be 'something that's obviously to do with teaching … comfortable enough that I can live perfectly fine' (Rachel 2017, 20 April). James who had shown less commitment to his studies but more interest in it as a conduit to a job, contemplated future success as being happy to work as a teacher. At the same time though, he tied this to a life of material comfort, hence defining a future of personal satisfaction and socioeconomic advancement.

> If you have a job that makes you happy and you enjoy doing it and you're not living in a garage, eating two-minute noodles like a lot of uni. students are, I think … Just being comfortable. You don't need too much, but as long as you're comfortable and you've got everything you need—that's success. (James 2017, 13 May)

Bob and Henry differed from the other participants who seemed mostly to associate their current success at university with a future of socioeconomic betterment. On one side, Bob defined his future according to what he as an individual wanted, altogether making an abstraction of the socioeconomic context. 'To me, success is for yourself as an individual. It's achieving the things that you want to achieve in your life. It doesn't mean that you're rich, it doesn't mean that you've got a big house or car. It could just be that you've got what you wanted' (Bob 2017, 19 April). On other hand, Henry saw his future as inclusive of others. Henry wanted to reproduce his own success for others by becoming a teacher for those who do not want to learn and 'to be there' in that learning space that he himself had now found.

> So I want to be the teacher who can help the kids who are being [curses], the kids who don't want to learn and don't want to be there. That's the whole reason I'm becoming a teacher, so success for me is just being in a place of influence—a place of positive influence. (Henry 2017, 28 April)

4.4 Experiences of engagement with learning: interactions with teachers

In their experiences of engagement with their learning, the non-traditional students in this research worked at positioning themselves in the university field, through their interactions with teachers (ACER 2012; Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis 2015; NSSE 2011). Two themes emerge in this section, as to what mattered to these students in their interactions with their teachers. One unfolds around the participants' interactions with their teachers as the more knowledgeable other, and the other revolves around the participants as differently knowledgeable because of their different experiences in their interactions with teachers. Table 4.3 that follows captures the two themes across the participants.

Table 4.3 The more knowledgeable other and the differently knowledgeable

Participants	Theme1 - The more knowledgeable other: from trust to frustration	Theme 2 - The differently knowledgeable
Samara	✓	✓
Cassie	✓	✓
Bob	✓	✓
James	✓	✓
Rachel	✓	✓
Henry	✓	✓

The above table shows that both themes —the more knowledgeable other and the differently knowledgeable— relate to all the participants. Samara and Cassie expressed a wider range of emotions for the first theme, and Cassie and Bob's experiences were more confrontational for the second theme.

4.4.1 The more knowledgeable other: from trust to frustration

To comprehend university knowledge, the participants looked to the teacher as a major source of knowledge, and there appeared to be an underlying need to emotionally relate to them too.

Samara put the onus on the teacher as the legitimate guide to her learning in the university field so that what she did would be 'correct.' 'If I share my idea and the teacher says, 'Yes, that's correct,' and he or she talks more about it, I get to say, 'Okay, so my ideas are correct … and this is why' (Samara 2017, 8 May). She was trusting of knowledge imparted by the teacher: 'I can rely on that information because I can trust it.' (Samara 2017, 8 May). What Samara (2017, 8 May) said of her peers was: 'I learn from others that I can trust', would also apply to her teachers. Similarly, Cassie's interactions with her teachers were based on the belief that the latter are the experts to guide her first year in the university context. 'To me, the teachers are the experts. They know more about it than I do, so I think that anything they tell us is really valuable' (Cassie 2017, 31 August). Such a belief for Cassie (2017, 10 May), rested on a relationship of

reciprocal respect between student and teacher, ‘You have a mutual understanding of each other and a mutual respect as a teacher and a learner.’ Like Samara and Cassie, James (2017, 13 May) considered the teacher as ‘the most knowledgeable person and the person you should be listening to.’ Like them, he relied on the teacher to confirm that he was on the right track, ‘You’d rather take advice from an expert than someone who doesn’t know.’ Rachel appeared to echo the aforementioned, when she referred to the teacher as ‘more knowledgeable than us. He's one person that we go to if we're stuck’ (Rachel 2017, 20 April).

While acknowledging that teachers have students’ interest at heart, Henry’s definition of teachers—in contrast to the appellation of ‘expert’ and ‘most knowledgeable’ by Cassie, Samara, James and Rachel—was more moderate, in that he called them ‘informative.’ ‘Most of the teachers are really informative and really want you to learn … they’ve got your best interests at heart’ (Henry 2017, 28 April). Bob (2017, 19 April) had a similar consideration of teachers who ‘have got their hearts in it. They want us to learn; they’re giving us as much help as they can give us in terms of learning.’

However, when the teacher was not functioning in their prime role as facilitator to the university discourse, the face of the university, which has been seen to be blurred by the participants’ initial unfamiliarity with university expectations (Section 4.2.1), turned opaque and caused frustration. It appears that when this occurred the trust bond between Samara and the teacher was broken.

> If it wasn’t for them, who else would I ask, really? You’re meant to rely on the teacher because they’re the ones who are meant to be doing their job—they teach you … We really did nothing in class … We didn’t know anything … the actual experience about it just put me off trusting some teachers … It was our first year … What are we going to expect, really? (Samara 2017, 8 May)

To convey his disappointment in a similar situation, Henry used the image of the student-driver rendered helpless by a teacher-car that did not move. ‘If the student is the car driver and the teacher is the car, if the car doesn’t want to go,

you're not going anywhere. If the teacher doesn't want to teach you, then the student's not doing anything. It's not fair' (Henry 2017, 4 September). The reciprocity no longer being present in the teacher-student relationship, Henry lost respect for the teacher. 'I did what anyone would do if you don't have respect for someone. You don't listen to them ... So, I just took the learning in my own hands' (Henry 2017, 28 April). He indirectly pointed an accusing finger to the university for the teacher's act of omission, 'He is just a fleshy puppet that the university calls a teacher' (Henry 2017, 4 September).

Some university practices, with the teacher as the more knowledgeable other appeared to cause further frustrations to the participants. Teachers 'just barrelling through their presentations' during lecture time were for Rachel (2017, 20 April) 'very boring' and 'not very engaging.' Extended to tutorial time, a lecture-type class that did not make space for Cassie (2017, 31 August) to process learning made her feel inferior, 'I think you just feel … a bit spoken down to—inferior I think is the best word I can think of… It's [the learning] definitely hindered because you're not as open to learning'. Such a situation engendered anger: 'I remember feeling very angry …. We sit there and write the whole time. She talks at us. It's not a conversation. It's like she's giving us information and we're expected to just know it' (Cassie 2017, 10 May). With the absence of mutuality in the teacher–student relationship, Cassie lost respect for the teacher, 'I just didn't want to hear what they had to say because they didn't want to hear what I had to say. That's the respect thing' (Cassie 2017, 31 August). Cassie's experience was echoed by James. As a result of experiencing one-way depositing of information, James mentally took leave of the class. 'You zone out. You stop listening …You go, 'Oh, I'm taking notes,' but you're actually doing another assessment … You want to walk out but you don't' (James 2017, 13 May). He too appeared to be losing respect for the teacher, 'If you talk about your opinion and you don't listen to everyone else's opinion, then I have no time for you whatsoever' (James 2017, 13 May).

Bob found that in giving exclusivity to the teacher as the most knowledgeable, students themselves could be complicit in nurturing the situation:

> Students learn how to be students when they're little. If you ask a question and they say nothing, the teacher's going to provide them with the answer… By the time they get to high school and university, it's become ingrained. They just shut up and hope that the teacher's going to fill in the air. (Bob 2017, 28 August)

However, Bob did not discount that the teacher's ultimate power of success or failure on students can have a curtailing effect. 'They [Bob's peers] don't want to rock the boat. So they'll go with the flow of the topic for the sake of their degree … because they don't want to have something that could possibly reflect on their marks' (Bob 2017 19 April). Yet, as Henry (2017, 28 April) said, 'every student intercepts knowledge differently', and in the participants' interactions with their teachers, they looked for spaces to show what they knew.

4.4.2 The differently knowledgeable

From mutual construction of knowledge with the teacher, to having their voice heard as well as power plays with the teacher, the participants appeared to be equally keen to express what they knew that was different to the views of teachers, who acted as agents of the field.

Samara

Acknowledgement of individual differences in Samara's description of a teacher appears to have been of significance for her learning. The teacher would listen to her students, be respectful of their ideas and would help them tie these ideas together under a common topic, hence creating strength out of difference at a common meeting point. 'She would come and ask what we had written down. I would tell her our ideas … she would ask why we had written this one or how it is related … Towards the end, she would share everyone's ideas' (Samara 2017, 8 May). In addition to how the teacher managed the classroom discourse, how the teacher built rapport with students individually, appears to have had an equally important impact on Samara. 'She would ask them how their day was … She's building that relationship with the student … their presence is everywhere in the classroom, not just focusing on the content' (Samara 2017, 7 September).

Cassie

Cassie's (2017, 10 May) interactions with the teacher indicated both mutuality in knowledge building as well as moments of hostility when she 'felt like they didn't really care that much'. Thus, a teacher gaining Cassie's appreciation appeared to negotiate her role with Cassie and her peers, as a co-participant in the learning process. She would ask her students to develop their own understanding of her contribution to the task through their own distinct realities.

> This one teacher that I had, she would always come up and talk to me about what I'd done. Then she'd be very supportive of all the work that we'd done … Then, she'd discuss with us different ideas or different approaches to the same task … but then she would say, 'That's an idea, but I want you to put that in your own words'. (Cassie 2017, 10 May)

In contrast, non-acceptance and recognition of Cassie's world view in her interactions with another teacher appeared to adversely affect her learning. She recalled her anger and the overall feeling of having learnt nothing when she was asked to leave a first-year class for having a different opinion to that teacher, who instead assumed that she was not concentrating.

> I got kicked out because she said that I wasn't concentrating, but I was. I just had a different opinion to her … I was really angry … Then for two weeks after I did not go back … I just didn't want to see her … I don't think that learning took place in the classroom, because even if I think back now, I don't remember anything that we spoke about in class. (Cassie 2017, 10 May)

James

For James, learning in interaction with the teacher was about the student's experiences, and having voice as opposed to not having voice. To the more knowledgeable teacher, James posited the student as not less knowledgeable, but differently knowledgeable for their different experiences.

> So let's say … a science teacher would know a lot more than the Year 8s that he's teaching, for example. One of the Year 8s might know

> something cool, but they're looking it up online and the teacher might not know, or they had a certain experience that a teacher didn't … The teacher shouldn't cut down that experience just because they think they know more. (James 2017, 13 May)

James also remembered the literacy teacher giving space to the different student voices. 'There was a teacher and she'd put things up to show us on PowerPoint and we'd discuss it a lot. It was fun to engage in the discussion ... That was definitely one of the better classes' (James 2017, 13 May). For James a class that would promote his learning would be one where there is an understanding with the teacher, which understanding he defined as the teacher being willing to discuss and listen to him. 'You feel like you have an understanding with the lecturer more and you want to feel engaged in the subject … if you know that you can discuss ideas with them and they will listen and just let the class discuss' (James 2017, 13 May). As a result of the literacy teacher making space for James to have his voice heard, there was a development of interest and 'passion' in what he was thinking over, which passion could likewise be seen in Henry (see further below). James said:

> But the one class where the teacher would throw an idea to us and let us kick it around … it was far more engaging than having someone just talk at us …The passion's actually good because it means that the students are thinking about it and they're engaged and they want to contribute. (James 2017, 13 May)

Gaining ownership over his learning gave a raison d'être to James to be in class. 'It feels like you're actually doing something, that your opinions actually matter. It definitely feels like you're there for a reason' (James 2017, 13 May). Conversely, James also remembered a first-year teacher as being rude to presuppose that she was the one who always had the answer to questions she would pose to students. For him, her status as the more knowledgeable other should not give her licence to monopolise the space to the point of thinking for him, obliterating his voice and dictating to him his experience.

> She just got to the point where she was obnoxious. How I deal with things is I make things funny, so I made everything funny. She'd ask me a question and I would give this stupid answer. She wouldn't cut me off in my stupid answers, but if I actually gave a proper answer, then she'd cut me off. (James 2017, 13 May)

Henry

Knowledge building with the teacher for Henry was about the teacher meeting the students where they were with their learning. It was also about the student having voice and being empowered in their learning.

For Henry, the Maths teacher was cognisant of each of her students' strengths and weaknesses, implying recognition of each individual student as different from the other in their learning of Maths. Henry's weakness was with mathematical formulae, and the lack of patience from his primary school teacher meant that Henry was not helped to learn. He did, however get it from his Maths teacher at university, who took the time to break down the Maths formulae to make them less daunting for him.

> She was incredible… really patient and really good at breaking things down, really good at picking out everyone's strengths and weaknesses, my big weakness being the formulas … She really took her time. Quality over quantity…even if it's just one formula over a two-hour class – we understand that, rather than talking about five formulas and no one getting it. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

As the teacher broke the mathematical formulae into smaller pieces and showed the reasoning, Henry realised the importance of thinking over Maths instead of focussing on the right answer.

> Anyone can figure out the right answer eventually, but not everyone can figure out how to get that answer. It was showing your working. Anyone can tell you that 5 x 5 = 25 but it's different being able to show someone how you got that number … She was really good at encouraging us to

> figure out the process more than the answer. In my experience, not a lot of maths teachers did that. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

In his childhood as he was counting letter boxes and lampposts, Henry was using his imagination to expand his strength with numbers, but then he went no further when he did not feel understood at primary school. Now, that imagination found a possibility to expand through the Maths teacher who showed Henry how to use his thinking skills with mathematical formulae. While Henry did not inherit from his Maths teacher her passion for Maths, her knowledge coupled with her meeting Henry at the point where he was in his learning, enabled him to learn Maths and feel comfortable in a Maths class.

> She understood that just because she was passionate about Maths … not everyone's passionate about the same things that you're passionate about … There's a lot of fear that generates around the topic of maths and I've found a lot of maths teachers just forget that ... She always went over the equations and the formulas … and made sure she'd break it down as simply as possible just to make sure that we got it. She made me feel really comfortable. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

Passion for what Henry was learning appeared to develop for him in the literacy teacher's class. If the Maths teacher made Henry think, the literacy teacher challenged him to keep thinking 'ideas versus other ideas' to the point that he felt 'Empowered really' (Henry 2017, 28 April), in his understanding of literacy, hence developing a passion for literacy. Henry (2017, 4 September) recalled how he kept shaping and reshaping his ideas as the teacher made the class review and reflect on their practices, 'She was just really getting us to think … The discussions we were having, she was really making us think about the teaching that we were doing and the teaching that we had experienced ourselves.' Henry would extend his reflections to interrogating the mentor teacher's practice.

> Especially as a first-year student, questioning your mentor teacher who's in the class with you and you're like, 'Oh, I would have done that differently … I would have done that differently…' and asking yourself

> why. Everyone's got their own reasons for their own answers, but it just made you think. (Henry 2017, 4 September)

Going further, Henry in his interaction with the literacy teacher started addressing issues related to the course structure that could better serve students. Thus, while not discarding the relevance of the online week during the semester, he 'made a statement about how I thought that it was a little negligent to be doing this so late in the semester … I really thought the face-to-face time with everyone would have really helped this week' (Henry 2017, 28 April). Receptive, the literacy teacher 'took all in her stride' (Henry 2017, 28 April), and Henry ended up collaborating with her. 'From that interaction, it led on to some further discussion … and then we ended up doing some collaborative work together towards the symposium on blended learning' (Henry 2017, 28 April).

Underlying the interaction with the literacy teacher, Henry detected a power play, where the literacy teacher's power would be to empower her students by getting them to think and take control of their learning and get passionate about it. 'I felt like she was being really sneaky and doing a power play on us. If she can get us to think like that, we were passionately driving ourselves forward' (Henry 2017, 4 September). That power play—more like a game—intrigued Henry and stimulated his interest.

> She said something and I said something back and she'd gone, 'Ah, okay'… My other peers were saying things and the tutor was saying, 'Well you guys have learned a lot. You've obviously got something to come back with.' Then she'd come back with something. It was almost like a game. We, the students, were trying to outdo the tutor ... It was interesting, it was intriguing and we all got to have a say.
> (Henry 2017, 28 April)

That back and forth between the literacy teacher and Henry and his peers appeared to feed his freedom to express himself, affirming him in the development of his ideas, and resulting in his passion to learn more**.** 'It was a lot of back and forth … ideas versus other ideas and how those ideas can help each other. It was fantastic. That was where … and I feel like a lot of my peers

in that class as well … we all did a lot of learning' (Henry 2017, 28 April). Unlike Henry, the school boy who did not want to be in class, Henry the student really thrived in the literacy class, 'Every single literacy lesson, I walked out of the classroom going: 'I've learned something today and I feel better because of it … My class was 8 o'clock on a Monday morning and I was excited for it ... I wanted to be there' (Henry 2017, 28 April).

For Henry, in reaching students in accordance with their individual differences, the teacher was engaging them to bring out the best in them. The Maths teacher engaged with her students in responding to the strengths and weaknesses of each. Differences had also been recognised in the literacy class in that each student had their voice heard, and Henry's collaboration with the teacher over the curriculum was sought. Nevertheless, Henry (2017, 28 April) noted the disconnect between students with their 'different learning orientations', and the teaching of some teachers: 'sometimes … the teacher is presenting this knowledge in this bland, disengaged, very uninformative way.' What Henry (2017, 28 April) did then was to reverse the game to discreetly 'keep that tutor on track', by engaging with the teacher so they would be obliged to engage with him. 'I might ask the question, 'Back to what you were talking about before, how would you have done that differently?' (Henry 2017 28 April).

Rachel

Rachel's interactions with teachers can be compared with moments in Henry's experiences of the literacy class. Where the freedom to express himself rose to a crescendo in Henry's experience of the literacy class, such freedom, while desired by teachers in Rachel's experience, appeared to collide with the teacher's plan of the classroom scenario.

> Teachers would have a plan of how things were going to turn out in the classroom, but a lot of the times, it would just go on a tangent, just because they would want the students' input and sometimes what the students would say would be a little bit off topic but they'd try and run with it. (Rachel 2017, 20 April)

While Rachel did not interrogate the mentor teacher's classroom practice as Henry did, the difference between rigidly structured classes and one class offering pupils a level of freedom in choosing what they learnt, mattered to her as the one experience to remember of her placement classes.

> I can only remember one placement class … you have five different literacy activities and you choose either two or three of them from the block but you have to be doing it. So he [the teacher] gives his students the freedom to choose what they want to do as opposed to the other teachers where they're like, 'Well, we have to do this for this hour'. (Rachel 2017, 1 September)

Bob

Bob is intent on not having his voice overpowered by that of the university, in his interactions with teachers. He confronted his teachers with his own knowledge, history and background as he interacted with them for his learning. On having their views imposed on him by three teachers who are 'very passionate in their beliefs, but very militant in their beliefs as well' (Bob 2017, 19 April), initial caution gave way to his need to externalise his world view based on his past experience in the police force.

> I managed to bite my tongue for the first two days before I decided, 'No, I'm not going to let them just browbeat us with this information, I'm going to say my piece as well.' … I have had a lot of exposure ... Accordingly, I have my own views … So when they are telling me their version of what's happening in places, I'm going, 'Well, hang on … ' I can debate that because I have seen contrary to what they're saying personally, not just read it in a book or watched it on the TV: actually been there, seen that, done that. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

It is of significance that Bob's episode of disputing the teachers' discourse was met with neither further discourse of theirs, nor any further opening to Bob's position on the topic under discussion. 'Their reaction was pretty much silence because they weren't used to having somebody who could dispute their version of the facts' (Bob 2017, 19 April). Having disputed a discourse that he felt was

being imposed upon him, had a liberating effect on Bob (2017, 19 April), ‘I felt good. It didn't bother me ... It bothered me for a little while beforehand because I wasn't saying what I was feeling about the topic.’

For refusing to remain silent to the dominant voice though, Bob was aware that he was treading on delicate ground liable to have adverse repercussions on his marks. Moreover, if his voice was met with silence, that silence expressed neither rejection nor reception of his ideas. That he obtained 96% in his assignment gives indications of the same teachers’ later consideration and appreciation of Bob’s stance. ‘Even though I kind of upset the tutors, the mark I got for my course was 96%, so I obviously didn't get penalised for speaking my mind’ (Bob 2017, 19 April). The potential adverse impact of not externalising his views to the teacher is evident given that for Bob, interaction with the teacher was a key way for him to learn.

> I think I've learned more from them [the teachers] than I have from the books … not necessarily that they're more informed than the books … I learn from people; I don't learn from books … when I'm in the classroom and they're my teacher, I'm focused on them: I'm listening to what they're saying; I'm taking in what they're saying; I'm asking questions about what they're saying. That's how I learn, rather than sitting with the textbook and then asking you a question. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

4.5 Experiences of engagement with learning: with peers

This section provides insights into the non-traditional students’ experiences of collaborative learning with their peers (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis 2015), as part of their engagement with learning. The results show that the benefits that the participants derived from meeting people with different views were sometimes outweighed by the context of competition and performance (Theme 1 in Table 4.4 that follows). Moreover, the skill of working as a group was sustained with varying levels of difficulties (Theme 2 in the same table), reflecting the institution’s lesser concern for the process of collaborative work at the expense of its end-product.

Table 4.4 With peers

Participants	Theme 1 - When performance trumps learning	Theme 2 - From adversarial strategies to leadership skills
Samara	✓	×
Cassie	✓	×
Bob	×	✓
James	×	✓
Rachel	×	✓
Henry	✓	×

As indicated in the table above, Theme 1 was evident in the experiences of Samara, Cassie and Henry. Under Theme 2, working as group was a mostly difficult experience for James and Rachel, and brought from the home background in Bob's case.

4.5.1 Collaborative learning: when performance trumps learning

Samara, Cassie and Henry found their experiences of collaborative learning intellectually enriching, and it offered them the safety of same-level interaction. Nevertheless, as collaborative work was assessed, the tension of performance presented challenges in negotiating the task with their peers for the best outcome in the form of marks, learning itself taking a secondary place. Despite setting group productions as a hurdle that students needed to pass, in the experiences of the participants the university appeared to be oblivious to their predicaments.

Samara

Samara's interactions with her peers for collaborative work were based on the belief that they were like her teachers and that she would learn from them. 'You have to treat another person like they are teachers and you're in the work field' (Samara 2017, 8 May). When she worked with them, Samara (2017, 8 May) was in a situation to compare her experiences with those of her peers, whether similar or different, 'Some would respond because they had the same

experience ... Some of them would tell me what happened to them. It could be a different story.' Exposure to multiple ideas and experiences presented multiple learning possibilities for Samara (2017, 8 May), allowing her to relate her peers' stories to her own story to create new stories to incorporate into her body of knowledge, 'I have someone to remember and what they did … the theories related, and then I can link them to my assignment. So it's good to have other people's stories as well.' Fundamentally, it was in the meeting of different worldviews that there was growth in knowledge for Samara (2017, 8 May): 'They would have different ideas and that helps me think more, because it's obviously outside of my thinking box.' Moreover, the presence of Samara's peers made her feel stronger when facing the unknown in the university environment. 'I was nervous about the course … so with other people, you feel more comfortable because you're not by yourself and other people are there to support you. Even if we might all feel the same, we still have each other' (Samara 2017, 8 May).

Nonetheless, Samara found cause to complain about some of her peers for their level of commitment, when group tasks were assessed. The learning outcome itself took a secondary role as Samara considered her peers' potential to contribute to the task's completion for the best outcome in the form of marks.

> The people I would choose to be with, I know they would do their work. If I'm put with someone … we all discuss doing a part in an assignment or anything, we agree on that, but then sometimes they don't do it until the last minute … I don't like that because I like to finish mine, make sure it's done. (Samara 2017, 8 May)

Samara (2017, 8 May) would confront her peers, 'So what happens is I sit there going, 'Okay, me and more people have done most of the work. Why can't you do it?' Nevertheless, Samara (2017, 8 May) found herself caught between the university's compulsion for group assessments, 'You're not allowed to do it alone,' and students who had various levels of individual commitment to the success of the common task. As a result, Samara's (2017, 8 May) individual knowledge input in the work would at times far outweigh the knowledge gained from her peers' contributions, 'Some of them don't like to share the ideas … I'm

the only one who will just do it, sometimes it's annoying because you feel like you have to do everything.'

Cassie

For Cassie who talked about her lack of life experience, working collaboratively with her peers provided the possibility for her to expand herself by being receptive to their different experiences. 'We all have different experiences and different lives. When I talk about something and we're all having a discussion, I pick up on their experiences and their ideas. I think it's learning, but in a different form' (Cassie 2017, 10 May). There is the image of her mind opening, 'hearing their point of view … it will open up your mind,' and travelling deeper, 'instead of just looking on the surface, you think, 'Oh yeah, you could do this, but you could also do that,'' and wider, 'The broader perspective is just looking at everything very openly, thinking about all possibilities instead of just one and sticking to that,' to explore knowledge, when she talked about working with her peers (Cassie 2017, 10 May).

The appeal in working collaboratively with her peers for Cassie was also found in the absence of the superior-inferior tension already denoted in her interactions with her teachers (Section 4.4.1). Interestingly, in referring to her peers she used the pronoun 'we', 'I think that we're all on the same level … we do all impart knowledge on each other, I think it's at a different level to when a teacher does it' (Cassie 2017, 31 August). Cassie even drew her peers closer to her by calling them 'friends' in the online subject chatrooms. By this she also pointed to the increased connection in this same-level (peer group) approach to processing knowledge.

> If you have any questions, you just ask them and people will get back to you. It's not teachers; it's your friends. They might send you a link or they might be like, 'This is what I did. You can use that.' I think it's good. I really like that because if everyone's struggling with the same thing, you just know it's not you. You write, 'I can't find this – does anyone know where it is?' And someone will be like, 'No. I haven't been able to find it either'. (Cassie 2017, 10 May)

Understandably, Cassie, like Samara, gave credit to her peers for enriching her learning, but like Samara, she might also have felt that the intellectual advantages of working with her peers were outweighed by the pressure of different levels of peer commitment to group assessments. ‘I do enjoy learning with my friends because I can use their ideas but then ultimately when I have to do the work, I prefer doing an assessment on my own as opposed to a group assessment’ (Cassie 2017, 31 August). The benefits of knowledge acquired through collaborative learning also seemed to be lost in the exigencies of getting the work done. What Cassie (2017, 10 May) said of a group report to be submitted is a point to ponder on regarding the design of collaborative work in relation to collaboration and learning, ‘We broke it up into seven different sections. I took one of them, another person did another and then we put it all on paper. The eighth person would put it all together, do the referencing and then submit it.’

Henry

Henry appeared to reap intellectual benefits from working with his peers. Working collaboratively in the Maths class allowed him to watch and learn from his peers. ‘We'd do a lot of our work in our groups. I suck at maths, so that was really important for me, and it made it really easy because of being able to watch peers’ (Henry 2017, 28 April). In the same Maths class, Henry and his peers enacted working to each other’s strengths to solve problems; Henry would use his love of numbers while one of his peers would make use of his better understanding of algebraic formulae.

> Well, we needed each other; we depended on each other … I don't understand the formulas but I know numbers inside and out. Working alongside, especially one guy in the Maths class ... He knew how to do algebra, all of that stuff, but when it came to adding and finding out the numbers involved ... Being able to collaborate like that was really, really handy. You came to depend on each other. (Henry 2017, 28 April)

Henry’s tendency to read the Maths instructions too quickly was moderated by his peers in the same Maths class.

> Some of the other guys were ... really good at unpacking a tricky question and seeing how the question was laid out. I'm really good at reading the question too fast … And then not reading the question properly and not picking up that it's milligrams instead of grams or litres instead of millilitres … Just making sure that we were all on the right track and we hadn't missed anything. Collaboratively it worked really well and we all ended up doing really well. (Henry 2017, 28 April)

The common denominator tying Henry's Maths group together was the shared sense of purpose in the group, to work together to learn. 'We were all really invested, because you want to make a point of sitting with the people who give a damn and who want to try and who are there to learn. So, we helped each other out and it was very beneficial' (Henry 2017, 28 April). Learning with his peers appeared to take place for similar reasons in the literacy subject.

> One of the assessments required us to dissect six pieces of … literacy pedagogies … I met up with one of the guys from our class … when someone opens this door, you go, 'Oh!' … Hearing what he had to say about his style of teaching and him hearing about my style was really beneficial with both of us. We did a lot of learning … I felt accomplished. (Henry 2017, 28 April)

Yet, working collaboratively also had its challenges for Henry. He had not always experienced the same sense of commitment from all his peers, especially when collaborative work was assessed.

> Collaborative work as a whole can be quite challenging … my peer didn't do any of the work. So this person that I was grouped with got all the marks that I was getting, but they weren't doing any of the work. So that was really deflating … It was minimal effort for maximum gain. You could tell that he just wanted to do as little as possible and just ride his way through, which was quite frustrating. (Henry 2017, 28 April)

A climate of profit and loss around collaborative work led Henry (2017, 28 April) himself to gauge the competitiveness of his peer in the university context, 'He wasn't cut out to be there … I think after the first semester, the people who

shouldn't have been there got weeded out a bit.' Henry's frustration also took the shape of a complaint to the teacher, who, while pointing to the necessity for Henry to work collaboratively on the given task, had no solution to Henry's predicament. 'She said, 'Look, there's nothing I can really do, because you guys need to do this work in pairs. All you can do is take it on top of you' (Henry 2017, 28 April). The group being in a state of dysfunction, thus defeated the purpose of collaborative work, rendering Henry resigned to the unfairness of the situation.

In at times failing to see the real purpose of collaborative work in meeting his learning needs, Henry (2017,28 April) pointed the finger at the university: 'Sometimes I found that the work assigned for group work didn't make sense ... I just felt like it was busy work, really.' He further drew attention to the apparently futile nature of collaborative work set in a way that promoted little learning from each other.

> Really the only collaborative point of the whole research was to come back together and say, 'Okay, I'm talking about this. Maybe you talk about that.' There wasn't really a lot of collaborative work apart from the fact that we had to make sure that our research matched up.
> (Henry 2017, 28 April)

Henry's experience was similar to Cassie's seen previously; with her peers, they went their separate ways to do a collaborative report, only to have their work pieced together for submission.

4.5.2 From adversarial strategies to leadership skills

The above accounts of conflictual collaborative learning set as performance lead to this section, revealing how the skill of working collaboratively itself was sustained with difficulty by James, with Rachel balancing difficulties with benefits. Nevertheless, difficulties in working collaboratively with peers were also seen to be transcended with assets from the home background as in Bob's case.

James

James' experiences of collaborative learning mostly focused on assessed work. Knowing how to work together as a group presented as a major hurdle for James himself. He saw his work partner as an opposite with no common ground with him. 'The work wasn't a bad thing. It was the partner that was the bad thing … We were very much opposites' (James 2017, 13 May). In the absence of an understanding of how to confront the situation positively, the avoidance strategies James made use of are likely to have widened the gap with his peer, leaving James less keen to cooperate.

> Tried not to fight and tried not to talk to them or to talk to them as little as possible … She liked to talk a lot. She was very opinionated. I thought she was stupid, so I didn't say a lot. I just kept my mouth shut … It's more you don't say what your opinions are if they're completely opposite … It avoids conflict and it makes things easier—a lot quicker.
> (James 2017, 13 May)

Overall, collaborative work appeared to present itself for James as more adversarial at the level of personalities, and less as collaborative at the level of ideas. As already seen with Cassie and Henry, the possibility to split up the task and work it out as completely separate entities seemed to defeat the purpose of collaborative work. James would do his piece of the group work 'my way' and his peer would do hers 'her way', making of collaborative work a ground where different world views would not be reconciled.

> We split it up, so we didn't really have to talk to each other a lot about the different sort of work. It was two separate pieces of work … It was okay for me to do mine my way and for her to do hers her way.
> (James 2017, 13 May)

On the one hand, James (2017, 13 May) believed that by promoting group productions the university would be aiming to respond to the need for team players in the workplace, 'I suppose the purpose of it in university is just because we're going to need to do it later on. If I'm teaching in schools, I'm going to have a teaching team that's going to discuss things'. On the other

hand, the issue also appeared to be that when the university set collaborative work with performance targets, it was more the reward to be reaped from it that acted as a motivating factor for James rather than working with others for a common purpose. Thus, learning itself as a primary target of collaborative work, appeared to lose its importance. As James considered the advantages of group assessments in terms of delegation and division of labour, there was the overwhelming sense that group assessments have the advantage of getting the work done, for him to pass the subject.

> Oh, it's good. It's a lot easier to get stuff done … You can delegate tasks a lot easier and you can split it up so that people can put better work into the parts that they have ... It's just a way to get the work done easier … It got the work done. That's as far as it helped. (James 2017, 13 May)

James' attitude to collaborative work with his peers could have been partly due to his independent nature. 'I'm more of an independent person, but collaborative work—it does make things easier every now and then, that's for sure' (James 2017,13 May). Yet, that independent nature could also hide an unwillingness to reveal hidden insecurities. From revealing that he could do it all, 'Usually I think I can just figure it out myself, as long as I've got the right information. To me it's counter-productive if I have to ask someone for everything', he intimated the possibility that he might be bothering his peers in asking for help, 'Usually I will try and find out what I'm missing rather than ask for help … They're trying to do their own work and you've got someone asking them constant questions', to then hover on the other possibility that he might be revealing himself as lacking in knowledge compared to his peers—'You feel annoying if you have to keep asking for help. If I do ask for help, it's not a lot. Why do I have to ask for so much help if no one else is? Is there something I'm missing?' (James 2017, 13 May).

Rachel

Rachel (2017, 20 April) acknowledged difficulties in the group, especially when functioning as group leader, 'I'm not really great with criticism … I don't like disappointing people and I don't like letting people down … I want to make

everyone happy.' In this situation she found herself tolerating free-riders 'because we didn't want to have them left out or anything like that' (Rachel 2017, 20 April).

Possibly, Rachel's very difficulty in standing up for herself was what made her appreciate the benefits of group support. Compared to when she was doing her assessment all by herself, 'confused. I might be thinking … I don't have anyone to ask and be like 'okay, well are we heading in the right direction?', working as a group seemed to alleviate the tension of having sole responsibility for the work: 'it puts less stress on me. I also don't feel so alone when I'm doing an assessment. I know that we're all in this together and that we're going to get through it' (Rachel 2017, 20 April). At the same time, working as a group helped her grow: 'you have to force yourself to talk to people and to make friends. I've always been someone that's been quite reserved. I normally don't talk a lot. I'm a listener" (Rachel 2017, 1 September). While Rachel, unlike James, valued her peers when working collaboratively with them, her experiences also presented as a foil to Bob's experiences of collaborative learning as seen below.

Bob

Of all the participants, Bob appeared to have had a better experience at working collaboratively with his peers. For him, learning collaboratively with his peers was about the excitement at learning what is new at university, which he assumed to be his peers' experiences too. 'Everyone was a brand new student, so everyone was excited and keen and working. Most were very good to work with together' (Bob 2017, 19 April). He acknowledged learning from his younger peers, 'There are some very smart people in my groups, in my units. Even though they're half my age, they have valid contributions to the learning process' (Bob 2017, 19 April). Equally, he thought the latter would benefit from his experiential knowledge: 'the younger ones did it fine but they had no [experiential] knowledge to draw on. I brought that to the table' (Bob 2017, 28 August).

The leadership skills that he showed for collaborative learning appeared to be part of the experiences that he brought with him to university from his own

background in the police force and in the army. Thus, Bob's ability to facilitate discussion among his peers for the construction of knowledge could have been related to his need to be outspoken in his previous work positions.

> I'm very quick to talk and happy to get a conversation flowing for the sake of learning. That's obviously to do with my—I think—background, and where I've come from and what I've done. You can't be shy in what I used to do. You've got to be outspoken. You've got to be very confident and project confidence. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

As leader of the group, Bob (2017, 19 April) monitored his own input to allow space for his peers, 'I don't want to be the only one talking. It's not about me wanting to talk. It's about getting that whole conversation going so we can figure out what we're learning. I want others to get involved too.' Bob additionally revealed his ability to use the enquiry mode to identify meaning when working with one of his peers.

> We would get together and bounce ideas off each other and discuss the underlying topics. Am I answering this right? Am I on the right track? Have I understood what they're asking me in the criteria properly? Am I addressing the criteria of the task? There was a lot of that kind of conversation. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

Bob did not appear to have passed through the challenges of assessed group work like the other participants, and the only assessed work he mentioned (above) was an individual assessment for which he used the benefit of working with a peer. In this regard, his account of experiences of assessed work was not comparable with the accounts of those who discussed group tasks for assessment. Nevertheless, Bob (2017, 28 August) referred to the 'grey man' in the army as a characteristic of collaborative learning at university: 'the grey man is the guy that hides in the crowd ... He just hides in the middle and lets everyone else carry the load … group work at university has people that want to do that. It's the nature of group work', and the role of the leader of the group is to call them to accountability, 'it takes the leader of the group to go, 'Hey, you haven't done your bit! Get your act together!' These reflections make it possible

to infer that Bob could have been such a leader for assessed collaborative work. His remarks draw further attention to the university's apparent omission in showing students how to work collaboratively in the first place.

4.6 Experiences of engagement with learning: academic challenge

In this section, academic challenge as a measure of engagement with learning (NSSE 2011; ACER 2012, Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis 2015) is seen through the experiences of the non-traditional students in this research. The results indicate that the participants in this research rose to the challenge set by the university, but also rose to the challenge set by themselves to stretch themselves academically. However, in how they engaged with knowledge, the participants are shown to have experienced academic challenge in ways that departed from those of the university. Ultimately, the participants appeared to relate what is academically challenging to benefits to be reaped from the learning experience. These experiences are set theme-wise in table 4.5 below, according to their occurrence among the participants.

Table 4.5 Academic challenge

Participants	Theme 1 - High expectations: from teachers and self	Theme 2 – Engaging with knowledge: pure and applied knowledge	Theme 3 – Benefits derived from what is learnt
Samara	✓	✓	×
Cassie	✓	×	✓
Bob	✓	✓	✓
James	×	✓	✓
Rachel	✓	×	×
Henry	✓	×	×

The above table shows that to the exception of James, all participants revealed experiences encompassed in Theme 1. Samara, Bob and James engaged with knowledge, differently from the university's usual practice (Theme 2). Cassie,

Bob and James tied academic challenge to the material benefits of learning (Theme 3).

4.6.1 High expectations: from teachers and self

In their experiences of academic challenge Samara, Cassie, Rachel and Henry rose to teachers' high expectations as well as to their own high expectations to do their best in the university context. At times academic challenge as set by the university appeared to offer zero level of challenge or a level of complexity that acted more like an obstacle to learning in the perspectives of these students. In contrast, Bob who indicated no need to be externally challenged, nonetheless challenged himself to work towards his own goals.

Samara

Samara acknowledged teacher influence in motivating her to expand herself intellectually. In her experience, teachers set the challenge to 'push our limits. If there was something we're not sure of, they encouraged us to ask further and to do more research because they wanted to see what we're capable of doing and where our brains think' (Samara 2017, 8 May). Yet Samara also appeared to be internally motivated. Hence, to difficulties in her readings she looked for alternatives as a challenge set to self, as she did when she perceived an absence of relevance in pre-set readings.

> My reading isn't that good ... I like to find my own research to give me a challenge. If someone just gives me the answers, I don't really like that. Sometimes, regarding my topic, the resources provided aren't really related. So that's when I find my own. (Samara 2017, 8 May)

It follows then that when there was nothing for Samara to find out and think over, the level of academic challenge was at zero: 'it's already there. There's nothing to challenge me further or to make me think further. It was just there, really' (Samara, 2017, 8 May). When this happened in class, precious learning opportunities were lost for Samara. 'Sometimes in class, we have to do something like that, and I think to myself – I could have done this at home … In

class, I would prefer to do something … I can generate ideas from, something I can learn from' (Samara 2017, 8 May).

Cassie

Like Samara, Cassie appeared to be influenced by her teachers' high expectations and she worked harder to meet these expectations. 'Teacher expectations here are very high. They always expect you to get the best grade that you possibly can and you're kind of just like, 'Oh I don't really want to disappoint them.' So you just work a lot harder' (Cassie 2017, 10 May). While she acknowledged the pressure coming from teachers' high expectations, 'I think there's a lot more pressure when someone else puts an expectation on you, because you want to live up to their expectations. You don't want to let them down or make them think less of you' (Cassie 2017, 10 May), she matched their high expectations to her own high expectations, to prove to them her ability.

> If they thought less of me, I would then go home and be like, 'I'm going to prove them wrong'. So I would work harder to prove to them that they shouldn't think less of me … I think that I work very hard … I just always try my best ... There's some students who don't really try that hard … but I always try and go the extra mile just to do a little bit more and show them that I'm really, really trying. (Cassie 2017, 10 May)

Where teacher expectations were blurred as when she was kicked out by a teacher and expressed the view of having learnt nothing from them, Cassie challenged herself to meet her own high expectations, 'I did all the stuff at home … and with assessments, I didn't fail any of them. I was doing okay at it. That's how I passed' (Cassie 2017, 31 August). She also sought ways to delineate meaning, if understanding eluded her, 'if you're at home, by yourself, you don't have anyone there to help you … when I don't understand something, I usually push myself to go and find out what it is' (Cassie 2017, 10 May).

While academic challenge seemed to be at its peak for Cassie (2017, 10 May) when what she was learning was new to her, 'when you've never done something, it's always going to be a challenge: something new, something

different ... I'm interested in learning about it and seeing what it is', the challenge appeared to be at zero level when there was nothing new to learn. Thus, the repetitive nature of work done at home and in class at times, seemed to offer no challenge to Cassie. 'For homework, we might get told to read a chapter, and then we'd get to class, and then in class we'd read that chapter again … I learned it once, but the second time I just didn't feel like I was learning' (Cassie 2017, 10 May).

Rachel

Rachel (2017, 20 April) responded similarly to teacher expectations by working hard, 'So obviously them [teachers] setting an expectation ... I'd obviously try my hardest with all my assessments - trying to get as much information as I can on the topic.' However, while Cassie worked hard to prove her ability to teachers, Rachel's (2017, 20 April) response related more to being accepted by others: 'I don't like people not liking me.' Nevertheless, academic challenge for Rachel also came from within. Acknowledging herself as 'I'm someone who likes to know a lot of things', online activities with 'links to articles, or even YouTube videos that would introduce a topic or further explain a topic that we had discussed in class', made her 'want to learn further' (Rachel 2017, 20 April). Of 'things I had no idea about', she 'would go out and look for information. I would look for it a lot more thorough than what I would with something that I knew' (Rachel 2017, 20 April). In that she resembled Cassie who was most academically challenged by what was new.

Henry

Academic challenge for Henry was primarily to prove to himself that he could do university studies, especially after a long time not studying and with a history of hating school. 'That was really the challenge for myself, coming into uni. was to prove to myself that I could do it ... For someone who really hated school, coming back … The challenge in the classroom was wanting to be there' (Henry 2017, 28 April). On reflecting on his grades, Henry intentionally effected the necessary changes for him to move from a pass level to one that would make him feel accomplished.

> It was a pass, but it wasn't great … I suppose that was that make-or-break moment for me personally. Am I going to make the changes? Am I going to do this properly or am I just going to keep at this level of work and just skim by? That's not what I'm here to do. I get a feeling of accomplishment when I start to get it right and my grades started showing it. (Henry 2017, 28 April)

Once he had set himself on focussing on doing his best, the work Henry produced in turn encouraged him to keep doing his best, indicating that for Henry the academic challenge started from within first, before connecting to classroom activities that could academically challenge him.

> So as far as the activities in class … they just challenged me to produce my best work. I knew that I was prepared to do the work … When the work is set out, the work's good. It's properly done. It's thorough. It makes you want to be there because you want to do the work. I guess I was challenging myself and the work was challenging me, so I was trying to rise to the challenge. (Henry 2017, 28 April)

Through his experiences of academic challenge Henry (2017, 28 April) realised his capacity to achieve: 'it showed me that I am capable'. He was excited to be challenged to learn further, to the point that getting it wrong did not faze him, but further whet his interest to learn. 'Even being challenged by getting it wrong, it was still simply, 'Well I want to learn'. To be challenged was to be excited. 'You wake up and you're like, Oh, what am I going to learn today?' (Henry 2017, 28 April).

However, at times rather than prompting Henry to expand intellectually, academic challenge as set by the university appeared to veer more towards a level of complexity beyond his comprehension, that Henry would nevertheless strive to overcome.

> I had never read an article that has so many big words in all my life … So reading that and trying not only to understand what was being said, but also trying to figure out how I was going to summarise this information that I don't even understand … So that was really challenging ... I felt like

> this was just stupidly hard for the sake of being stupidly hard, but I ended up acing that assignment, which really surprised me.
> (Henry 2017, 28 April)

Against what appeared to him as an absence of concern from the university in providing support to meet such level of challenge, Henry revealed his greater motivation to succeed.

> In tertiary, it's like, 'Here's the information we need; provide it for us however you want to do … It doesn't matter if you're going to fail … So the challenge there was that I didn't have any real support apart from my own want to succeed. (Henry 2017, 28 April)

Equally absent was any university concern when work appeared too easy to adequately challenge students, as when Henry compared one of his subjects to a walk in the park.

> I felt every single assignment was a walk in the park. It didn't really take a lot of imagination or creativity to pass those assignments … Like I said, it was just busy work: that work wasn't challenging me. It wasn't making me try to think, 'How can I do this better?' It just made me think that I just got an easy HD [laughs]. (Henry 2017, 28 April)

Bob

As compared to Samara, Cassie, Rachel and Henry, Bob is the only one who appeared to be exclusively responsive to self in his experiences of academic challenge. Focussed on his goal and working hard to reach it, Bob gave little importance to teacher expectations. 'It doesn't necessarily have such an impact on me because I already know where I want to go and I'm already working very hard to do that anyway' (Bob 2017, 19 April). He was, however, ambivalent as to why he did not need to be academically challenged from without. He first ascribed it to age, as compared to his younger peers. 'With some of the younger students who, like I said, are still figuring out where they want to go, the teacher encouraging them or pushing them may be beneficial to them' (Bob 2017, 19 April). However, later he admitted that his younger peers could be as

goal-oriented as he was. ‘I'm very goal-oriented and I work hard towards my goals. There are young people out there who have got goals that they're working for and they work really hard for them … it's absolutely not just about age’ (Bob 2017, 19 April).

4.6.2 Engaging with knowledge: pure and applied knowledge

In what challenges them most, Samara, Bob and James revealed ways of engaging with knowledge that differed from the university’s approach from pure to applied knowledge. Their mode of reasoning was premised on the concrete to then move to theoretical understanding—for Samara it was by doing, while for Bob it occurred in understanding how things worked, and for James it was through observation.

Samara

While Samara rose to the challenge set by the university, she appeared to be most challenged in the mathematics class where learning revolved around the concrete.

> This would have to be maths class because every single class, the teacher would bring in resources and objects. To challenge us, we’d have to do them by ourselves … So it made me learn a lot ... If she gave us building blocks, we had to build it physically in 3D.
> (Samara 2017, 8 May)

That such learning context was intellectually stimulating to her was evident in her fondness for the Friday morning Maths class, ‘I love challenges. It was a challenge every Friday at 8 in the morning. It’s a good thing to wake up to’ (Samara 2017, 8 May).

Bob

Bob has already been shown to have risen to the challenge he set to himself to reach his goal, putting aside the need to be challenged by the university. Nevertheless, the fact remains that learning for him takes place in the university context. While he did not necessarily reject the university’s structured approach

from theory to practice, he appeared to favour the reverse. ‘What we’re doing here is we’re learning all of this theory about how A, B, C, D got developed when we don’t even know what A, B, C, D are yet. It’s the horse before the cart sort of thing’ (Bob 2017, 28 August). For Bob, theory comes after practice with a purpose for further improvement.

> ‘Right, to do X, Y, Z, you do this … We’d now learned how to do X, Y, Z. That might take a bit of time, obviously, depending on the complicated level of it, but you do that. But once you know how to do that, you learn why you do that – why did we decide to do it that way? How can we improve that? But how can you question how to improve it? That information or those processes come after the knowledge.
> (Bob 2017, 28 August)

From his experience there appeared to be an absence of immediacy between theory and practice that contributed to a loss of momentum in learning, as when the university taught theory and made no connection with real-life application.

> I still haven’t made a connection between the theory stuff that they taught us in those units to anything practical ... Maybe there's a reason they do it that way. If there is, I don't understand it, but for me: teach me what I need to do and teach me the understanding of why I do that, rather than teach me the theory of it and then just let me make up my own mind about how I'm going to do it. (Bob 2017, 28 August)

James

James was similar to Bob in the sense that he gave precedence to practice over theory, **‘**We can implement five activities better than one abstract idea that the teacher wants to get across to us’ (James 2017, 13 May). Theory for James has the importance of clarifying practice, ‘the theory has a purpose, but only as deeper enquiry. If you can’t understand something or you’re having trouble understanding something properly, that’s what I feel the theory is for’ (James 2017, 31 August). Nevertheless, he was closer to Samara than to Bob in his need to understand through the concrete first. Where Samara needed to do, James (2017, 31 August) needed to see: ‘I need things to be demonstrated to

me before I fully understand them'. A science experiment that he saw, allowed him to think further over it. 'It definitely helped me learn something because you could see what everyone else made. You look at what they made and you think of their reasons behind it' (James 2017, 31 August).

4.6.3 Benefits derived from what is learnt

Academic challenge, in the experiences of Cassie, Bob and James intersects with the benefits that they derive from what they learn. For Cassie, it would be about the reward in the form of marks. For Bob and James, it would be about the usefulness of what is learnt as regard their future jobs, though the two of them reveal different degrees of engagement with their learning.

Cassie

Marks as a measure of her learning appeared to challenge Cassie to do her best. 'You're getting graded on it, and it's all based on your learning and your work. It motivates you to get the best out of yourself and to see how much you've actually learned and what you can use' (Cassie 2017, 10 May). Thus, she intentionally sought her teachers after class to further discuss work to be assessed. 'I don't really like procrastinating, especially with assignments. Probably a week in advance, I'll go to class and, at the end, if I have any questions, I'll go and ask my tutor so that I can clear everything up' (Cassie 2017, 10 May). When there was no assessment at stake, Cassie's (2017, 10 May) defining characteristic of doing her best was seen to be in a lull, and her comment on online hurdle tasks is indicative of that state: 'It wasn't really encouraging. It was just something we had to do in order to pass'. Similarly, she commented on when she had to submit summaries of her readings and the given marks were not assessed: 'and they read it and give you a mark. It doesn't go towards your overall grade but you do have to pass it … You just don't really feel motivated if you're not getting a result for it. You just pass, you fail, and that's it' (Cassie 2017, 10 May).

Bob

As Bob (2017, 19 April) challenged himself to do his best, he balanced the importance of subjects as ‘need to know to be a good teacher’, against ‘the nice to know’, ‘fluff’ subjects that turn out to be theory-based, hence associating academic challenge with the usefulness of what is learnt.

> The first two units that we do are very 'fluff' units … They're not really necessary for being part of your degree in terms of what you're ever going to use when you walk away … I keep using the word 'fluffy' and I mean that because it's nice to know but you don't need to know it to do the job. (Bob 2017, 19 April)

James

Quite similar to Bob, James specified that, of the activities done in class, those that would be useful to James as a teacher were what held his interest, as well those that would allow him to get his degree. ‘If it’s not necessary, then why do it? If it’s not necessary to actually getting your degree or learning how to teach properly or getting experience in teaching’ (James 2017, 13 May). As James (2017, 13 May) considered the usefulness of the intellectual activities that he engaged in, he nevertheless narrowed down his intellectual activities to an almost exclusive focus on assignments, ‘Assignments is everything to me now.’ Where Cassie used assignments for their competitive dimension, James used assignments as a passport to a degree, and thus paid greater attention to assignment-related matters in class, to the point of downplaying anything else happening there.

> They [assignments] basically determine your pass or fail. A lot of the tutorials and lectures, they don’t talk about the assignments, or the assignments don’t have a lot to do with the actual course work. You could basically do an assignment and not have been to any of the classes because you can look up everything that they used in class via references and all that. Assessments are more important. (James 2017, 13 May)

4.7 Summary

In this chapter, the non-traditional students in this research were first seen to pass through a period of uncertainty when faced with ways of doing in the university culture with which they were unfamiliar. To support them, they brought their own system of meaning-making from their home, work experiences and class values into their first-year engagement with learning. Second, having invested themselves in their learning and development, the non-traditional students appeared to be at ease in the university context, while giving no sign of unease with their home background. The participants also appeared to project their current success to a future of personal betterment through socio-economic advancement, except for Henry who imagined a life focussed on others' welfare in society, and Bob whose projected future was not materially-focussed even if highly individualised. Third, regarding interaction with the teacher for their engagement with learning, the non-traditional students were reliant on the teacher to facilitate their understanding of the university knowledge discourse. They also looked for spaces to show their different knowledge and experiences, at times in confrontation with the teacher and at other times on almost equal terms with them. Fourth, when collaborative work was assessed by the university, the non-traditional students experienced conflictual relations with their peers that undermined their learning. In contrast, when marks were not at stake the participants experienced collaborative work as valuable for learning. Fifth, the value of academic challenge for the non-traditional students appeared to be stronger from within themselves than it was when it came from without, and while academic challenge could be tied to these students' own ways of approaching knowledge, it was also tied to their concerns for success and the usefulness of what they were learning.

While the above experiences of first-year engagement with learning are bound to the group of non-traditional students studied, this research is broadened in the next chapter by tying the experiences of engagement of the participants with theory.

Chapter Five - Discussion

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the results are discussed against a Bourdieusian backdrop with the 'transformative potential of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural capital and field' (Mills 2008, p. 87), and in relation to both the literature on student engagement and that on the first year. Bourdieu (1990, p. 53) 'never ruled out that the responses of the habitus may be accompanied by a strategic calculation tending to perform in a conscious mode' and in this research the habitus is not immutable, allowing for individual agency. Agentic players in the field, in turn stand to 'valorize the species of capital they preferentially possess' with the potential 'to transform, partially or completely, the immanent rules of the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 99).

In Section 5.2, while the non-traditional students in this research have to survey the rules of the game to become acclimatised to the university culture, they also deploy familial, experiential and symbolic capitals from their backgrounds to negotiate their engagement with learning. In Section 5.3, with identity as 'an expression of habitus' (Crozier, Reay & Clayton 2019, p. 925), in an academic space initially unfamiliar to them, the non-traditional students give indications of having developed academic learner selves by the end of their first-year engagement experiences. They show how their new selves sit with their home selves. Possible future selves of personal well-being can also be discerned, with glimpses of future selves concerned for society's well-being. Where habitus is seen to have been transformed in Section 5.3, the ensuing Sections 5.4,5.5 and 5.6 of the discussion unfold around the habitus in the process of transformation in the course of the first-year engagement experiences of the non-traditional students in this research.

Thus, in their interactions with teachers in Section 5.4, the non-traditional students enact nuances of the dominant discourse as well as a discourse different to university norms, to position themselves strategically in the field. As relations that matter to the non-traditional students in the university field, but at the same time as agents representative of that field (Thomson 2014), teachers—in the experiences of the non-traditional students—appear to

facilitate or hinder that process or even open the door to a completely different game in the field. In Section 5.5 while the evolving habitus prevails, Bourdieu's (1998) field as a field of forces and power is brought to the foreground to shed light on the engagement experiences of the non-traditional students in the field of collaborative work, as a subfield of the university field. These students' strategic positioning in the field of collaborative work for best outcome in the form of marks, are not necessarily conducive to learning. However, as the tension of competition and performance recedes from the field of collaborative work, the non-traditional students draw closer to their peers as learning is validated in a spirit of interdependence. This interdependence, nevertheless, does not galvanise them into concerns beyond personal welfare. Finally, in Section 5.6 academic challenge as experienced by the non-traditional students points to a habitus evolving in coalescence with the university field—as when they respond to expectations—and differently to that field, in their negotiation of the relationship between pure and applied knowledge. Yet as the non-traditional students tie academic challenge to utilitarian and career-oriented goals, dominant influences on their university education prevail, leaving little space for them to seek to be challenged to see the broader world differently.

5.2 Alternative forms of capital from the home background

As the non-traditional students' home resources, work experience and class values are brought to interact with a reading of Bourdieu's work and the extant literature, unacknowledged forms of capital that these students bring to their engagement with learning are revealed. On the borders of Bourdieu's (1986a) field that Thomson (2014) describes as a site of struggle over the value of the capital, the notion of cultural capital as competencies, skills and knowledge acquired solely through membership to a privileged group is thus turned around with the non-traditional students gradually working their way to centre field. These students show themselves 'as individuals imbued with strengths and capabilities' (O'Shea et al. 2017, p. 58), tracing a trajectory that departs from considerations of non-traditional students as deficit-ridden in student engagement (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis 2015; James, Krause & Jennings 2010), and showing themselves as agentic players in the university field.

5.2.1 Getting into the university field

The non-traditional students in this research are seen to pass through a period of uncertainty before developing familiarity with the university field. Their initial challenge is to delineate ‘university ways’ in the form of university expectations. Collier and Morgan (2008) have argued that for students to have the ability to understand and respond to university expectations, and apply their academic skills, they need to master the university student role. On examining the fit between university expectations and students’ understanding of those expectations, they found incongruities between what are largely implicit expectations related to tacit understandings. On further comparing traditional and non-traditional students, Collier and Morgan (2008) found the level of incongruity more among non-traditional students—with them wishing they had more details about university expectations—than traditional students, more familiar with the university’s cultural codes. Based on that difference, Collier and Morgan (2008) have associated the need to master the student role almost exclusively with students from non-traditional backgrounds. Spiegler and Bednarek (2013, p. 326) too have attributed ‘faulty understanding’ of the student role to students who are the first generation in their family to attend university.

Taking the position to neither blame the university nor low SES students who are the focus of her study, Devlin (2013) has advocated teaching these students the student role. Her argument is that

> If the tacit expectations inherent in, and practices undertaken at university are within a socio-cultural subset peculiar to the middle and upper socio-economic levels, this may facilitate the success of students familiar with the norms and discourses of these groups and exclude students from low socio-economic status. (Devlin 2013, p. 942)

An alternative that would not target any specific student group could be found in clarifying university expectations for all within institutional structures and having ‘clear consistent information available throughout an ongoing transition’ (Goldring et al. 2018, p. 1). Nevertheless, this would still set the university in a dominant position with non-traditional students having to align with the

institution's ways. With a focus on first in the family students, King, Luzeckyj and McCann's (2019) argument is that

> expectation is placed on the new student to 'adjust' … What is needed is greater recognition of what students have to say … Valuing their perspectives and standpoints helps to challenge entrenched institutional practices. (p. 59)

Non-traditional students' own ways can also inform meaning in the university context. In their experiences of engagement with learning, the non-traditional students in this research showed the resources they deployed in their agentic navigation of an institution new to them, offering insights into capitals derived from their backgrounds.

5.2.2 Familial capital

The non-traditional students demonstrated strengths rooted in their family and its immediate circle, characterised by values, resources, strategies and knowledge that positively impacted on how they negotiated their first-year learning and development. This can be associated with Yosso's (2005) familial capital. In questioning the exclusivity of Bourdieu's cultural capital enjoyed by students of privileged backgrounds, Yosso (2005, p. 69) brought to light the rich 'array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts' of the under-privileged students in her study. Yosso's (2005) expansion of Bourdieu's cultural capital takes the form of a community cultural framework constituting six forms of capital—aspirational, familial, navigational, social, linguistic and resistant—that contribute to the educational success of the aforementioned students. Familial capital, as 'cultural wealth [that] engages a commitment to community wellbeing and expands the concept of family to include an understanding of kinship' (Yosso 2005, p. 79), is a healthy connection with the resources within the family and the community that in turn 'inform[s] emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness.'

Similarly, for the non-traditional students in this research, familial capital traced a trajectory of flow rather than field demarcation from their backgrounds to the university. The motivation for Cassie to do her best, came from having been

raised by parents who, while not exerting pressure, encouraged her 'to leave nothing in the tank at the end of the day' (Cassie 2017, 10 May) as a measure of her ability. Cassie's consideration of her non-university educated parents as 'educated in terms of the world' (Cassie 2017, 10 May) indicates an educational consciousness beyond structural borders, manifested in Cassie herself in the form of her appreciation of excellence. Here, as in Gofen's (2009) study on first generation students, parents are shown to be strongly oriented towards their children's education. Parents want their children to succeed academically, and they work at nurturing values, beliefs and attitudes that will allow their children to enact successful educational outcomes. As such, parents develop the academic self-concepts of their children (Saenz et al. 2018), indicating the importance of the family in leveraging first-year success. The achievement-related beliefs of parents have in turn influenced their children's own perceptions of the value of learning and education (Eccles et al. 2006).

Closely related, there are manifestations of 'the voice of others' from the backgrounds of the non-traditional students in this research 'providing the impetus to both commence and continue university studies' (O'Shea 2016, pp. 44-45). Henry's mother, having discovered in him the skill to teach, encouraged him in this direction: 'My mum always said I'd make a good teacher and I've always listened to my mum … it was always in the back of my mind' (Henry 2017, 4 September). Parents' beliefs in their children's abilities are turned into educational outcomes by the latter, and side by side there is their children's significant sense of respect for their parents' sacrifice in life (Gofen 2009). Henry did see his mother carefully managing the little money they had (Henry 2017, 4 September). This reciprocity of commitment between Henry and his mother has also been seen to underlie the relationship between parents and children among low income, high achieving students in Li, Savage and Ward's (2008) study. In addition to the voice of others in Cassie's and Henry's families, there were supportive silences in the form of James' parents' silent approval of his choice of teaching as a career (James 2017, 13 May). Unlike O'Shea's (2015) first in family students whose parents' trajectory from school to work caused silence in the home about further studies, James' dad preferred to be

silently supportive rather than directive, after having failed in his endeavours to have his first son take a teaching career.

Support in the form of advice, information and assistance derived from networks around the family (Hope & Quinlan 2020; Mishra 2020) had an input in the non-traditional students' experiences of engagement in this research. Samara (2017, 8 May) was strengthened by being 'prepared from home.' Her mother gave her advice from having seen Samara's sister do a first year, two years earlier, and her sister was herself intent on helping Samara from her own first-year experience. Samara, together with her cousins and her high school friends, discussed their university studies, and encouraged each other in their university endeavours. The intricate network woven around Samara reflects the 'sense of community … the willingness to help each other out' that Delahunty (2020, 28 October) found among students marked by equity factors at a regional university campus. Samara's mother, sister, cousins and friends also had commonalities with what Li, Savage and Ward (2008) refer to as the 'anchor helper', who is a person in the home or outside the immediate family offering guidance for school progress. The support not only flows from home to university but is also reproduced at university with Samara revealing her perspective on learning as 'social interaction', and seeking help from her sister to then help her peers (Samara 2017, 8 May).

Support from the home also came in the form of 'tangible and practical strategies to assist the learner' (O'Shea 2016, p. 44), like Rachel's parents who would keep from disturbing her from her studies (Rachel 2017, 20 April). James enjoyed the emotional stability of coming from a peaceful family (James 2017, 13 May), indicating the home setting itself is influential in the student's success (Gofen 2009). Overall, 'These resources were not necessarily visible or valued at an institutional level but often fundamentally impacted upon learners' educational experiences' (O'Shea 2016, p. 44).

Henry (2017, 28 April) showed that by being raised to think about complex issues—in his house everything was open to discussion—learning was fostered in everyday life at home (see also Mandara & Murray 2007). This capacity to think critically over issues, Henry (2017, 28 April) took into his first year: 'I'm

here to learn and I want to ask questions.' However, Henry's fascination with numbers, shaped at home through scarcity of money, was not well understood within formal education. Despite his lifeworld knowledge of Maths, he did poorly at school with him pointing to his teacher as failing to understand him (Henry 2017, 28 April). While Henry (2017, 28 April) acknowledged that he was then an 'angry' boy, the limits on what counted as formal school knowledge (Stahl et al. 2021) could also explain the school's failure to understand his lifeworld knowledge of Maths. In contrast, the lifeworld knowledge that Henry brought to the university Maths class (Henry 2017, 28 April) seems to have been valued and 'enhanced through formal pedagogical practice' (Stahl et al. 2021, p. 57), while mediated by his relationship with the teacher to whom he attributed in part his success in Maths (Section 5.4). As argued by Stahl et al. (2021, p. 57) in their study on the capital that students bring from home, 'Making more connections across familial, community and place-based knowledges and formal academic learning could open up spaces to further enable engagement.'

Beside the family and its immediate circle, figures in the school environment were instrumental in the academic pursuits of the non-traditional students in this research. Spiegler and Bednarek (2013, p. 324) argue that 'Teachers, guidance counsellors and other adults at school have a vital role in creating ideas about one's future.' For the students in this research, teachers who had an impact on them at school acted as role models. Rachel wanted to emulate that 'lovely teacher' who was knowledgeable and respectful of her students (Rachel 2017, 20 April). Similarly, Bob sought to learn from his genius Polish school teacher (Bob 2017, 19 April). While the latter explained at too complex a level—testimony of his genius—Bob wished to bring the level down to benefit his own students. In contrast to both Rachel and Bob, and from the subtractive teacher model of his school years, Henry wanted to become a teacher who would be cognizant of his students' own world (Henry 2017, 28 April).

The non-traditional students in this study, who were all successful in their first-year learning and development, shared commonalities in family backgrounds that strengthened their educational endeavours. As such, the home positively shines for the non-traditional students as the 'most enduring ecological context'

(Massey et al. 2003, p. 46) in which people, attitudes and behaviours impact on members' educational trajectory. Deficit thinking that views non-traditional students as having inadequate cultural skills and knowledge for success at university (Devlin 2013), similarly frames the 'families of origin as lacking the academic, cultural and moral resources' to support their children's educational success (Smit 2012, p. 370). However, the findings in this research point to the family as a source that contributes to the educational success of the non-traditional students in their engagement with learning. Their success is not despite their family but significantly due to them; non-material resources in the family are used and channelled for educational outcome. By nurturing spaces conducive to educational achievements, the families of the non-traditional students endowed them with capital—albeit unrecognised in the educational context—to face challenges encountered in their first year.

5.2.3 Experiential capital

Outside the family network and its immediate circle, there are other biographical moments in the non-traditional students' backgrounds that appear to be reservoirs of skills and knowledge that they draw from to contribute to their first-year experiences of engagement. Bob, James and Rachel, whose non-traditional profile is characterised by being first-in-the-family and mature-aged, have non-linear life trajectories in the form of out-of-home experiences in jobs and elsewhere in the community. These are sources of skills and knowledge which, when brought on the borders Bourdieu's field (Thomson 2014) took the shape of experiential capital that the non-traditional students used to move towards centre-field. Referring to a possible silence from Yosso's (2005) framework, O' Shea (2016, p. 46) explains experiential capital as 'knowledge sets … derived from life and professional experiences' in her study of first-in-the-family, mature-aged students.

The experiential capital of the non-traditional students in this research helped them variously to advance with their learning and development. As an ex-police officer, Bob (2017, 19 April) developed leadership skills 'standing there and projecting to the people around you that you're in control and everything's cool and they're all going to be okay.' He also developed problem solving skills as an

army man on deployment that he used when working collaboratively with his peers (Section 5.5). When James worked as a coach at the sports clinic, he developed the skill of relating to kids that became helpful to him when he was on placement in primary schools (James 2017, 13 May). From years spent in the retail industry, Rachel had developed a work ethic that she applied to discipline herself when studying (Rachel 2017, 20 April). Spiegler and Bednarek (2013, p. 327) draw attention to successful first-generation students who, with 'a strict work ethic acquired in earlier work experience, time-management skills and the ability to work in a goal-oriented manner enabl[ing] them to diligently follow the curriculum.' Work ethic is also seen to be rooted in the experiences of working-class students in Lehmann (2009b). Side by side with skills and knowledge acquired from work experience, there is deeper understanding resulting from life experience itself. Thus, Bob (2017, 19 April) ascribes his capacity to voice his opinion to his greater life experience, 'I have had either direct involvement in that throughout my life, or I have an understanding of that.' As O' Shea (2016, p. 46) points out, 'previous lived experience had provided them with a depth of understanding that could be applied to their learning.'

Experiential capital could also act as a conduit in better understanding theory in the first-year learning and development of the non-traditional students in this research. Mobley and Brawner (2019, p. 362) have demonstrated that first in the family engineering students' prior 'exposure to the technical professions associated with engineering practice in blue collar or service occupations' helped them to better understand engineering in the university context. For instance, one student who was 'always building things' like his machinist fabricator father and grandfather explained his experiential advantage thus: 'A lot of engineering students … learn a lot of theory, but they don't know the backside of a hammer … and don't have any practical experience' (Mobley & Brawner 2019, p. 362). Another acknowledged his 'formative experience' working in a hospital maintenance department 'getting dirty on the mechanical side of everything' (Mobley & Brawner 2019, p. 362). While Bob, James and Rachel used prior work skills and knowledge to better apprehend aspects of their first-year learning, they did not directly relate these to the theoretical dimension of their learning. However, since Bob and James would later reveal

their preference to apprehend knowledge in its applied form (Section 5.6), the concept of experiential capital takes on additional significance in their engagement with learning.

5.2.4 Symbolic capital

Henry (2017, 4 September) talked about the strength that he brought to university from his home background in terms of his working-class values, and this appears to be a new form of symbolic capital. Considering his working-class community as supportive and helpful in contrast to the upper class, who he said are greedy and stabbing each other in the back (Henry 2017, 4 September), he used his working-class values and experiences of mutual support to help his peers in class (Henry 2017, 28 April), and to define his own learning and development at university as not an isolating one (Henry 2017, 4 September). Symbolic capital 'commonly called prestige, reputation and renown' (Bourdieu 1985, p. 724) and 'another name for distinction' (Bourdieu 1985, p. 731), acquires new forms of prestige and distinction in this research, allowing Henry to negotiate aspects of his first-year learning and development, in the shape of moral boundary marking.

Just like Henry in this research, Lamont's (2000, p. 108) working-class men compared themselves with those socio-economically above them, identifying the 'poor quality of their [the upper middle-class] interpersonal relationships and their lack of sincerity' in relation to their own working-class values. Lamont (2000, p. 101) explains moral boundary marking 'not as an explicit goal and act of resistance' but 'as an unintended consequence of the search for respect and alternative spheres of worth.' Lamont (2000) considers moral boundary marking of the working-class men in her study thus,

> many of the men I talked to find meaning, value, and worth in their own lives, and they achieve this in part by stressing moral criteria of success that are available to all (such as personal integrity and good interpersonal relationships) and by downplaying the status criteria that are the dominant currency of the upper middle-class world. (pp. 100-101)

Similar mechanisms of moral boundary marking have been seen in Waterfield, Beagan and Mohamed (2019, p. 386), where academics with working-class roots demonstrated having symbolic capital by aligning themselves with their working-class values when confronted with 'those upper-class jerks.'

Closer to the working-class university students in Lehmann's (2009b, p. 641) study, 'who draw from their class status as a source of strength', Henry's working-class values that he brings on the borders of Bourdieu's field permit him to evolve in the field. Rather than dissociating him from university, his working-class values appear to have helped him enhance his learning and development in his first year. Parallel to Lehmann's (2009b, p. 641) students, whose 'working-class moral advantages' appear to be 'consolidated with their ambition to enter the middle class', Henry's working-class values and background can be seen to co-habit with a developing academic identity (see Section 5.3). The one closer to Henry in expressing class difference, though not explicitly, is Samara. She (Samara 2017, 8 May) refers to herself together with her cousins as wanting to make a change from the lives their parents have had by 'breaking the intergenerational cycle' (Gofen 2009, p. 104), implying social mobility. Where Henry's narrative is steeped in class consciousness, it is less so with Samara. However, both go on to transcend class positions in the development of their academic identities (Section 5.3).

At the same time though, Henry's emphasis on how his working-class values were supportive of the team, accords a community focus to his symbolic capital, which can also be perceived in aspects of the familial and experiential capitals already discussed. The point is that while the non-traditional students in this research have been revealed to have familial, experiential and symbolic capitals as alternative forms of capital that they use in their engagement with their learning, these capitals are not exclusively focussed on self. Indeed, there are some indications that these new forms of capital also allow a concern for community well-being in the non-traditional students in this research.

Hence, Samara used her familial capital in the form of her support network to help her peers. The same capital nurtured in her a belief in learning that expanded from self to the social context, 'You get to learn more from others, but

when you're not social … You're left alone' (Samara 2017, 8 May). James connected learning to the state of being a human, which humanity he shares with all in society, 'If you become a lot more 'human' it's a lot easier for people to understand you and connect with you' (James 2017, 13 May). Connecting with the broader context from within the family, brought out in Henry an in-depth understanding of the world and a desire to question, 'We talked about everything at home. Everything was up for discussion … I'm here to learn and I want to ask questions'; 'I'm asking those questions that need to be asked' (Henry 2017, 28 April). Also, Bob's experiential capital in the form of leadership and problem-solving skills nurtured within the community, reproduced its communal dimension when he worked collaboratively with his peers (Bob 2017, 19 April). The non-traditional students' familial, experiential and symbolic capitals in this research served their advancement in the university field and also indicated instances of social consciousness. In a university field experienced 'like a waterfall' (James 2017, 13 May), a 'sieve', a 'hurdle' and 'sorting through' (James 2017, 31 August), by a helpless and isolated James with his 'little bucket' (James 2017, 13 May), the said capitals offered engagement experiences that speak of greater equity for students from non-traditional backgrounds.

5.3 Identity formation

The discussion in this section flows from a reading of habitus as not static, with the individual led to 'confront events that cause self-questioning, whereupon habitus begins to operate at the level of consciousness and the person develops new facets of self' (Reay 2004, pp. 437- 438). The non-traditional students' investment in the university field through their engagement with learning leads to the formation of academic selves that, while not antagonistic to their home selves, project future selves that appear to be largely focused on personal well-being, with much less concern for society's well-being.

5.3.1 The academic self

Holding to the safety and reassurance of the familiar, Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010, p. 112) explain, adversely impacts on the development of the academic self, while engagement with the unfamiliar could lead to confident academic

learners. In this research, moments of uncertainty and disquiet gradually give place to the non-traditional students' investment of the field. They have already been seen to use capitals from their own backgrounds to better apprehend the university environment. By the end of the year, there is transformation in that these students see themselves as successful in the university environment, having been able to assert themselves in the field by committing to a course of action characterised by hard work and choice-making.

In this respect, Samara (2017, 7 September) 'would try anything' 'to make sure that it's correct' in responding to unfamiliar university expectations. By the end of the year, she felt 'strong' (Samara 2017, 8 May), revealing her sense of achievement in having understood and performed the same university expectations. Cassie committed to working hard, and having completed her first year she felt a sense of accomplishment in having done 'something meaningful' (Cassie 2017, 10 May), that she can bring forward in her following years at university. She also felt a better understanding of self and self with respect to others, hence the belief that she had become a 'better person' (Cassie 2017, 31 August). What Lehmann (2014, p. 11) indicates of the successful working-class students in his study is reflective of Cassie and Samara's new identities as academic learners: 'They not only spoke about gaining new knowledge, but also about growing personally, changing their outlooks on life … developing new dispositions.'

There are variations though in the non-traditional students' development of their academic selves. Of all the participants in this research, Henry appears to have developed a more pronounced academic identity. Like Samara and Cassie, he committed to hard work, but beyond the good grades, Henry (2017, 28 April) 'wanted to be a part of it' as well. Consequently, Henry (2017, 28 April) deployed his efforts in such a way that by the end of the year, he realised that 'I'm in the right place.' He felt 'like an academic' and liked that 'that coat fits' (Henry 2017, 4 September). Henry's strong intentionality in developing an academic identity is possibly in reaction to his history of failure as a school boy. Unlike Cassie and Samara who do not report failure at school, Henry acknowledged being an 'angry' school boy who felt misunderstood at school

and thought that the burger or surf shop was what lay ahead for him (Henry 2017, 4 September). However, as he found himself in a situation where the university was 'throwing work at him', Henry rose to the challenge, having 'something to prove to the university and you are not going to stomp me out' (Henry 2017, 4 September). 'In place of anger … [there was] a strong investment in the academic field' (Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2009, p. 1114), and with the development of a self that encompasses his success at university there was a sense of appeasement for Henry as the angry boy was no more. Henry (2017, 4 September) himself noticed that he had become less reactive and more understanding of the world.

A path traced out for success in the university context is also about making the right choices. The participants made the choice to engage with an unfamiliar external world for success to ensue. To Cassie's (2017, 31 August) 'It's all your choice', 'I just chose that I wanted to do that so I did', there is Henry's (2017, 28 April) 'When I decided to go back to uni. that was just it' and Samara's (2017, 7 September) 'I wanted to be successful', and finally Rachel's (2017, 1 September) determination to 'stick to a choice'. The suggestion in this research is that the non-traditional students—unlike their traditional counterparts who are 'like fish in water' (Bourdieu 1992) in this milieu—made conscious choices to turn cultural constraints into opportunities to achieve success, this in turn impacting on the shape of their habitus. Of choice as a conduit to the formation of self, Cote and Levine (2002, p. 2) argue that 'many people have not developed the means for coping with a process that allows them to make choices, the consequences of which they may have to live with the remainder of their lives.' With choice, there is the accompanying responsibility to one's actions, and Cote and Levine (2002, p. 2) add that 'Although many people welcome the ability to choose, they may not be so happy with having to assume the responsibility for the outcomes of those choices.' Cote and Levine (2002, p. 2) associate difficulties in identity formation to being uncommitted to any course of future action, among other factors. Cassie, Samara, Rachel and Henry take responsibility for their choices by being committed to achieve success in their first-year learning and development.

Unlike the working-class students in Ball et al. (2002) who submitted to constraints in their limited choices of universities to attend, and at the same time reproduced inequalities in education, the non-traditional students in this research enacted a conception of choice associated with responsibility. This relates to the student's agency as conceptualised for student engagement in this research. As seen in Chapter Two, the student as an agent in their engagement with learning is a reflexive individual who is also responsive to their context (Archer 2003). Choice with responsibility, as well as agency, can be further associated with a Bourdieusian perspective that would see the non-traditional students in this research 'trouble the borders' to move centre-field (Crozier, Reay & Clayton 2019, p. 923) in their engagement with learning.

In contrast to Cassie, Samara, Rachel and Henry, the development of the academic identities of James and Bob presented differently. As compared to the first-mentioned, James' (2017, 31 August) choice to commit to his learning and development is articulated rather weakly as 'uni. I just want to pass', indicating a different standard of success. This likely influenced his exclusive focus on assessments and 'a few things you need to do' (James 2017, 13 May) to get a job in four years' time, because it is 'the person behind the paperwork that gets the job' (James 2017, 31 August). To James' lukewarm will to flex his habitus academically, Bob's academic learner self that appeared not to be boldly defined either, was not a result of choosing to be less committed to his studies. Nor did it indicate the logic of 'necessity' to 'taste' (Bourdieu 1990) that could result from his competing responsibilities as a family breadwinner, father and partner supplanting his academic activities like the mature-aged students in Kahu et al. (2014), who indicated the challenges of managing multiple responsibilities and their studies. Rather his preference for the 'need to know' teaching tools over the 'nice to know' theoretical dimension of the course is likely to have proceeded from his own self-definition as a pragmatic person (Bob 2017, 19 April). Closely related to his pragmatic view of the world, and possibly influential in it, was Bob's experiential capital acquired in the police force and in the army, which he used for the advancement of his learning in his first year**.** He may well have been demonstrating his negotiation of dominant cultural norms 'through the selective appropriation … of what he wants and

needs … to satisfy his own identity formation' (Crozier, Reay & Clayton 2019, p. 931).

In all, the first-year non-traditional students in this research managed not to succumb to Bourdieu's predicted hysteresis, that is, a form of alienation of the subject from the society to which they did not belong (Hardy 2014), despite not being an initial product of that social world like 'fish in water' (Bourdieu 1992).

5.3.2 The academic self in co-existence with the home background self

In seeking to position themselves in the field constituted by the university, there does not appear to be a disjunction between the non-traditional students' development of their academic selves and their home background selves. As argued by Crozier, Reay and Clayton (2019, p. 929), 'change and development can take multiple forms and impact in varying ways on identity but do not necessarily involve rejecting the original self.' Seemingly, the non-traditional students would have 'hybrid identities' (Crozier, Reay & Clayton 2019). While now familiar with the rules of the university game and able to play it, they have not developed antagonism for that other field with which they were already familiar, and which is their home background. There was no apparent 'painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus' (Baxter and Britton 2001, p. 99). The formation of new identities at university did not incur conflict with the students' home backgrounds to the level portrayed in the studies discussed below.

Thomas and Quinn (2007) note in their study the ambivalence between working-class parents wishing their children to go to university and the fear of them abandoning family norms and values. Kaufman (2003) finds university students dissociating themselves from their working-class family and friends. 'Hidden injuries of class' were inflicted on parents wishing for the advancement of their children, explains Lehmann (2013, p. 2), and the same injuries were similarly inflicted on these children in experiencing the conflict of separation. Still other findings depict students straddling two worlds but belonging to none, experiencing the 'alienation from their own pasts, families, and cultural backgrounds' and at the same time 'lack[ing] a feeling of belongingness in the

middle-class worlds that they have entered' (Aries & Seider 2007, p. 140). In Lehmann (2014, p. 3), the students carry with them the 'continued feelings of being outsiders, having lost their true selves, and feeling like frauds and imposters. As a foil to all these, Samara's (2017, 7 September) family sit in awe and admiration, listening to her new-found knowledge, noticing her greater confidence and the 'big words' that she used in her conversations, they themselves having been part of the network supporting Samara in her learning and development.

To some extent the non-traditional students in this research are closer to those depicted in Reay, Crozier and Clayton's (2010, p. 116) study in which distancing from the home background did not take place, though these authors noted ambivalences on the part of both students and parents. Reay, Crozier and Clayton's (2010) explanation for this is that the process of managing the tension between home background and academic dispositions had started long before coming to university. Nevertheless, the authors remain vague in situating the context of the negotiation of that tension. In a prior study (Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2009) though, mention is made of the high school as the site for the negotiation of that tension, the assumption being that prior success for the working-class students at high school implied a history of negotiating working-class norms with the school's middle-class norms. The non-traditional students in this research had had various school trajectories, from doing poorly at school like Henry, to moving from high school to a sports school like James, and to Cassie, Samara, Bob and Rachel completing high school with no explicit indications of excellence like those in Reay, Crozier and Clayton's (2009) study. Crozier Reay and Clayton's (2019, p. 926) argument that 'there must have already been something in these students' habitus which has enabled them to transcend fields—from the non-university [high school] to the university context' remains hypothetical for the non-traditional students in this research. What is conspicuous as a common denominator among them though is the positive influence of their home backgrounds, as in Matos (2015) and Webber (2017), on their current university trajectory.

Arguably the nurture, skills, experiences and values from the home background of the non-traditional students, conceptualised as familial, experiential and symbolic capital in this research, sustained them in their first year, suggesting at the same time the home background's contribution to the formation of their academic selves. 'Rather than acting as a barrier … [their] background can be interpreted as the reason they attended university and were successful once there' (Lehmann 2014, p. 11), hence the apparent absence of conflict within the non-traditional students in the formation of new identities in their first year. It is likely that the home background provided the stability for them to manage the tension of change accompanying the development of new identities. The non-traditional students' home background identities could be said to have offered them 'ontological security' (Giddens 1991 as cited in Lehmann 2014) for the development of their academic learner identity. Nevertheless, as will be seen in Sections 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6, the non-traditional students in this research did not take up the university discourse uncritically in their engagement with learning. This relates to Crozier, Reay and Clayton's (2019) hybrid identity, which they saw as offering the possibility to challenge dominance.

In Ingram's (2011, p. 301) study of successful working-class students, the home identity seems to be sitting in a liminal space once these students are settled in life, 'it's probably going to subliminally go along my life and always be there but it's not going to always be like how I act.' Elsewhere, Lee and Kramer (2013) have argued that an academic self in working class students in cohabitation with their home selves would suggest that they are still in the process of social mobility. Still, Lehmann's (2014) argument is that multi-class navigators would not limit social mobility to themselves personally but would make their mobility instrumental to their family's mobility. While the non-traditional students in this research maintained their home background identities alongside their new-found academic identities, 'hybridisation is not a bringing together of equal parts,' as Crozier, Reay and Clayton (2019, p. 932) suggest. How these two selves could play out in the future, can be inferred in the way the non-traditional students see their possible future selves. This is discussed in the next section.

5.3.3 The current self and the possible future self

Success in their first year gave rise to an imagined future that appears to relate to the non-traditional students' success. Where Bourdieu has often been criticised for ignoring the capacity of the working class to imagine (Crossley 2014), Bourdieu's theory revisited in this study is open to non-traditional students imagining a future of possibilities. Cassie saw herself as enjoying a stable family life and enjoying a life-style different from her current one. 'So eventually when I finish uni, I'd like to earn a stable income, have a house, have a family' (Cassie, 2017, 10 May). Samara (2017, 8 May) wanted to take a photo of her first-year achievement and associated this milestone with her long-term goal of making an intergenerational change up the socio-economic ladder. James (2017, 13 May) combined personal satisfaction with material success, 'If you have a job that makes you happy and you enjoy doing it and you're not living in a garage.' Rachel (2017, 20 April) saw 'something that's obviously to do with teaching … comfortable enough that I can live perfectly fine.' It is probable that these students' self-concepts as successful university students have paved the way to a vision of possible selves in the future that is associated with their current success. Ryan and Irie (2014, p.116) argue that 'For a mental self-representation to be plausible as a possible self, it must fit the current narrative of the self and not break with the trajectory of existing plot lines.'

In the same line of thought, Erikson (2007, p. 348) points out that, 'Possible selves include an experience of what it would be like to be in the future state in question.' A further suggestion of Erikson's (2007, pp. 351-352) is that 'participants' personalized meaning of future states and actions' are based on the understanding that 'possible selves ought to be seen as having a dimension of being an agent in the future.' Erikson's agent to future selves, that Ryan and Irie (2014, p.113) in turn define as having 'a capacity to act volitionally and affect outcomes' can also be related to the non-traditional students' current selves as the likely fruit of their agency (Archer 2003) in their engagement with learning. The socio-cultural space in which the non-traditional students view their possible future selves would not be dissimilar to the socio-cultural space of the university in which the participants have developed their academic selves.

Yet, for Henry it is his home background self that appears to bear most on his future self.

Henry (2017, 28 April) wanted to become the teacher ‘for kids who don’t want to learn and don’t want to be there’, projecting a future with a concern for the broader good and by the same stroke bringing into salience his community concern from his home background. This future of collective well-being contrasts with the pattern of university success and a future of individual well-being through socioeconomic advancement projected by Samara, Cassie, Rachel and James. While Henry too had wanted to be successful at university—and he had revealed himself as most wanting to be part of the university—an imagined future which is not as bent on personal success alone, raises questions about the degree of relevance of his current academic experience to a future beyond the personal. It is equally concerning that as future teachers Samara, Cassie, Rachel and James project future selves that make abstraction of their participation to the life of society.

While a future of economic individualism and a future for the broader good appear to define Samara, Cassie, Rachel and James on one side and Henry on the other, a future increasingly detached from social structures was what Bob aspired to. When Bob considered success in the future, he made abstraction of the acquisition of economic goods while showing increasing responsibility in defining his personal biography. ‘It doesn't mean that you're rich, it doesn't mean that you've got a big house or car … To me, success is for yourself as an individual. It's achieving the things that you want to achieve in your life’ (Bob 2017, 19 April). In the same manner in which he constructed his subjectivity in the university context choosing ‘what he wants and needs’ (Crozier, Reay & Clayton 2019, p. 931), Bob projected a future determined by what he wants and needs to mitigate the influence of social structures. ‘This does not mean that such social forms no longer exist … they have less relevance to people’s lives … the understanding of the individual and his or her relationship to society has changed’ (Middlemiss 2014, p. 931). As such, Bob was projecting a form of individualisation that gave him greater agency in his subjectivity, while downplaying relations with others in his world.

5.4 With teachers: from the normative in the university field and beyond

With the habitus of the non-traditional students evolving in the course of their first-year experience of engagement with learning, and with teachers standing as legitimate agents of the institutional field, for having an accumulation of capital valued in that field (Thomson 2014), the discussion in this section brings to light the self-interest of these students as well as their vulnerability, in their interaction with teachers. They seek to counter their vulnerability through opportunities to express what they know as different to the university discourse, with some instances of them questioning their own education for self and for others, hence giving indications of emancipation in the field.

5.4.1 Self-interest and silences in the field

In using their teachers as academic points of reference, the non-traditional students were inclined to adjust their habitus, gradually internalising the dominant discourse of knowledge for them to reach the future to which they aspired. For Cassie (2017, 31 August), teachers were the ‘experts’, Samara (2017, 7 September) said that they were ‘correct’, Henry (2017, 28 April) found them ‘very informative’, Bob (2017, 19 April) ‘can’t fault any of them’, and James (2017, 13 May) thought that they were ‘knowledgeable’, with Rachel (2017, 20 April) considering them as ‘more knowledgeable than us’. Bourdieu’s symbolic violence as complicity with the dominant worldview to subjugate oneself (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), which complicity occurs ‘not because we necessarily agree with it, or because it is in our interests, but because there does not seem to be any alternative’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002, p. 96), appears less likely for these non-traditional students. It would be in their interest that they look to their teachers: they internalise and accept the dominant discourse as useful to their personal advancement though they made emancipatory moves too, as seen in Section 5.4.2 below.

While the non-traditional students have been shown to be agentic to their learning and development through hard work and choice-making (Section 5.3.1), there is a level of responsibility on the part of the teachers as agents of the university to facilitate their students’ first-year trajectory in their engagement with learning. In the experiences of the non-traditional students in this research,

this responsibility does not appear to have been sustained throughout by their teachers. This is when Samara (2017, 8 May) lost trust in the teacher, and Cassie (2017, 10 May) and Henry (2017, 28 April) lost respect for them. They emotionally disengaged from the teacher. Nevertheless, inclined to a transformative habitus these students looked for an alternative by reverting to their own hard work to learn what they did not through their interactions with the teacher. ‘So, I just took the learning in my own hands’, says Henry (2017, 28 April). Under such conditions, interpreting university knowledge independently of the teacher lends a new but less shiny definition to the university’s notion of independent learning.

As an antithesis to learner dependence and its association with individual failure, independent learning has value in the context of higher education’s current conception of the independent and successful individual. Such individuals are ‘expected to take full responsibility for their own lives … as self-reliant, self-managing autonomous individuals, engaging in the ‘choice’ practices of the market economy … free from any dependence on the state’ (Leathwood 2006, p. 614). However, as it appears here, expectations of the teacher in their roles as teachers would not make dependent individuals of the non-traditional students, nor would independent learning absolve the institution and their agents from their responsibilities. As Samara (2017, 8 May) said, ‘If it wasn’t for them [teachers], who else would I ask really?’ While it would not be without self-interest that the students in this research turn to their teachers, relying on them as a key source of knowledge also presents an unequal power relation, with these students being on the vulnerable side.

Power imbalance experienced through the teacher–student interaction seemed to impede progress. The non-traditional students found themselves in situations where silence was thrust upon them, rendering their own knowledge insignificant. Listening to the teacher without hearing her own voice made Cassie (2017, 10 May) feel inferior and angry: ‘She talks at us. It’s not a conversation’, ‘I think you just feel … a bit spoken down … That makes me angry … some of them just weren’t or they weren’t willing to.’ Bob’s remark on his peers’ silence because of the teacher’s ultimate power to pass or fail the

student would indicate a system nurturing such silence. ‘They [Bob’s peers] don't want to rock the boat … they don't want to have something that could possibly reflect on their marks’ (Bob 2019, 19 April). The immediate impact was disengagement, ‘You zone out. You stop listening … You sit there and you think about other things’ (James 2017, 13 May).

Perhaps more insidious and far-reaching would be an ‘acceptance of the way things are’, as Cammarota and Romero (2006, p. 17) have suggested. Bob (2017, 28 August) found that in giving exclusivity to the teacher as the more knowledgeable other, students themselves could be complicit in nurturing the situation, ‘They just shut up and hope that the teacher’s going to fill in the air.’ Cammarota and Romero (2006, p. 17) further argue that students ‘are left thinking that their world will never change, or more importantly, that they can never change it’. Nevertheless, the non-traditional students in this research have shown their agency in the face of the unfamiliar, with the use of alternative forms of capital. They have also worked out a successful first year, developing an academic habitus in hybridity with their home background habitus and projecting a trajectory that would change their lives. In the face of silence imposed upon them in their interaction with teachers, more prone to act than to be acted on, they found opportunities to work at shaping their learning.

5.4.2 Beyond the normative in the field

With the capacity to ‘put into action the incorporated principles of a generative habitus’ (Bourdieu 1990, p.10), the non-traditional students found opportunities to be strategic in the field. ‘Rather than defining limits upon themselves … [they] recognise opportunities for improvisation or tactics … and act in ways to transform situations’ (Mills 2008, p. 83). Bob (2017, 19 April) who had ‘been there, seen that, done that’, wanted his first-hand experience as a police officer to be heard when faced with teachers who were ‘very passionate’ and ‘very militant in their beliefs’. When externalised, his views were met with silence. If it is possible that the abrupt confrontation with different worldviews might have upset the teachers, they were not averse to new perspectives, ‘Even though I kind of upset the tutors, the mark I got for my course was 96%’ (Bob 2017, 19 April). However, as agents of the field, in remaining silent these teachers

neglected to expand further on the different form of knowledge that Bob had brought to the field, putting aside the possibility to affirm him in his learning and further expand knowledge for the benefit of all in class.

More subtle than Bob, Henry (2017, 28 April) would find ways to engage the teacher to engage with him: 'I might ask a question—Back to what you were talking about before, how would you have done that differently?' Henry's move could also be attributed to the strength he brought with him from a home where it was customary to discuss as a means to better understand the world, and to his readiness to help his peers' voices to be heard (Henry 2017, 28 April). This in turn, could be his enactment of his working-class team spirit (Henry 2017, 4 September). Playing back the teacher's own silence game also served as a subtle form of protest. James (2017, 13 May) created a diversion to silence a teacher used to cutting down James' own voice, 'She'd ask me a question and I would give this stupid answer. She wouldn't cut me off in my stupid answers, but if I actually gave a proper answer, then she'd cut me off.' These various interactions of the non-traditional students with their teachers are indicative of emancipatory moves in the field, reflecting dispositions 'to make things happen, rather than things happening to them' (Mills 2008, p. 83), while at the same time pointing to the level of preparedness of some agents of the field to encounters that do not fit with the prescribed institutional script which is the curriculum.

In trying to predominantly see whether the student knows what the university values, teachers could above all limit themselves in seeing the knowledge and abilities of the non-traditional students in this research. Delpit (2012, p. 6) points out that too often the underlying question to the teacher's approach would be 'Do you know what I know?', when in fact the question to ask to make visible what could be rendered invisible in students would be 'What do you know?' It is of significance that Samara (2017, 8 May) specifically remembered that teacher who during group work valued each student's contribution. Similarly, Cassie (2017, 10 May) was willing to reciprocate when the teacher responded to students' different conceptions of the world**.** In contrast, she did not go back in class for two weeks when she was 'kicked out because she [the teacher] said that I wasn't concentrating, but I was. I just had a different opinion to her,' and

her views had not been validated (Cassie 2017, 10 May). As opposed to silencing, whether imposed by the teacher or resulting from confrontation with students, giving value to what students bring up in class would provide ‘an environment of discussion and reflection about learning with students and teachers playing reciprocal meaningful roles’ (Zammit 2014, p. 209).

Where Henry (2017, 4 September) developed a fascination with numbers by counting letterboxes and lampposts in his childhood, his imagination with numbers soared with his Maths teacher who broke mathematical formulae into small pieces to show him the reasoning behind each piece. There was a meeting point between his excellence with numbers and the teacher’s algebraic formula, the connection being made between the student’s history and experiences, and the instructional activity taking place in class. From the known in Henry’s world, the connection is made with the unknown as in Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development, for learning to take place in an environment where dominant codes prevail.

In positioning themselves strategically in the dominant field, the non-traditional students in this research have shown ‘their creative responses to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu’ (Wacquant 2016, p. 76), whether through open or subtle confrontations with agents of the field or reciprocal meaning making. Yet, in their experiences with teachers they also encounter moments where the rule of the game appears to be altered by agents of the field. As opposed to ‘acting on’ students, the teacher could better be ‘working with’ them in sense-making of their experiences and histories (Gale, Mills & Cross 2017). It would be like the teacher enacting a feel for the game in the moment; the teacher ‘lets go [of the normative]. It is a tactical move, executed on the run, in response to the moves of her students’ (Gale, Mills & Cross 2017, p. 352). Youdell’s study (2010, p. 321) of such in-the-moment learning spaces showed how, ‘The expectation of conformity, singularity, consistency is set aside’ by the teacher for boys considered as beyond the educational system to become students and learners. This study reveals similarities with the spaces created in the literacy teacher’s class, where Henry and his peers developed their passion for literacy.

The literacy teacher offered possibilities that moved beyond the normative notions of teacher–student interaction into spaces characterised by the fluidity of power where 'It is in the letting go' (Youdell 2010, p. 321) that knowledge is created. A back and forth conducted in apparent jesting, with Henry (2017, 28 April) suspecting the teacher was 'doing a power play' led Henry and his peers to surpass the teacher and themselves for their own learning and development. **'**She said something and I said something back … she'd come back with something … We, the students, were trying to outdo the tutor … it was intriguing …. That back and forth … I think it was vital' (Henry 2017, 28 April). Of the same teacher, James (2017, 13 May) recalled that 'the teacher would throw an idea to us and let us kick it around', and what ensued was passion and engagement: 'The passion's actually good because it means that the students are thinking about it and they're engaged and they want to contribute.' Just like in Youdell's (2010, p. 313) study, by moving 'beyond the normative', the literacy teacher 'opens up the possibility of identification and recognition' for the non-traditional students to engage with their learning from who they are and what they know.

These moments that liberated Henry and his peers and were vital for their learning are reflective of how the literacy teacher treated her students; in her teaching, she considered her students as being filled with possibilities. As Ladson Billings (2006) argues:

> Whether teachers think of their students as needy and deficient or capable and resilient can spell the difference between pedagogy grounded in compensatory perspectives and those grounded in critical and liberatory ones. (p. 31)

To working with her students instead of on them, the literacy teacher's liberatory stance towards them would also imply the teacher feeling 'with' her students, that is, acting with a form of informed empathy rather than 'for' them which is sympathy for 'you poor thing' (Ladson Billings 2006, p. 31). 'Feeling with the students builds a sense of solidarity … but does not excuse students from working hard in pursuit of excellence' adds Ladson Billings (2006, p. 31). It is interesting to note that Henry (2017, 28 April) expressed his sense of

achievement in that class as, ‘We all left that class like we actually accomplished’, and this was not because of marks obtained from tests but because ‘we all did a lot of learning.’

As a result of the teacher’s flexibility with the prescribed curriculum along a power continuum, Henry also experienced moments where he raised questions about university practices. On finding that the online week for the subject, set in the final weeks of the semester, impinged on students’ face-to-face time with teachers, Henry (2017, 28 April) ‘made a statement about how I thought that it was a little negligent to be doing this so late in the semester’, bringing to light a ‘weakness’ in the curriculum with respect to ‘experiences and knowledge that teachers and their students bring to the classroom’ (Ladson-Billings 2006, p. 32). Questioning official knowledge in a climate where power seemed to be more democratically shared, resulted in participation at the level of decision-makers in the field, with Henry (2017, 28 April) collaborating with his teacher in a symposium on blended learning for the university. Out of this critical stance about activities prescribed by the university, Henry had thus been brought to question the significance of what he was doing, the reason for doing it, and how it would enrich his life and that of others (Ladson-Billings 2006, p. 34).

Henry (2017, 4 September) also found himself questioning those in positions of power as related to him, ‘Especially as a first-year student, questioning your mentor teacher who’s in the class with you and you’re like, ‘Oh, I would have done that differently.’ As a foil, in another class where the power tension required treading along the path set by the teacher, Henry (2017, 28 April) felt pangs of guilt when wishing to appropriate his own learning, ‘part of me did feel like I was taking control of where she wanted to go … I guess part of me felt a little bit guilty, but the other part of me was like you’re here to learn.’ When rendered powerless in her interaction with a teacher, Cassie (2017, 10 May) had said that ‘some didn’t really care that much.’ Nevertheless, through the experiences of Henry and his peers in the literacy class, it appears that care takes the shape of a commitment to what is significant to the student as related to their context and their lives, and the responsibility to make ‘a lifelong impact on who they become and the kind of society in which we all will ultimately live’

(Ladson-Billings 2006, p. 40). Power sharing and care as experienced by Henry and his peers in their interaction with the literacy teacher were nevertheless not common: in Henry's (2017, 28 April) words, 'never really had that interaction with a tutor before.' More commonly, teachers as agents of the institution had, as Rachel (2017, 20 April) said, 'a plan of how things were going to turn out' to meet the requirements of the dominant field. However, this plan could be in disconnect with the student's contribution or override their participation in what was to be learnt; there was no 'freedom to choose what they want to do as opposed to … we have to do this for this hour.'

5.5 With peers: competition, interdependence and personal welfare

The evolving habitus as setting continues in this section, but coming to the foreground is Bourdieu's field which is 'a field of forces' where individuals 'bring to the competition all the power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field, and as a result their strategies' (Bourdieu 1998, p. 40). The field here is the sub-field of collaborative work as positioned within the broader university field, itself positioned in the higher education field influenced by the laws of the market. The discussion first focuses on the non-traditional students' strategies of power to position themselves in the field of collaborative work, in the face of the challenges experienced, before considering their experiences of collaborative learning where difference co-exists in the field and the associated potentialities.

5.5.1 Assessed collaborative work: performance and individualism

In the experiences of the non-traditional students in this research, when group work was assessed, engaging academically with their peers presented itself as a zone of conflictual action. To mitigate what they perceived as risks to group outcomes presented by their peers, the participants deployed 'power that is relevant to the purposes of … [the] field' (Bathmaker 2015, p. 66) to position themselves. Consequently, in making their choices about whom to work with, both Samara (2017, 8 May) and Henry (2017, 28 May) showed their preferences for peers who they knew would take their share of responsibility in the task production, for the group to perform to its best. They sought to assert themselves by making the difference between competitive peers in the field and

other peers, and the intentionality was there to associate with the former, while culling out the less competitive ones.

However, this association with peers that the non-traditional students sought to use advantageously in the field, was not always possible if the teacher imposed the group configuration. As Bathmaker (2015, p. 73) explains, 'The construction of power [lies] within and between field'. Disempowered by the way the field was configured by the teacher-imposed grouping, the non-traditional students sought other strategies of power in the field to reach their end. Samara (2017, 8 May) was worried when asked to work with peers she was not familiar with in case they demonstrated disparate dispositions towards collaborative work. With the impending deadline approaching and to alleviate risks, she resorted to exercising power in the group by confronting peers who had still not given evidence of shared work. Of the first-semester peer who was not doing much in the paired assessment, Henry (2017, 28 April) commented that he was not 'cut out to be there', and having found peers of his choice to work with, he concluded that those who did not want to stay 'had been weeded out'. The tension exerted by assessment on collaborative work appeared to cause the non-traditional students to generate patterns of inclusion, exclusion and domination that were directly related to their wish for best outcome, in the form of good marks. This 'sorting mechanism' could possibly indicate 'what it can mean to become part of one field [the university] rather than another or to be positioned in the flaky borderlands' (Bathmaker 2015, pp. 70-72). In the development of their academic learner habitus, the non-traditional students in this study appeared to themselves develop exclusionary practices reflective of an individualist culture as they moved away from the flaky borderlands.

5.5.2 The teacher: ultimate power and doxa

Irrelevant of the non-traditional students' field strategies in self-selected or teacher-imposed group works, the teacher as agent of the university field looked—in these students' experiences—to retain the ultimate decision on the outcome of the assessed group task. The paradox though is that while teachers appeared to retain the power to set collaborative work as assessment, and the power to decide on students' success or failure in such tasks, they equally

appeared to be in doxic submission to university practices, this in turn impacting on the non-traditional students. Bourdieu (1977) explains doxa as a view of the world beyond question. To the conflicts arising from the workings of collaborative work, teachers had few solutions. Henry's (2017, 28 April) teacher replied that there was nothing that she could do when he informed her of his peer's lack of contribution to the pair work. Gibbs (2009) and Orr (2010) argue that teachers have little understanding of the social practices in collaborative work. Yet, it is also likely that the teacher's response reflects an institutional habitus (Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2010; Thomas 2002) passive to new possibilities for assessed collaborative work, one of its key practices. The consequence is that misrecognition— 'being caught up in, and bounded by, what seems natural and normal in the world' (Nolan 2012, p. 205) —at teacher level, leads to symbolic violence, 'where individuals accept their position in any power play as the status quo' (Teviotdale et al. 2017, p. 338), at student level. Aware of the unfairness of the situation, Henry had no choice but to do an assessed group task all by himself, with the peer also benefiting from the good marks.

5.5.3 Student learning in jeopardy

The learning benefits of collaborative work itself seemed to lose significance as the non-traditional students' energies focused on strategies to deploy with regard to other players in the field so as to lead the collaborative work to the best outcome in the form of marks, while teachers remained unresponsive to conflicts arising in that field. It is concerning that Cassie (2017, 10 May) reported on assessed collaborative work as a clear-cut division of labour, with each group member going their separate ways until one of them combined all work prior to submission. Henry (2017, 28 April) had similar experiences. James (2017, 13 May), whose main focus was to have the work done, would do his part of the collaborative work 'my own way,' while his peer would do their part 'another' way. Teviotdale et al. (2017, p. 343) argue that 'students' division of labour in this manner undermines the intended learning outcomes. Fragmented knowledge, without seeing its place in the completed work, is not what is intended from group work.' Division of labour and ensuing fragmented learning further indicate that the design of the task itself prompts this approach,

encouraging students' focus on what would contribute to the end-product rather than to a more wholistic and critical learning process as part of achieving the work. The non-traditional students in this research had been critical of the university's 'own way' in Section 5.2, but now they are replicating strategies of 'my way' and 'her way' (James 2017, 13 May) where there appears to be little concern for a meeting point where different perspectives would converge for learning to take place.

Arguably, collaborative work as assessed work appeared to be a source of tension that weighed heavily on the students in this research. Both Samara (2017, 8 May) and Cassie (2017,10 May) indicated that they would have preferred to do the work individually, had the choice been offered to them. A climate lacking in trust around assessed collaborative work is likely to develop. Orr (2010, p. 311) argues that 'students are sometimes unsure about the extent to which they can trust their fellow students and the assessment methods employed.' As a result, the wealth of each other's unique contribution as a source of learning is largely missed in the non-traditional students' experiences of collaborative work as assessed work.

5.5.4 Collaborative work not assessed

In contrast, collaborative work with peers without the tension of assessment shaped the non-traditional students' experiences of learning in a more positive way. As the pressure of assessment decreased in the field of collaborative work, the benefits of learning collaboratively increased for these students. A 'lower assessment risk field', Teviotdale et al. (2017, p. 347) argue, is likely to predispose learners to group work, this in turn creating the necessary conditions for learning to take place. The non-traditional students' uniqueness is validated, just as they themselves validate their peers' contributions. Henry (2017, 28 April) acknowledged learning a lot from his peers and enjoying it as well. He gave the examples of him combining his knowledge of numbers with his peer's knowledge of algebra to solve Maths problems and sharing approaches to pedagogy in literacy with another peer. Samara (2017, 8 May) considered that her peers' stories had the potential to make her own story become a bigger one since they contained different ideas that were outside her own thinking box. As

such she considered that her peers were like ‘teachers’ for her. Cassie (2017, 10 May) also noticed her mind opening to her peers’ different experiences and lives, thus to their different world views.

Drawing closer to their peers in the field of collaborative work appears to have been equally useful to the non-traditional students, as newcomers during the first semester. Both Samara (2017, 8 May) and Cassie (2017, 10 May) found comfort in the group. Cassie (2017, 10 May) called her peers in the online chatrooms ‘friends’ whom she could easily ask for help if she was struggling; she felt relieved knowing that ‘it’s just not you’. In these situations, proximity and complicity with peers would be an asset in the non-traditional students’ strategic positioning in the university field for their learning and development. By establishing ‘common grounds with peers’, the non-traditional students appeared to ‘strengthen their perception of their relative position within the HE context’ as Thomas (2002, p. 436) argues, hence as part of a group, they felt stronger and not alone within the university field.

This is of particular significance, when associated with the non-traditional students’ home backgrounds (Section 5.2). They lived within the collective constituted by family, friends and the community, out of which they derived alternative forms of capital. Henry (2017, 4 September) took pride in the interdependence in his working-class background, and when working with his peers he acknowledged that, ‘we needed each other; we depended on each other’ (Henry 2017, 28 April). Bob (2017, 19 April) called the community he served as a policeman his home background, and he used his experiential capital in the form of his leadership skills to leverage his experiences of collaborative learning.

5.5.5 From sub-field of collaborative work to university field and the broader world

Feeling stronger as a group, nevertheless, did not result in the non-traditional students sustaining a sense of solidarity with their peers to serve other than self. Experiences in the literacy class that led Henry to function for both himself and others by questioning what he was learning (Section 5.4), did not appear to have galvanised him into action as related to collaborative work with peers. The

literacy teacher shifted the rules of the game in the field, giving the students power to question what they were learning, but with regard to collaborative work the teacher upheld the rules set by the university field. Dissatisfied with the way group work was unfolding and his appeal to the teacher having been met by an agent of the field themselves in doxa, Henry (2017, 28 April) ended up submitting to the power of the dominant field by going back to a group whose very dysfunctionality came from an excessive focus on self. James' (2017, 13 May) inherent difficulty in working collaboratively could also have resulted from too much focus on self. In addition, Bob's (2017, 19 April) use of his experiential capital to lead group work went no further than the group work outcome, despite the fact that he had been responsive to the community in his job as a policeman.

A concern for the collective seemed to be constrained by the 'logic of competition' in the field, and the 'propensity to division and particularism' (Bourdieu, Sapiro & McHale 1991, p. 667). 'The potential of being in charge of things and that they can effect change' (Nikolakaki 2012, p. 409) was subsumed to the culture of individualism and competition sustained by the university field, itself influenced by the higher education field governed by market laws. Thus, little space was left for a commitment to the welfare of others in the non-traditional students' experiences of collaborative work. As related to the broader world, collaborative work with peers was important only insofar as it was useful as a skill in the workplace, hence mainly serving the purposes of the economy, but was less so for the non-traditional students in becoming citizens of the world in which they are called to live. As James (2017, 13 May) reflects, 'I suppose the purpose of it [collaborative work] in university is just because we're going to need to do it later on. If I'm teaching in schools … to discuss things.'

5.6 Academic challenge

With a habitus evolving in the university field the non-traditional students responded to external as well as internal motivators in their experiences of academic challenge. As they stretched themselves academically, there were also indications of the non-traditional students approaching knowledge differently from the dominant approach. What was academically challenging to

the non-traditional students pointed to utilitarian life goals in a market driven economy, with little concern for the broader life of society.

5.6.1 Academic challenge from without and from within

The non-traditional students indicated a habitus responsive to transformation in the university field as they met their teachers' high expectations to rise to academic challenges, and as they set the challenge to self to stretch themselves intellectually in the field. In Section 5.3.1, it was seen that these students chose to work hard and sustain their goal with responsibility in the acquisition of their academic selves. That hard work that they chose, to assert themselves in the field, reappeared among the non-traditional students as they experienced academic challenges in the process of knowledge building. In response to teachers' high expectations, Cassie (2017, 10 May) worked harder since 'you want to live up to their expectations.' However, Cassie was not solely reliant on external affirmations; she was also driven by high expectations set to self, 'If they thought less of me, I would then go home and be like, "I'm going to prove them wrong" … I think that I work very hard … I just always try my best' (Cassie 2017, 10 May). Like the non-traditional students in Wong's (2018, p. 9) study who had the 'determination to prove themselves and challenge social barriers', Cassie, in her response to academic challenges indicated a habitus equally responsive to transformation in the university field.

Similarly, Henry was driven by activities set in class, and would also drive himself to 'produce my best work'—'I guess I was challenging myself and the work was challenging me, so I was trying to rise to the challenge' (Henry 2017, 28 April). In Wong's (2018) study his participants wanted to prove that they could study after previous school failure, and in this present research Henry wanted to prove to self for similar reasons, whereas Cassie wanted to prove her ability to the world despite having no past school failure. Her familial capital that she brought with her to university 'to leave nothing in the tank at the end of the day' (Cassie 2017, 10 May), likely encouraged her to enact successful educational outcomes.

At the same time though, there could be a fine line between an activity leading to higher level learning outcome on one side, and intimidation (Payne et al.

2005) or feelings of being overwhelmed (Draeger, Prado Hill & Mahler 2014) on the other side. Thus, Henry (2017, 28 April) talked of the level of difficulty he faced: ‘I had never read an article that had so many big words’, and its resulting effect on him: ‘I felt like this was just stupidly hard for the sake of being stupidly hard.’ Nevertheless, Henry surpassed himself. What appeared to endure were the non-traditional students’ dispositions to expand themselves in their engagement with learning. This became clearer with Bob’s experience of academic challenge. While aware of teacher expectations, Bob (2017, 19 April) aligned his own high expectations to his personal goal: ‘It [teacher expectation] doesn't necessarily have such an impact on me because I already know where I want to go and I'm already working very hard to do that anyway.’

There are aspects of the first-year curriculum, though, that seem to belie teachers’ expectations to push the frontiers of knowledge. In this regard, Henry (2017, 28 April) was not keen on assessments that required no ‘imagination or creativity’ or looked ‘like a walk in the park.’ Neither were Samara (2017, 8 May) and Cassie (2017, 10 May) motivated by learning materials that they felt they already knew, that were repetitious or that would not necessarily require their presence in class for them to understand. The non-traditional students in this research did not appear to expect less from their teachers or ‘feel entitled to good grades in exchange for their tuition, regardless of the amount or quality of their work’ (Schnee 2008, p. 58). As Campbell, Dortch and Burt (2021, p. 12) point out, ‘challenge is only meaningful … if that challenge produces learning or growth.’ Where the non-traditional students were keen for meaningful engagement through new ideas that would bring new perspectives to their views of the world, surprisingly, the university did not always appear to offer such possibilities to them.

5.6.2 Academic challenge and approaching university knowledge differently

While the non-traditional students in this research rose to the academic challenge set by the university, they also approached knowledge in ways that countered the dominant approach to knowledge. As argued by Lehmann (2009a, p. 146) ‘we can neither assume … a single habitus, nor should we insist

on a hegemonic middle-class culture at university, and the unavoidable alienation.' The non-traditional students have already shown the formation of an academic learner habitus alongside their home background habitus (Section 5.3), and by this have disproved deficit arguments associated with students of non-traditional backgrounds. In their interactions with teachers (Section 5.4) they sought to engage with the dominant discourse, but they were also keen to show who they are and what they know as different from the normative. Here, in what academically challenged them, the non-traditional students appeared to reverse the university's accepted way of approaching the relation between pure and applied knowledge.

Samara's (2017, 8 May) learning experience opened up when using objects and resources, leading her to understand the abstract nature of Mathematics. Her preference for the concrete in engaging with knowledge differed from university practice, which prioritised learning the theory first before considering its application, which took secondary status. Gale's (2012, p. 253) remark on the rigidity of this format is of pertinence, 'The relation is uni-directional: knowledge of the pure must precede knowledge of the applied.' There are parallels between Samara giving meaning to knowledge through the concrete, and Bob's (2017, 28 August) reflection on the university convention regarding the relation between theory and practice: 'we're learning all of this theory about how A, B, C, D got developed when we don't even know what A, B, C, D are yet. It's the horse before the cart sort of thing'. Where practice was used to clarify theory at university, theory appeared to clarify practice for James (2017, 31 August), who said: 'If you can't understand something or you're having trouble understanding something properly, that's what I feel the theory is.' These 'valuable ways of understanding and engaging with the world, which have different understandings of the relations between pure and applied knowledge', argues Gale (2012, p. 254), are 'denied, suppressed or lost to others in the learning environment.' While not the field-sanctioned approach to knowledge, the non-traditional students used their perspective on the relation between theory and practice to position themselves advantageously in the field. In Section 5.2, a variation on the relation between the real world and the world of abstraction that the non-traditional students in this research made, was seen as these students

showed that they had capitals from their home backgrounds that helped them to better apprehend their scholarly endeavours. In this section, they showed that they could be differently oriented to intellectual challenges just as they showed that they were able to rise to challenges that are in congruence with field practice.

At this point, my discussion distances itself from the 'worrying tendency … to reinforce the notion that people in non-elite positions are more hands on by dispositions … and less dispositionally oriented to 'intellectual' challenge' (Brennan 2005, p. 5). This research does, however, subscribe to Nolan's (2012, pp. 206-208) view that current pedagogical paradigms that regulate learning behaviours could be a control mechanism, wherein 'covering of content is privileged over the actual learning of content' and 'the realization of more open, student-generated knowledge' would be inhibited so as not to jeopardise test results. Such 'discomfort for creativity and innovation' (Nolan 2012, p. 206) and the kinds of understanding experienced by the non-traditional students, may reflect the university's ultimate concerns for performance, competitivity and the market value of education.

5.6.3 Academic challenge as leverage for utilitarian goals

The insidious influence of a market-driven education did, however, ultimately impact the non-traditional students in their experiences of academic challenge. Having made connections with the real world to engage with academic challenge in different ways from the dominant university discourse, they nevertheless did not relate back differently to current dominant influences on the world. What was academically challenging to the non-traditional students appeared to be tied to utilitarian and career-oriented goals to perform in a society governed by the laws of the market. Cassie's (2017, 10 May) challenge to do her best waned if there were no marks to reward her performance. Bob (2017, 19 April) gave all his attention to the 'need to know' 'to be an expert and be able to teach students'. Though less keen than the two others to stretch himself intellectually, James (2017, 13 May) also focused his attention on what was necessary because 'If it's not necessary to actually getting your degree or learning how to teach properly or getting experience in teaching, then why do

it?' As they tied academic challenge to market-influenced goals, these non-traditional students sought to comply with the dominant norms governing their education. While they have revealed familial, experiential and symbolic capitals shaping their engagement with learning (Section 5.2), their future selves mostly projected a life of socio-economic and personal well-being (Section 5.3). These students' lesser concern for the broader benefits of their education to society were played out in their experiences of academic challenge. A parallel can be drawn between the utilitarian value that the non-traditional students placed on their experiences of learning and development, and the working-class participants in Lehmann's (2009a) study. Lehmann (2009a) argues that the 'pragmatism of their choice to attend university is in the hope for upward mobility' (p. 141) nurtured by the 'public discourse that equates high formal education with life course success' (p. 143)**.** Nevertheless, learning to this end, while presenting as narrow in scope, could also have hidden benefits.

In contrast to the deficit-ridden trajectory already seen to be associated with non-traditional students (Devlin 2013, Smit 2012), the concrete goal of a life of betterment could assuage the uncertainties associated with entering the unfamiliar university culture. 'Having a concrete goal, achievable within transparent and understood boundaries creates incentives to overcome class-cultural barriers', Lehmann (2009a, p. 147) argues, 'almost acting as a form of existential security in an unfamiliar environment' (p. 146). Interestingly Lehmann (2009a, p. 147) also notes that where utilitarianism kept parents away from higher education, it is the 'utilitarian concerns of employability, income and mobility' that draws their children to university.

5.7 Summary

To sum up this chapter, firstly, the non-traditional students in this research revealed the use of other forms of capital, namely familial, experiential and symbolic capital, from their home background in their experiences of engagement with learning, indicating that their home context was not lacking. Secondly, departing from a scholarly discourse that would position non-traditional students as more like 'fish out of water' in the university culture (Thomas 2002), the non-traditional students in this research had by the end

their first year, formed new academic selves in hybridity with their existing home selves. Where the collective participated in shaping their home background capital, the individualism towards which their possible future selves appeared to be mostly channelled hindered their participation in the broader life of society, thus limiting their moves to new states of being (Barnett 2007) beyond those dictated by an economy-driven education. Thirdly, in their interaction with teachers the non-traditional students depended on the latter to acquire the university knowledge discourse. When there were moments of silence in the university field, the non-traditional students sought to show what they knew, at times in collaboration with the teacher and at other times in confrontation with them. The non-traditional students also experienced rare moments of power sharing and solidarity with their teachers that led them to question those in positions of power and the content of the curriculum, in relation to self and others. Fourthly, when working collaboratively with their peers, a climate of competition and performance undermined learning, but learning was validated when marks were not at stake, indicating the value of the interdependence non-traditional students brought from their own background. Nevertheless, the overall purpose of collaborative learning with peers in the university field remained focussed on self and individualist concerns with functioning in the market economy. Fifthly, the non-traditional students rose to the academic challenge set in the university context, but they also showed ways of approaching knowledge differently from those of the university field. Equally self-focussed in their experiences of academic challenge, the non-traditional students showed little concern for how their education could benefit the broader society.

With their alternative forms of capital and an evolving habitus, the non-traditional students' first-year experiences of engagement in the university field were successful but not without challenges. The implications related to student engagement for an equitable education for non-traditional students form the focus of Chapter Six.

Chapter Six – Implications

6.1 Introduction

What can be inferred from the discussion is now presented in relation to an education for equity for these non-traditional students in the field of student engagement. Bourdieu's concepts of flexible habitus and non-exclusive capitals in the university field, together with a first-year literature and a student engagement literature, have shed light on the non-traditional students as agents taking responsibility to forge a course of action in their learning and development, in an environment initially unknown to them. In the process of doing this, the non-traditional students in this research have shown their contribution to higher education through an alternative discourse alongside the dominant university discourse. Their engagement efforts have been mostly directed at an education focused on self, with the purpose of functioning well in a knowledge economy, though with a lesser focus on the self in relation to the broader society, where they could also be agents for a better and more equitable society. Non-traditional students' engagement as played out in this research calls for an institutional response for an education for equity for these students.

6.2 Implications for student engagement

6.2.1 Opening up to alternative forms of capital in student engagement

In Chapter Five (Section 5.2) the non-traditional students revealed knowledge, experiences, skills and resources coming from their backgrounds in the form of familial, experiential and symbolic capital in their first-year engagement with learning. The university recognising the capital of non-traditional students would imply recognising that their backgrounds are not just 'extra baggage or possible negative influences' (O'Shea n.d.) that they bring with them into their learning and development. A teaching-learning process that would make space for the capital of students from non-traditional backgrounds in a university context where the dominant capital prevails could contribute to a more equitable consideration of these students in their engagement with learning.

There is a parallel between the proposition to leverage non-traditional students' capital in the teaching-learning process, and Sweeney's (2018) use of students' diverse capital in a project for the engagement of students from international backgrounds studying International Business. Sweeney's (2018), cultural capital is one that

> recognises and celebrates a diversity of knowledge and experience and even values, between groups. It is not about the homogenisation of cultures but more about developing an appreciation of this diversity and better non-judgemental understanding of difference. (p. 256)

It is important that difference is treated with respect and the learning experience is structured 'in ways to open it up' (Gale 2014). The students in Sweeney's (2018, p. 259) project are brought to share perspectives, experiences and issues from their own countries, 'nurturing the ability to reshape assumptions in the light of new experiences and new ideas', while sharing the common goal of developing new knowledge. Institutional recognition of students' diverse capital in Sweeney's (2018, p. 256) study, as in this research, would draw them centre-field into the game, 'developing learners' confidence and self-belief that their prior learning and cultural background are significant assets in a learning community', thus reinforcing their engagement with learning and a more equitable learning experience for them.

Such student engagement could also increase empathy among students, drawing them closer, nurturing a willingness among them to take action for issues impinging on the welfare of the wider society, and 'helping them become engaged and responsible citizens' (Sweeney 2018, p. 258). In 'We are losing sight of higher education's true purpose' in *The Conversation*, Forstenzer (2017, 9 March) comments on higher education's overwhelming preoccupation with the student as a customer to be trained to function in a knowledge economy. He points that 'Now, perhaps more than ever, we need universities to find ways to enrich our understandings of ourselves and others' (Forstenzer 2017, 9 March). Higher education with such a purpose would offer the opportunity 'to develop critical perspectives, analytical competence and a drive to make the world a better, more sustainable place' (Fortenzer 2017, 9 March). Compared with

educational outcomes for individual benefits, there would also be broader outcomes that could equip non-traditional students as well as their traditional counterparts to take action for a better world.

Altogether, the incorporation of the capital of students from non-traditional backgrounds into the teaching-learning process in student engagement, could lead to greater equity through the formal recognition of students from non-traditional backgrounds. Adding criticality to student engagement could expand the limits of learning itself as a means to understand self, others and the world that would benefit all students, non-traditional students who are the focus of this study together with their traditional counterparts. What would emerge is an emancipatory strain to student engagement that has already been identified in the literature review as critical student engagement (Zepke 2015, 2017, 2018). Students building capital for self and others could foster empowered learners, and students engaging with 'the other', could create the potential in them to take action for a better and more equitable society (Zepke 2017, p. 143).

Manathunga (2017) considers that tying the equity discourse to discourses of democracy, truth and citizenship could incur the risk of equity disappearing altogether from an educational discourse moulded by economic rationalism. However, as Zepke (2017) grafts critical student engagement onto mainstream student engagement with neoliberal affinities, cognizant that neoliberalism is there to stay for some time, the possibility is there to channel the equity discourse from the classroom to the outside world. The non-traditional students in this research have revealed other forms of capital than those that have currency in the dominant university culture. With university intervention these capitals also have the potential to allow non-traditional students to 'speak otherwise' in the making of a better world. As such the non-traditional students in this research stand as a conduit to pioneering new territories in student engagement for an education for equity.

6.2.2 Identity change undergirding the engagement experience

As seen in Chapter Five (Section 5.3), change has occurred—albeit to various degrees—as the non-traditional students in this research navigate their engagement with learning in their first year, leading to the formation of

academic selves that live side by side with their home selves. The future selves that they project tend to be more individualist than reflective of the interdependence from their home backgrounds. The non-traditional students in this research have been agentic in that change, indicating that they are not 'docile bodies, unable to participate in the construction of who they are' (Pearce Down & Moore 2008, p. 257) in the university context.

Identity formation for the non-traditional students has been more complex than Krause and Coates' (2008, p. 500) explanation of identities in student engagement as 'goodness of fit'.

> One of the reasons students find transition to university so tumultuous is that it often challenges existing views of self and one's place in the world. Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, for example, experience significant culture shock on entering an institution whose practices and traditions are alien to them.
> (Krause & Coates 2008, p. 500)

From a conception of habitus as flexible, the students in this research have shaped non-linear pictures of identity formation (Pearce Down & Moore 2008), in contrast to the linear perspective suggested by Krause and Coates (2008), to either integrate or perish. While these students developed an understanding of the university through adaptation and used their home background capital as their own ways to approach university, they mostly worked hard and made choices accompanied with responsibility to make success at university theirs. In negotiating their way between two cultural contexts they developed an academic learner self, with the home self still bearing on who they are.

While the non-traditional students have been agentic in their transformation, that should not preclude the university from taking responsibility in that process of transformation. 'Higher education must have structures and processes, that cannot be denied' argues Quinn (2010, p. 127), 'but ultimately it needs greater openness and flexibility. It should mirror the flux of our being, rather than trying to subjugate it with rigidity.' Such openness and flexibility could happen with the university, and more specifically Teaching and Learning, giving value to non-

traditional students' identities, that is, who they are, their histories and perspectives. Recognising and integrating the identities of non-traditional students within more flexible university structures would give them equality of opportunities with those students whose backgrounds are closely reflected in the university culture, to attain success as set by the institution.

Having had to work their way in the university field to develop their academic learner selves, concerns beyond the personal, nevertheless, appear mostly absent in the future selves of the students in this research. As they project themselves into the broader context of their life after university their possible selves encompass economic stability through a career and social mobility, while an understanding of the world that could lead to positions of positive influence on others, especially as future teachers themselves, emerge as of lesser importance. Private concerns overshadow public concerns that could give them the 'ability to negotiate the political, economic and social dimensions of human experience' (Rhoads & Szelenyi 2011, p. 28). While the non-traditional students in this study found ways in a field initially unfamiliar to them to negotiate with or counter the dominant discourse in their engagement with learning, their moves to a better understanding of a more socially equitable society appear limited.

Having been supported by the home community on their trajectory to the development of their academic learner selves in their first year at university, the future that they frame tends to be concerned with 'individual opportunities for social mobility rather than with broader social justice concerns for social (as well as the individual) transformation' (Burke, Crozier & Misciaszek 2017, p. 22). Arguably, the 'reward at the end of it' (Quinn 2010, p.125) in the form of a career with its associated socio-economic benefits has been considered to be one of the elements that drive non-traditional students in the face of challenges (Lehmann 2009a). This would discount the reality of debt awaiting students, and the instability of employment under the current global socio-economic conditions (Bathmaker et al. 2016). Nevertheless, what remains missing in how the non-traditional students in this study see themselves in the future is their social concern**.** The equity discourse, as enacted by them, remains somewhat caught in a higher education keen on the student-consumer but less committed to education as a public good for the well-being of all in society.

A student engagement that would value and recognise students' difference, while being critical of a higher education focused on performance and success, could balance out the individualism that seems to catch up with the non-traditional students as they project themselves in the broader society. To this effect Burke, Crozier and Misciaszek (2017, p. 134) argue for a social justice pedagogy that would consider, 'equitable distributive, recognition and representation processes that work with and through [students'] difference'. They add that to deal with issues related to social well-being, 'we must create spaces of refusal in which broader meaning is collectively reconstructed about the world and our contextual orientation to it' (p. 14). Such student engagement appears to fit into Zepke's (2017) model of mainstream student engagement with purposes bent on responding to the laws of the market, onto which would be grafted critical student engagement with purposes conducive to active citizenship. In this way non-traditional students might, in addition to projecting a future self of personal success, see themselves as having a 'more critical understanding of the structural and cultural condition of their previous lives' (Lehmann 2014, p. 13) and other people's lives, with a concern for a better and more equitable society.

6.2.3 Interaction with teachers: beyond the normative and beyond personal success

In their endeavours for success and a better future, the non-traditional students in this research have been seen in Chapter Five (Section 5.4) to be keen to use the teacher to acquire the university knowledge discourse, but they also wanted to be recognised for who they are and what they know. Their moves point to the need to harness together the dominant discourse (as normative) and the non-dominant discourse, in a more systematic way in the teaching-learning nexus to provide non-traditional students with a more equitable engagement experience in the classroom. Nevertheless, genuine power-sharing in classroom processes in student engagement could also be required for non-traditional students to go beyond success and performance, to experience an education critical of the inequities of the world—that they themselves have lived—that would empower them to make changes for a better society.

Acting as agents of transformation for non-traditional students would mean the teacher would not only impart the dominant knowledge discourse, but also engage with their world, allowing them to speak from their own experiences. Gale, Mills and Cross (2017, p. 348) identify ‘a belief that all students bring something of value to the learning environment’ as one of the principles on which educators could build a pedagogy inclusive of students’ different worldviews. As suggested by Brennan and Zipin (2005, p. 3), there is virtue in ‘gaining student[s’] engagement in a curriculum appeal of familiar and relevant connection to their ways of knowing/acting/identifying’ to prevent alienation. The argument would not to be to replace “school knowledge” as ‘the value of such knowledge is not only based in its historical accumulation of cultural value and prestige but also in its scientific validity as abstract and collective disciplinary knowledge’ (Gale, Mills & Cross 2017, p. 349), but to add other knowledges to the field. An inclusive classroom pedagogy, ‘a design that values difference while also providing access to, and enabling engagement with dominance’ (Gale, Mills & Cross 2017, p. 353) would make space in the field for engagement with both the dominant discourse and a discourse of difference.

Engaging with different worldviews in the classroom is likely to benefit not only non-traditional students, but also traditional ones. In their study on the benefits of engaging with heterogeneous groups, Milem (2003, p. 142) noted there were ‘greater relative gains in critical and active thinking … greater intellectual engagement and academic motivation’. However, if addressing difference offers a more equitable student experience to non-traditional students within the institution, power would still be in the hands of the dominant in determining what they are learning and for what purpose. Such education would still be geared towards market demands. Equity as related to the bigger world for non-traditional students in student engagement, could pass through space made in the teacher–student relationship for greater democracy.

An education with more democratic purposes in student engagement would involve power-sharing between teacher and students in the co-construction of classroom processes. For this to happen there would be a need for dialogue in which those who already have power ‘learn to listen and collaborate with those

who have less power' (Sleeter 2018, p. 15). Sleeter (2018, p. 15) argues that 'what educators from dominant groups think are the key issues and best solutions are not necessarily the same as what students … and community members from non-dominant groups think.' Free flowing dialogue would also be facilitated by authentic caring between teacher and students, sharing similar concerns for humanity. It would be an 'I-Thou relationship, and thus necessarily a relationship between two Subjects' (Cammarota & Romero 2006, p. 19), the reciprocity of authentic caring standing in contrast to aesthetic caring whereby students are treated as objects, not 'complete people with real life problems' (Camarota & Romero 2006, p. 21).

Dialogue and authentic caring between teacher and students as suggested here for student engagement, are associated with Fielding's (2012, p. 45) 'democratic fellowship—that attends, not only to power, but to relationships, to care as well as to rights and justice.' As dominated groups get the power to define teaching–learning processes together with dominant groups in student engagement, there could be a shift in educational concerns to domesticate students for use, to concerns for the very social inequities lived by dominated groups. This form of student engagement could contribute to develop a critical consciousness in non-traditional students, making of them agents of change in society.

6.2.4 With peers: collective interdependence and relational reciprocity in collaborative processes

What can be drawn from the discussion in Chapter Five (Section 5.5) is that for collaborative work to function with the dual purpose of learning and assessment, co-opting the collective interdependence from non-traditional students' backgrounds would not only acknowledge their presence and do justice to them, but also enhance all students' engagement with their learning. Nevertheless, beyond university and as pointed out by James (2017, 13 May), 'the purpose of it [collaborative work] in university is just because we're going to need to do it later on. If I'm teaching in schools … to discuss things.' In extension to a life of self-centred, socio-economic well-being, and to allow non-traditional students to later care for others for a better world, collaborative

processes that foster relational reciprocity among students in student engagement could also be required.

Nurturing collective interdependence in collaborative learning would help to counter the adverse effects of individualistic power games as seen through the experiences of the non-traditional students in this study. It would be necessary to first initiate low stakes collaborative work that would make a ‘contribution to shaping dispositions to group work’ (Teviotdale et al. 2017, p. 347) in students not predisposed to it, and reinforce it in students like the non-traditional students entering university with such backgrounds. Teacher support would also be necessary to help students work with their peers in low-risk situations. Such a two-pronged approach would create a ‘healthy learning milieu’ (Gibbs 2009, p. 9) for collaborative work. Each member of the group being valued, and none seeking to prioritise themselves over the group would then constitute the foundation for setting assessed group work. To shift from the lethargy of doxa, teachers would also need to engage in dialogue with students when designing assessed group work; potential problems would have to be discussed and considered. Teachers themselves would have to be clear about their reasons for using group assessment and clearly link them to the subject learning outcomes and the assessment criteria. They would need to explicitly address the value of group assessment in terms of the impact and role of constructive group work in social, family and work contexts, as well as in collaborative learning and professional practice. However, prioritising interdependence in collaborative learning would not extend the boundaries of Teaching and Learning, and the university to purposes beyond individualism. With ‘increasing heteronomy’, that is, ‘the increasing control of the [university] field from forces outside the field’ (Bathmaker 2015), the individualist influence of the market economy upon the university endures.

It has already been seen in Section 6.2.3 in this chapter that a more democratic construction of classroom processes between teacher and students could empower students to take a stand for what they are learning, to function for self and for others for greater justice in the world. Noddings (2005, p. 164) furthers the argument by extending the shift in power to collaborative processes, ‘Democracy … depends on the desire to communicate and the goodwill to

persist in collaborative inquiry.' The author (Noddings 2001) expresses the difference between an education that 'cares for' which is built on relational reciprocity, and an education that 'cares about' which encompasses coercion to get the targeted outcome. 'The richest aims of education', argues Noddings (2012, p. 778), are 'full, moral, happy lives, generous concern for the welfare of others.' An education that cares for would be in response to 'an expressed need' as opposed to an 'assumed need' (Quay & Noddings 2018, p. 112). It would be other-oriented and not self-oriented.

For that to happen, 'receptive attention, which is a totally open, vulnerable position in which you really are listening to the other' (Quay & Noddings 2018, p. 115) would be needed. In a reciprocal relation of human care between carer and cared for, 'Both parties are held in an ongoing dance of care' (Quay & Noddings 2018, p. 110). The teacher would care for their students, who in turn would care for their peers, while caring for their own learning and the world beyond; 'they [teachers] arguably have a responsibility to develop this capacity [to care] among their students, not only in terms of promoting passion for ideas and objects, but also through students caring about each other in their interactions' (Barnacle & Dall'Alba 2017, p. 1333). Using Noddings' (2005) conception of care in education, Barnacle and Dall'Alba (2017, p. 1333) further point out that 'This capacity is necessary if students are to develop ethical and social understanding … including in professional practice and a globalised world'. Noddings' (2012 p. 777) argument is that 'recognition of our global interdependence and a commitment to cooperation must replace the 20th century emphasis on competition.' Nevertheless, it has already been suggested in this chapter that to mainstream student engagement, a critical student engagement would not replace it but be grafted upon it.

Thus, for an education for equity for non-traditional students in student engagement, learning collaboratively would not only incorporate interdependence as lived by these students in their backgrounds, but also consider an education that would show them how to care for their learning, for others and for the world so that they can positively impact their own existence as well as that of their fellow human beings.

6.2.5 Academic challenge: alternative approaches to knowledge and broader concerns

In Chapter Five (Section 5.6), the non-traditional students in this research rose to the challenge of expanding themselves intellectually, giving indications of the development of dispositions in congruence with the university field. Yet, they also used their own ways of approaching knowledge—in the relation between theoretical and applied knowledge—to engage in higher forms of learning. Moreover, the academic challenges experienced by the non-traditional students appear to be aimed at allowing them to be competitive, achieve their educational goals, and fulfil their occupational aspirations in a society governed by market laws. To manage the tension associated with an equitable offering for non-traditional students in their engagement with learning, academic challenge would need to be reconfigured to recognise these students' ways of knowing and allow them to expand their concerns beyond the personal to society's well-being.

Since the university's focus on conceptual knowledge could hide different ways of knowing, 'A greater awareness of the importance of ways of knowing' could help 'create appropriate learning situations' for non-traditional students in their experiences of engagement (Carter 2007 p. 407). Proposing academic challenges that would resonate with their ways of knowing, would give recognition to their status as non-traditional students, empower them and support their agency. In formally acknowledging non-traditional students as 'knowers'—that is 'knowledge agents'— (Wiggan 2008, p. 338) they would be called to 'differentially contribute to its [knowledge] production' for a more equitable education**.** They would have to be engaged 'in ways that will not diminish their own backgrounds' (Zemits & Hodson 2016, p. 698). By arguing for a curriculum that would be meaningful to non-traditional students, Zemits and Hodson (2016, p. 703) emphasise the embodied nature of knowledge, where 'the individual's perspectives are integrated into the outcomes of what is researched', and knowledge exists as a binary with who the person is. Academic challenge without a consideration of how non-traditional students experience them would otherwise reflect the dilemma of access to university for

these students ‘without a concomitant re-thinking and re-structuring on the part of the colleges and universities they attend’ (Schnee 2008, p. 64)**.**

Nevertheless, academic challenges as higher forms of learning set by the university, and different ways of learning brought about by non-traditional students, could have to be further extended to forms of challenges in the current curriculum to meet the needs of non-traditional students (and all students) as future citizens for a better society. This would reinforce rigorous thinking, not circumvent it. While the influence of their home backgrounds has impacted on how they extend themselves intellectually, the non-traditional students in this research have left largely unquestioned an education that perpetuates inequities in the society in which they would be brought to live.

What appears to be missing in the non-traditional students’ engagement with learning would be academic challenges through ‘a curriculum that addresses important social, political and cultural issues in their lives.’ (Clifford 2009, p. 11). Besides the need to incorporate non-traditional students’ ways of approaching knowledge in the current curriculum, universities would need to ‘involve them in curricular planning and in building a new critical pedagogy’ (Clifford 2009, p. 4) juxtaposed to their current curriculum. Power relations would have to be revisited for their voices to be heard in such curriculum (Clifford 2009). Power has also been shown to need review in interactions with teachers, for criticality to be present in classroom processes (Section 6.2.3). As argued by Campbell, Dortch and Burt (2018, p. 20), academic challenge in support of learning and growth that is equity-based would involve ‘a learning process that questions modern problems and power structures.’ Already seen as knowledge agents further above (Wiggan 2008), non-traditional students would also ‘possess knowledge and insights that would benefit a more open and fluid dialogue on achievement’ (Wiggan 2007, p. 324) beyond the utilitarian to an educational experience more caring of the student and the world in which they live (Barnacle & Dall’Alba 2017). Academic challenge seen in this way need not alienate non-traditional students but offer a more enriching educational experience to them.

6.3 Summary

For an education for equity, this research suggests that the capital, identity and knowledge of non-traditional students be recognised in a student engagement whose main purpose is success for the individual to function in a knowledge economy. Grafted onto that student engagement would be a critical student engagement, for these students to be able to relate self to the broader world for a better and more equitable society.

Chapter Seven – Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate the experiences of non-traditional students in their engagement with learning in their first year of university, in relation to equity. In Chapter One, I contended that non-traditional students are not necessarily lacking in their engagement with learning. I stated that dominant norms at institutional level, and dominant norms impacting on the institution could be implicitly impacting on equity in the engagement of non-traditional students.

Distancing myself from depictions of non-traditional students in student engagement that 'strain and constrain' them (Kezar, Walpole & Perna 2014), I chose students who had successfully completed their first year (McKay & Devlin 2014; McKay & Devlin 2016) for an insight into their first-year experiences of engagement. The two research questions were:

(1) How do non-traditional students make sense of their experiences of engagement with their learning in their first year at university?

(2) How do non-traditional students make sense of the strengths that they bring from their home backgrounds into their experiences of engagement with learning?

The findings of this research are reiterated in Section 7.2 in this chapter. I entered the field of student engagement with a preoccupation with Teaching and Learning, and the findings relate specifically to Teaching and Learning that would impact non-traditional students in their immediate educational context and beyond. Thus, student engagement that takes its impetus from within the classroom as a 'knowledge centred activity' (Ashwin & McVitty 2015) has extended its influence to the institution and the world beyond, through the non-traditional students in this study. This chapter now moves to the research contribution, then to the major findings. Next, I state my positionality as related to this research, followed by the limitations in this research and the opportunities conversely offered, to then conclude with directions for future research.

7.1 The research contribution

This research is at the crossroad with equity, and the findings and the paradoxes within give indications of what is needed in student engagement for equality of opportunities towards these students, thus calling for a student engagement that does more than serve a knowledge economy. It is *through their approach to student engagement* that universities could do more than serve a knowledge economy.

Student engagement's focus on success with a purpose to serve the economy, while focussing on the outcome, has still not made much space in the teaching-learning process for the capital, identities and ways of knowing that the non-traditional students in this research reveal in their engagement experiences. What this means is that while aware of the presence of non-traditional students and while working towards the success of non-traditional students, universities are still aiming for that success within a normative student engagement.

Additionally, these students' home background identities (with its collective dimension) that have contributed to their engagement experiences, but are still to get recognition in the teaching-learning process also appear to bear little on these students' projection of a future of individual welfare. Bob who has had an active life in the community and uses his experiential capital to be proactive during group work, nevertheless wants a life detached from its socioeconomic context altogether, 'It doesn't mean that you're rich, it doesn't mean that you've got a big house or car. It could just be that you've got what you wanted' (Bob 2017, 19 April). Even Henry (2017, 28 April) who expresses his future as wishing to be in 'a place of positive influence' for others, talks about those who 'are not cut out to be there' and 'who had been weeded out', when caught in the individualist game of group work. This is concerning for students who want a community-focussed career like teaching. Universities giving access to non-traditional students comes with a concomitant consideration of who they are in the teaching-learning process as well as their freedom to become who they want to become in relation to the broader world, with the possibility to make a difference for a better and more equitable future.

Ultimately the difficulties associated to group work seen in this research goes back to a focus on self and less on others, within a climate of competition for success in the form of good marks, which while necessary for success to function in a knowledge economy appears to be a success with little concern for others. To the issues associated with group work, Henry's (2017, 28 April) teacher replies, 'there's nothing that I can really do'. Learning can even be narrowed down to marks only, as in James' (2017, 13 May) experience of academic challenge, 'If it's not necessary, then why do it? If it's not necessary to actually getting your degree'; 'Assignments is everything to me now.'

The university's notion of independent learning of the autonomous individual free from dependence on the state who is called to function in a knowledge economy can deflect the responsibility of teachers as agents in the university field - as seen through the experiences of the non-traditional students. These students resort to their own hard work when teachers, who are their only academic points of reference do not sustain their responsibility throughout causing lack of trust and loss of respect. 'If it wasn't for them, who else would I ask, really?' asks Samara (2017, 8 May). A better consideration of the voices of non-traditional students appears to be needed as when silence is thrust upon them, their own knowledge being rendered insignificant. For example, listening to the teacher without hearing her own voice made Cassie (2017, 10 May) feel inferior and angry. She was also kicked out for having a different opinion to the teacher. In contrast, the literacy teacher appears to completely change the rules of the game in her class, operating along fluid power dynamics with her students, developing their passion for literacy and giving them the possibility to surpass themselves and raise questions about university practices, this in turn leading to collaborations with teachers.

The suggestions made in this research are based on results obtained through an analysis of the lived experiences of the non-traditional students, which were then tied to theory through a view of Bourdieu's capital, habitus and field together with a student engagement and first-year literature. For greater equity towards non-traditional students this research, therefore, suggests the need for a student engagement that recognises who these students are, what they know

and how they know in their learning and development for their success, to then function in a knowledge economy. Additionally, and beyond serving a knowledge economy, this thesis suggests critical student engagement to allow the non-traditional students the freedom to become in relation to the broader world, taking part in the life of society to make a difference for a better and more equitable future. Recognition alone would not be sufficient to break down the cycle of inequity, but recognition and criticality would, and together they stand as the main contribution of this research in the field of student engagement.

The research gains in depth what it loses in breadth; while bound to the group studied, the research findings are of relevance to the reader in so far as they might be useful in the context of their practice. Moreover, the voice of the non-traditional students on what mattered to them in their first-year experiences of engagement with learning, has been brought to the foreground. This research has thus been responsive to Gale and Parker's (2014, p. 747) recommendation that first-year research 'needs to be cognisant of students' lived reality, not just institutional and/or systemic interests', adding depth to the literature on non-traditional students' potential to contribute to higher education.

Where Bourdieu has more often been related to the reproduction of inequities, in this research Bourdieusian concepts tie the non-traditional students' experiences of engagement with learning to an equity discourse. Furthermore, a first-year scholarship with a focus on the needs of students from non-traditional backgrounds (Devlin 2013; King, Luzeckyj & McCann 2019; Lawrence 2005; O'Shea 2016; Zipin 2009) has been brought into the field of student engagement, contributing to channel the research towards recognition for these students in their engagement experiences. Criticality, which is an emerging territory in the field of student engagement (Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017; McMahon & Portelli 2012; Zepke 2015, 2017, 2018; Zyngier 2008), has also been given further impetus through this research to act as a possible conduit to greater equity in education and in society.

7.2 Major findings

7.2.1 Validation of non-traditional students' home background capital for personal and broader outcomes

The non-traditional students in this research have shown that they bring alternative forms of capital – familial capital, experiential capital, and symbolic capital in the form of moral standing acquired from their backgrounds – in their engagement with learning.

For an equitable consideration of non-traditional students in their engagement with learning, this research suggests that the alternative forms of capital that they bring with them to university be leveraged at the level of Teaching and Learning for the learning experiences of these students to connect with their own reality and backgrounds. The skills, experiences and values of non-traditional students would at the same time benefit all students. A further suggestion is that exposure to a diversity of capital in the classroom could broaden the scope of learning for personal outcome to learning that would nurture a concern for others and the world. Thus, from seeking individual success and achievement to mainly function in a knowledge economy and enhance their socio-economic standing, non-traditional students could also be brought to experience an education that would prepare them as citizens willing to take action for a better and more equitable society.

7.2.2 Consideration for who non-traditional students are and who they are becoming

A flexible conception of habitus has facilitated the understanding of the non-traditional students' formation of identities resulting from their first-year engagement with learning. Their newly acquired academic selves exist in hybridity with their home background selves (Crozier, Reay & Clayton 2019). As a projection of their new academic learner selves, their possible future selves indicate the economic individualism of a higher education that tends more towards serving the skills required in the market economy, than towards concerns for society's well-being.

To afford non-traditional students, equality of opportunities in their engagement with learning, this research suggests that their identities be affirmed in Teaching

and Learning rather than considered as an obstacle. Yet, validating who they are would also need to be balanced out with concerns for who they would become so that they do not, in turn, re-enact the inequities of the world in exclusively serving a market economy. Becoming for greater social justice would also require that Teaching and Learning creates spaces for criticality, so that non-traditional students (and all students) get the opportunity to consider their becoming beyond the current socio-economic norms governing society and their education.

7.2.3 Space for what non-traditional students know, their histories and experiences, and power sharing in classroom processes

In their interactions with their teachers, the non-traditional students in this research engaged in a process of acquiring the university's knowledge discourse. However, they also sought to emancipate themselves from the university field of knowledge by giving importance to their own experiences and histories in their learning.

To attend to dominance as well as difference in the field, this research suggests that teachers, as agents of the university field, consistently respond to their role of imparting the university knowledge discourse, and also make space for non-traditional students to reveal what they know as related to who they are within a curriculum that is not strictly normative. While responsive to a more equitable classroom, attending to dominance and difference would have to be complemented with considerations of power sharing in the construction of classroom processes for issues pertaining to the lives of non-traditional students to become part of the teaching-learning process. It would be in the development of a critical consciousness through such education that non-traditional students could also become agents to a more equitable society.

7.2.4 Collaborative learning with peers: collective interdependence and reciprocal care

The non-traditional students in this research have given primacy to performance at the expense of learning with and from their peers, when collaborative work is assessed. The individualist game of performance has, however, receded when

collaborative work is not assessed, making space for sharing knowledge and the validation of each other's contribution.

The collective interdependence from the non-traditional students' backgrounds could offer a solution for collaborative learning with dual intellectual and competitive purposes, while serving as a form of recognition of non-traditional students themselves. At a broader level though, collaborative processes with the reciprocity of care could help non-traditional students to care for what they are learning, their peers, and the well-being of others in the world, making of them agents of change for a better world.

7.2.5 Academically challenging non-traditional students through their ways of approaching knowledge and challenging them to question issues in the bigger world

The non-traditional students have risen to the challenge set by the university - testifying to their agency in the field—as they have also used their own ways to approach knowledge, namely in the relationship between pure and applied knowledge. They have, however, been academically challenged only so far as their education would allow them to attain a life of personal betterment, indicating little concern for the bigger world.

Academic challenge as related to the experiences of non-traditional students in their engagement with learning points to the need for new avenues in Teaching and Learning. For a more equitable experience of learning engagement, academic challenge would need to include non-traditional students' ways of approaching knowledge. Additionally, challenging non-traditional students to question issues related to the broader world could extend their concerns beyond self, for a better society, more sustainable and liveable.

7.3 Positionality as a statement of transparency

My motivation to conduct research featuring the contribution of non-traditional students was to add to the literature in the field and to counteract marginalisation for greater equity in their education. Yet, on the matter of positionality as 'transparency about the author's perspective regarding the research' (Secules et al. 2021, p. 20), Secules et al. (2021, p. 26) make a point

that calls for reflection: ‘the choices we make to pursue specific research topics and the questions we ask are inherently related to our own experiences and positionalities’. My concern for equity in relation to non-traditional students—unacknowledged at the time I framed the research topic and questions—was heightened by my own professional experiences of being marginalised in my work, unrecognised for my skills, assets and knowledge (from my experiences in the Preface, the Epilogue will reflect on the journey travelled). This made me more aware of the inequities experienced by others, particularly non-traditional students.

Making space for the voice of non-traditional students to be heard through IPA incurred the risk of my voice mingling with theirs or overshadowing theirs. There was a tension to be managed as insider and outsider in how I related to the research participants. As an insider, I identified with the group studied in that their achievements have been overlaid by a deficit stigma, and the assets, skills and knowledge from their backgrounds have been marginalised in the dominant university culture. As an insider I had the ‘ability to authentically engage with members of that group’ (Secules et al. 2021, p. 20). Bourke (2014) advocates disclosing one’s positionality to students sharing similarities in positionality to further open up their conversations during data collection. I never disclosed my positionality to the participants. I am satisfied to have abstained from disclosure, because I had to maintain the necessary detachment of the researcher as outsider, collecting data objectively ‘so as to clearly and critically conduct research on a group with shared experience’ (Secules et al. 2021, p. 20).

IPA’s methodology was a useful buffer too, since my role as interviewer was to follow the interviewee into the depths of their experiences with minimum intrusion, so as not to superimpose what the researcher could think the experiences of the interviewee were. Moreover, I realised that by the time that I was doing data collection, issues and experiences of the past as recalled in the preface, while they still mattered to me, were no longer emotionally and personally related to my own actual lived experiences. That was an additional safeguard to an emotional investment in the research. The process of an IPA data analysis was also conducive to ‘mitigate preconceived notions or

assumptions that may taint the research process' (Secules et al. 2021, p. 21). To obtain the themes in the results section, a process of inductive theme development looked deeply into each participant's responses, followed by identifying the correspondence of themes across the six participants. It was only at the discussion level that the participants' lived experiences were associated with the theoretical dimensions of this research.

Nevertheless, I realise that the complexity of human life means that complete detachment, while striven for, would never be fully attainable. While the participants and the researcher are unique individuals, we are all at the same time part of a larger whole (Smith 2007, p. 5) and our shared humanity allows for greater understanding of the other, rather than complete understanding.

7.4 Limitations and opportunities

While not denying that there are limitations in this research, they have also given access to opportunities. This research is limited in scale, but the small number of participants in this research has made possible a deeper view of the experiences of the students interviewed than would have been possible with research on a larger scale.

Another limitation is that for the semi-structured interviews I set topics of conversation close to AUSSE-related themes instead of expanding to a broader set of questions. The AUSSE tradition with a focus on Teaching and Learning has participated in my journey in student engagement, but in staying too close to the AUSSE themes I forfeited further layers in my work. During fieldwork as I was constantly aware of the necessity to be humble to keep a check on any power imbalances, I realised that I did not have to grapple with following the interviewees into the avenues where they were taking me. I became bolder and with it came the thought that the alternative of asking the participants themselves to give me their understanding of student engagement and to then ask them to give me their lived experiences may have been preferable to the approach chosen. The alternative is, in hindsight, an interesting option for further research.

Nevertheless, AUSSE-related engagement themes took on specific and contextual meanings within an IPA methodology to reveal the lived experiences of non-traditional students. When extended through Bourdieusian theory and the extant literature, this research has shown an understanding of non-traditional students in relation to equity. The trajectory I chose, which was to use an institutional tool differently, allowed me to not only see the success and challenges of the non-traditional students in this research, but also the extent and limit of their emancipation as related to the student engagement proposed by the institution, itself influenced by dominant ideas in current society.

New avenues have been forged in the field, with on one side the need to recognise the value of non-traditional students' engagement with their learning for greater equity for them, and on the other side the identification of critical student engagement as a conduit to a more equitable society through non-traditional students. A mainstream student engagement more responsive to the needs of non-traditional students, with critical student engagement attached to it is what the thesis suggests. This would echo Zepke's (2017) suggestion that critical student engagement be grafted onto mainstream student engagement, whose main purpose is success for the individual to function in a knowledge economy.

7.5 Future research

In this research, I brought together an IPA methodology and Bourdieu's concepts at the theoretical level, into what looked like the well-trodden paths of student engagement to bring to fruition ideas to counter the marginalisation of non-traditional students. Future studies could build further on this research design to enrich the findings. The findings could be compared with findings from traditional students. A larger study with non-traditional students from other fields of study within the same institution would offer the possibility for further investigation. Research could be carried out in a different institution but with similar tools, and the findings compared. Alternatively, different theories to that of Bourdieu could be applied to research with a similar design. Practitioners implementing any aspect of the findings from this research could in turn research the lived experiences of engagement of their students.

Since greater equity in society is a matter of concern for all students in their role as future citizens enlightened about the great issues of this world, research on critical student engagement could incorporate traditional students as well as non-traditional students. In view of the wave of activism among the youth across the world, critical student engagement is likely to gain further momentum in the future. Related to that, I have brought to prominence the voices of non-traditional students for them to provide insights valuable for their education. Incorporating the voice of students in their education is necessary.

Epilogue

The courage to be myself

I look at where I am now.

I have been willing to launch myself into the unknown.

I have been willing to learn.

It has been about the courage to be myself,

For self and for others.

On the way I have met some people,

Who supported me in my endeavours.

The essential goodness of human beings prevails.

We all share a common humanity,

With the potential to draw us together

On life’s journey.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Extended profile of participants in this research

Table A1 A comprehensive view of the participants' profiles (Refer to Section 3.3.2)

Name of participants (pseudonyms)	Age at which started university	Address postcode classification by SES	Previous Qualifications	First in family	Employment in first year	Parents' educational attainments and occupations
Samara	21	Low SES	Completed high school	No Elder sister is ahead of her in the Education Degree	No Work	Father completed Year 10. Mother has a Certificate IV in Makeup & Beauty. They run a Milk Bar.
Cassie	18	Low SES	Completed high school	Yes	Receptionist; Volleyball Coach; Retail Assistant; 10-15 Hours per week	Father completed high school. He is a Firefighter. Mother completed Year 10. She works as a book keeper for a private business.
Bob	Above 40	Low SES	Completed high school	Yes	Security officer; 25 hours per week Formerly in police force and in Army	Father completed Year 10. Taxi Driver Mother completed high school. Did secretarial work
James	20	Low SES	Went to high school until Year 11 Then went to Sports School for a Certificate IV in Sports & Recreation and a Diploma in Sport & Development	Yes	Volunteering; 2 hours per week	Father is retired. He has a vocational diploma in Electro Technology. Mother completed Year 10.

Rachel	25	Low SES	Completed high school Completed a Certificate II in Kitchen Operations	No Brother has completed a Law Degree Sister dropped out of university	Retail assistant; 20 hours per week	Father is retired. Worked in the construction industry Mother is a stay -at-home mum.
Henry	25	Low SES	Completed high school. .	No Younger brother graduated in previous year	Babysitting; 9 hours per week	Both father and mother completed high school. Father is a mechanic. Mother works as a receptionist.

Appendix B – Interview schedule

Interview schedule used for the semi-structured Interviews

Active and Collaborative Learning

1.With regard to what was happening in the classroom, could you describe your experience of collaborative work in your first year?

(Prompts: Could you describe the highs/lows? Could you tell me more about the interactions you had with your peers?

2. There was work to be done outside the classroom, how did that involve your peers?

3. What were your other experiences of active learning in the classroom?

Student Interactions with Teachers

4. Could you talk about the interactions you had with teachers in the classroom? Outside the classroom?

Academic Challenge

5. In what ways did the activities set in class challenge you to do your best or learn further?

(Prompts: Could you give me examples? How about the teachers' expectations? Assessments?)

Strength and Positive Influences

6. When you started your first year, what strengths and/or positive influences do you think you brought with you from your home? Your high school? Your community or elsewhere?

7. How did you use these strengths and/or positive influences in your learning and development in your first year?

Appendix C – Sample of data analysis

Henry and teachers

Henry and Teachers – angry school boy (past); experience with Maths teacher in first year; and teacher he wants to become (projected future)	**Comments**
With school teachers I always got stuck with really angry teachers, for some reason. I was a pretty angry child. We just butted heads all the time. My perfect teacher would have been a patient one who understood why this young boy was so angry … A good teacher's a patient one who understands that all people, no matter how old they are, are still people.	Henry was an angry school boy. To his own anger and difficulties, teachers responded with anger. Henry wanted a 'patient' teacher who 'understands'. A teacher who considers H the person (consideration of the student as an individual).
From School Teacher to school yard … as a kid I was really good with kids. I always used to hang out with some of the mentally challenged children at our primary school. I always used to hang out and play with them, just solely for the fact that I thought that they were interesting. I just enjoyed their company; no more, no less. I didn't really think that they were any more challenged than I was …I just enjoyed hanging out with them. Some of these kids had downs syndrome, some of these kids had cerebral palsy. They were all really unique and really wonderful, but I was just always really good. Even though I wasn't the smartest kid myself, I was always really patient with children who were – for want of a better term again – not as capable as me. I just had patience. I was just patient.	The patience Henry did not get from his school teachers, he showed it in the school yard towards those deemed 'not as capable', to bring out what is unique and wonderful in each of them. In not being understood by his school teachers he himself has possibly felt 'not as capable'. His fascination with numbers was not brought out as unique and wonderful at school.

Experience at uni. with Maths Teacher My teacher, during that maths stage last year, was amazing. She was incredible. She was really, really patient and really good at breaking things down, really good at picking out everyone's strengths and weaknesses, my big weakness being the formulas and everything like that. It was really, really encouraging. She really took her time. Quality over quantity. If she can break down a formula – even if it's just one formula over a two-hour class – we understand that, rather than talking about five formulas and no one getting it. She was really good like that. She was just really, really chilled about it and she understood that maths is a daunting topic. She explained everything heaps. She always went over the equations and the formulas and repeated herself constantly and made sure she'd break it down as simply as possible just to make sure that we got it. She made me feel really comfortable because she was super easy-going. I definitely don't fear maths as much as I used to ... whereas before I would definitely just freak out and be shocked. Now I can sit there and say: well there's got to be a reason behind it. What's the reason behind this formula?	Why does Henry's experience with the Maths teacher matters to him? For him the Maths teacher is incredible. Why? She showed the patience he had wanted to experience from teachers at school. She works to each individual's strengths and weaknesses. She responds to Henry's home background strength with numbers, and helps him to overcome his weakness with formulas making his experience of Maths less daunting. The Maths Teacher has modelled the teacher H had wanted at school to bring the best out of him. The Maths teacher's understanding of H develops his confidence in the subject.
The teacher Henry wants to become I want to be the teacher I needed. … wanting to encourage kids, being patient with kids. It was like, 'That's the teacher I want to be,'	The patience and encouragement H did not

	benefit as a kid he wants to give it to his future pupils. From his past history of difficulties at school, he wants to become a teacher for the welfare of others. He wants to recreate the world differently.
Henry and anger now My thinking processes have changed … now from what I've learned in the world that I've been a part of…. I'm only human, so I might be angry but then I'll be like: 'Why did I get angry? Was it really worth it?' I never used to question myself about that. I used to be quite an aggressive person and now I'm super, super mellow. Just becoming an academic … I hated school; I never really studied; I never did anything. I'm street intelligent [laughs], but when it comes to studying and writing essays and everything like that, I've discovered a side of myself that I never really knew ... It's just a different branch of intelligence that I've never really dived into or noticed on myself and I really like how that coat fits.	Henry's anger has receded. In becoming part of uni. Henry who thought the burger shop was for him has fulfilled himself intellectually. Having been able to express himself H has become super mellow. Compare with angry school boy who could not express himself, had no space to express his imagination with numbers…

Appendix D – Documents used to seek student participation in this research

Flyer used to seek voluntary participation

To all Bachelor of Education Students currently enrolled in their second year

Would you like to participate in a study that will positively influence the first-year experience of future Victoria University students?

Would you like to provide valuable insights about your own first-year experience?

****

Victoria University will be conducting a study in the College of Education entitled:

Students' experiences of first-year learning engagement

In order to carry out this study, volunteers are being sought to participate in a data gathering interview process. The proposed study seeks to understand students' experiences of learning engagement in their first year. Participation is anonymous and voluntary.

It is hoped that the proposed study will contribute to a better understanding of students, with a view to enhance their first-year experience at Victoria University.

The results of this study will be fundamental work to be incorporated in a PhD thesis.

If you are interested in taking part, or would like to know more, please contact:

Nalenie Ramjaun

PhD Candidate,

Victoria University.

Phone xxxxxxx; Mobile xxxxxxx; Email xxxxxxx

Please note that all enquiries /registrations of interests will be treated as private and confidential.

Personal information sheet used to collect information to build the sample of participants for this research

To the Future Research Participant

I deeply appreciate your interest in participating in the PhD research that I am doing at Victoria University. Would you please complete the next two pages with the relevant information to allow me to constitute a sample of participants? Please note that all information provided will be treated confidentially.

Thanking you.

Kindly

Nalenie

Title of PhD research project: Students' experiences of first-year learning engagement

PhD student Investigator: Nalenie Ramjaun

PhD Research supervised by:

Chief Investigator: Dr Gwen Gilmore

PERSONAL INFORMATION SHEET

Name: _____

Email: _____

Phone contact no: _____

Your home address (permanent): _____

Postcode: _____

For the items that follow, please use an 'x' to indicate your choice

Please state your age group

☐18 – 21 years

☐Above 21- 30 years

☐Above 30 – 40 years

☐ Above 40 years

What was your highest educational participation prior to your current course?

☐Postgraduate qualification

☐Bachelor Degree

☐Other post school qualification (Please state) _____

☐Completed a final year of secondary education at school

☐Completed a final year of secondary education at TAFE

☐Completed Year 10

☐Did not complete year 10

☐None of the above (Please state) _____

Are you first in the family to attend university?

☐Yes/ ☐No

Please indicate your parents' highest level of education.

Father

☐Postgraduate qualification

☐Bachelor Degree

☐Other post school qualification (Please state) _____

☐Completed a final year of secondary education at school

☐Completed a final year of secondary education at TAFE

☐Completed Year 10

☐Did not complete year 10

☐None of the above (Please state) _____

Mother

☐Postgraduate qualification

☐Bachelor Degree

☐Other post school qualification (Please state) _____

☐Completed a final year of secondary education at school

☐Completed a final year of secondary education at TAFE

☐Completed Year 10

☐Did not complete year 10

☐None of the above (Please state) _____

THANK YOU

Document used to seek the consent of the participants in this research

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS:

We would like to invite you to be a part of a study entitled

'Students' experiences of engagement with their learning in their first year'

,

The aim of the study is to examine students' experiences of engagement with their learning in their first year at university. A mode of enquiry that gives centrality to the human experience will be used with a purposive sample of students from Victoria University. To elicit in-depth data about the learning engagement experiences of the participants, the semi-structured interview will be used. Fieldwork for this research is organised in two phases according to the following format: Phase 1 – Interviews followed by data transcription and analysis; Phase 2- Interviews followed by data transcription and analysis. Each participant will participate in one interview at each phase.

There are potential risks associated to human participation in this research of which the participant needs to be informed.

The minimum risk of 'discomfort' in reliving an episode in the past that could have been unpleasant does exist. Should that happen, the participant will be given the option of continuing at a later time or of discontinuing their participation in the research, if they desire.

The minimal risk for the participant to be identified by their peers also exists. To safeguard the confidentiality and anonymity of the participant, a room suitable for a one-to-one confidential interview conversation will be used at Footscray Park Campus, Victoria University. All Interview conversations remain confidential and all data provided by the participant will be anonymised throughout the project. All data and data-related writings will also be safely and confidentially stored in the Victoria University R Drive.

The contact details of the Victoria University Counselling Services are provided for you to use in confidentiality if you wish to book an appointment at any time during the project: Tel 03 9919 5400 from 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday.

CERTIFICATION BY PARTICIPANT

I, "[Click here & type participant's name]"

of "[Click here & type participant's suburb]"

certify that I am at least 18 years old* and that I am voluntarily giving my consent to participate in the study:

'Students' experiences of engagement with their learning in their first year'

being conducted at Victoria University by **Dr Gwen Gilmore (Chief Investigator)**

I certify that the objectives of the study, together with any risks and safeguards associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by:

Nalenie Ramjaun (PhD student Investigator)

and that I freely consent to participation involving the below mentioned procedures:

- Use of the semi-structured interview to collect data from research participants on their experiences of learning engagement in their first year.
- Interview duration of 45-90 minutes. Each participant does a total of 2 interviews.
- The interviews will be audio-recorded to facilitate transcription later. All interview conversations remain confidential.
- The participant will be asked to choose a fictitious name, which name will be used to address them during the interview. The same name will be used in the researcher's writings throughout the PhD project.
- All data and data related writings will be safely and confidentially stored in the Victoria University R Drive.
- The transcriptions of the interviews will be shown to each participant to confirm authenticity, and to give them the option to make amendments.

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed:

Date:

If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Ethics Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Office for Research, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC, 8001, email Researchethics@vu.edu.au or phone (03) 9919 4781 or 4461