International postgraduate students' experiences of independent learning within a UK higher education

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Candidate Declaration

I hereby declare that:

1. I have not been enrolled for another award of the University, or other academic or professional organisation, whilst undertaking my research degree.

2. None of the material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.

3. I am aware of and understand the University's policy on plagiarism and certify that this thesis is my own work. The use of all published or other sources of material consulted have been properly and fully acknowledged.

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Abstract

This qualitative study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach to explore nine international postgraduate students' experiences of independent learning. Participants were studying at either Masters or PhD level, across a range of courses at one higher education institution. Lifeworld interviews were used to explore the lived, everyday world of the participants (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015).

The participants described a wide range of experiences that impacted on their engagement with independent learning as they adjusted to a new country, unfamiliar language and teaching and learning approaches. This resulted in feelings of isolation, frustration, feeling lesser and othered.

Findings indicated that engaging with independent learning demands adjustment and can feel emotional and overwhelming if not introduced with care and guidance. However, a small amount of change in practice between previous and current study forms appear to lead to fewer emotional issues. Independent learning can be experienced as unbounded and hard to grasp and has been likened to a journey. Feedback and guidance from tutors support students in arriving at their destination quicker, avoiding hazards along the way. Independent learning is also more manageable when working in proximity to student peers. Finally, there was an appreciation of liberation through independent learning, with participants recounting successes and achieving agency.

Utilising Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model the research demonstrates that higher education institutions cannot begin to understand how international students experience independent learning without first coming to know how relationships and interactions within contexts affects that experience. It was evident that there was a mismatch between educators' understandings of independent learning and international students' experiences of engaging with it.

Dedication

This is for you, Mum- I wish you were here to finally see it submitted x

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No work is ever the author's alone, therefore, I have many people to thank for the success of this work. Firstly, and most importantly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the study participants whose stories have made it possible for me to accomplish this study.

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Table of Contents

1. Chapter 1: Introduction to the thesis

1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the focus of the study and places this within the context of the international students' experience. In this chapter, I briefly introduce and outline the international student participants' experiences of independent learning within a United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education Institution (HEI). Pertinent information is presented to outline the phenomenon of independent learning and a brief rationale as to my chosen methodology, namely interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The setting in which the study took place is then presented, along with an exploration of my position as an insider researcher as an academic at the same institution as the participants. I argue that my role within the university provided me with a unique understanding of the environment and an appreciation surrounding the complexity of the issue under investigation. The study aims and research questions are then presented. I conclude this chapter by detailing how the thesis is structured.

My interest in researching the lived experiences of international students as they engage with independent learning began in 2012. During this time, my role was as international lead for the nursing and midwifery department. I had a professional and educational responsibility to support the development and delivery of programs of study that met the needs of international students. At the time of commencing the Doctorate in Education I was involved in teaching nurses from Iraq as part of a wider workforce development project between

the university and Iraq's ministry of education. This was my first experience of teaching international students. Although I had several years' experience of teaching in higher education, this occurrence made me acutely aware of the challenges of supporting students in adapting to unfamiliar teaching and learning approaches. Whilst the students displayed many of the attributes required for higher education, they were perceived by the academic team to lack the independent learning skills required. This resulted in negative comments about the students' learning abilities from the teaching team.

Performing the international lead role for the department has continued to expose me to a more culturally diverse group of students. Annual teaching trips to China and subsequently developing a degree course for nursing students from China (and later other countries) planning to undertake further study in the UK further reinforced my interest in international students' experiences of independent learning. Yet, my experiences in this role have also increased my awareness of the negative stereotyping that surrounds international students in relation to their study skills.

In the following thesis, I explore the lived experiences of postgraduate international students engaging with independent learning. The nine student participants were all studying at either master's or PhD level at the university where I work as an academic in the department of nursing and midwifery. My rationale for focusing on postgraduate students as my research participants is that there is an expectation that they will have experienced or acquired the skill of independence with their learning, having already

completed a higher education degree. The participants were undertaking a range of courses, but none were from my department since, at the time of recruitment, we did not have any international students studying with us. However, due to the changes to nurse education funding and the move from bursaries to student fees, it was anticipated that this would quickly change. There had always been an interest from overseas applicants for UK nursing degree courses, but due to places being funded through Health Education England, overseas applicants were not able to access this funding. Therefore, the removal of NHS bursaries in 2017 and students paying course fees led to most undergraduate and postgraduate nursing (and other health and social care) courses being made available to international students.

My professional interest thus lies in the desire to help students learn by improving the teaching and learning experience for all international students within the department through exploring the challenges that international students face, with particular reference to independent learning. I hope that the learning gained through exploring other postgraduate students' experience will therefore be applied to future international students in my department.

1.1.1 A note on terminology

Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) argue that students from different cultural backgrounds are often considered in terms of their 'traits', which leads to assumptions being made about their culture and learning style. Traits

assumes that “characteristics of cultural groups are located within individuals as carriers of culture” (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003, p.19) and can lead to over-generalisation of the relationship between learning style and cultural group membership. Consequently, this can lead to the use of homogenising terms such as the ‘international student’, the ‘Chinese learner’ or the ‘home student’, thus categorising such students by their fixed characteristics (Gu & Maley, 2008; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Watkins & Biggs,1996). For example, Watkins and Biggs, (1996) used the term the ‘Chinese Paradox’ to describe how most students from China are categorised as rote learners, memorising without understanding and therefore likely to perform badly in a Western educational institution. This can lead to assumptions being made on the learning styles of cultural groups, without taking into account an individual’s past experiences.

Nevertheless, the term ‘international student’ is used consistently within the literature (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Owen, Day & Yang, 2017). Other terms used are ‘overseas student’ (Bache & Hayton, 2012), ‘non-UK student’ (Dunford, Muir, Teran & Grimwood, 2015) and ‘non-domiciled student’ (Morrison, Merrick, Higgs & Le Métais, 2005). Therefore, while not wanting to homogenise groups of students, for clarity and consistency with the literature, the term ‘international student’ will be used throughout this study.

1.2. Background

The UK reaps the rewards of international students choosing to study here as they contribute significantly to the country's economic and social prosperity. Over the years there has been an increase in the numbers of international students choosing to study in the UK. International students now account for 20.7% of the total student population in HEI's in the UK (Universities UK, 2020). Some 14.9% of all undergraduates and 37.1% of postgraduate students now originate from outside the UK.

The Higher Education Policy Institute (2018) estimates that international students contribute £22.6 billion to the UK economy. Therefore, considerable effort goes into attracting international students. However, although international students are regarded as a welcome diverse and growing population, authors of multiple studies have found that they encounter acculturative stress due to the need for academic and cultural adjustments as they undertake this important transitional event (Li & Peng, 2019; Taušová, Bender, Dimitrova & van de Vijver, 2019). For many, these challenges include learning to live in an unfamiliar culture, away from family and friends, communicating in a different language and learning through unfamiliar methods. Still, despite these tensions, a successful intercultural experience can be a transformative process and a route to individual personal and academic development (Anderson, 1994).

The role of culture in determining teaching and learning approaches has been discussed by numerous researchers (As-Saber, Crosling & Rahman, 2006;

Blasco, 2015; Chuang, 2012; Evans & Stevenson, 2010; Gieve & Clark, 2005; Goode, 2007; Gu & Maley, 2008; McClure, 2007; Ryan, 2011; Saravanamuthu & Yap 2014; Shevellar, 2015). Culture can be defined as the way of life shared by a group of people, incorporating shared values, views and behaviors (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011; Cole & Parker, 2011). Therefore, if culture determines how we think and behave, it will, in turn, affect how we learn (Gay, 2010). Still, whilst important, culture is not the only factor influencing teaching and learning approaches and experiences (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010). Coleman (2004) argues that a range of internal and external factors not necessarily associated with culture will influence the outcomes of studying overseas. These include motivation, attitude, anxiety, individual learning style and strategies, as well as location, learning environment and contact with other students.

Teachers' attitudes towards international students can diminish when different approaches to teaching and learning are viewed as demanding more time, energy, and patience (Otten, 2003). Anecdotal comments from colleagues about their experiences of teaching and supporting international students within the department included references to international students requiring more support than home students, as well as such students not speaking out in class and presenting written academic work of lesser quality. Comments like these can leave academic staff with a lasting negative opinion of international students, particularly if diverse cultural approaches are viewed as a risk to the standard of academic practices (Otten, 2003). This can then lead to both negative teaching and learning experiences for students and

academics. Despite their level of professional skills and knowledge, as well as the difficult circumstances the nurses from Iraq had endured to further their education, they were still at risk of being labelled a problem.

Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) argue that teaching and learning practices should move beyond a deficit-model approach, which leads to unacceptable judgments being made when cultural practices differ from the practices of the dominant group. Goode (2007) argues that students who do not fit the profile of an independent, autonomous, responsible learner are seen as in deficit and subjected to negative dialogue surrounding dependency. Therefore, staff at universities need to consider approaches that move beyond the problematisation of international students (Ryan, 2011). My experiences and dilemmas from teaching international students led me to question and examine how academics' perceptions of international students can be improved. By providing accounts of individual experiences my aim is to support academics with developing a more informed and nuanced appreciation for the learning experiences of international students. It is within such a context I explored international students' experiences of independent learning.

1.3 Making the case for IPA

This study is an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Proponents of IPA are focused on an individual's perception of an account of an event or experience. IPA researchers tend to explore participants' experiences, understandings, insights and perspectives (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005).

However, prior to choosing IPA I explored other approaches in terms of their value to my research topic. Two approaches that I considered were constructivist grounded theory and qualitative inquiry along with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Constructivist grounded theory is a method of qualitative inquiry in which data collection and analysis reciprocally inform and shape each other through an emergent iterative process (Charmaz, 2008). Sitting within an interpretative approach constructivist grounded theory does have much in common with IPA. Charmaz's approach places emphasis on the views, values, beliefs and feelings of the individual (Creswell, 2013), however with the final aim of generating a substantive level theory (Charmaz, 2008). The development of a theory leads to a lack of focus on the individual and this is where constructivist grounded theory and IPA differ (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Within the participants' accounts I aimed to explore and present, not just the commonalities of their experiences, but also their differences and therefore on this occasion put aside constructivist grounded theory as my research approach.

Thematic analysis is a systematic approach for "identifying, analysing and reporting themes across a dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 178). Thematic analysis is a flexible approach, accessible to a novice researcher as it is generally quick and easy to learn and can be applied to address almost all qualitative research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, following further exploration of this method it became clear that isolating the

philosophical underpinnings would be difficult. Additionally, analysis tends to side on the more descriptive, rather than interpretative. In contrast to IPA that focuses on the individual, thematic analysis fails to allow for contradictions across accounts and risks individual participant voices becoming lost (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Thus, IPA is my chosen approach for exploring international students' experiences of independent learning as it offered an approach focused on personal, individual experiences. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to elicit participants' accounts of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). While participants are the experiential experts, the phenomenological and hermeneutic underpinnings of IPA situate the researcher as a central piece of the interpretative process (Peat, Rodriguez & Smith, 2019). This means that both the researcher and the participants are active agents in the process.

Numerous researchers have explored international students' experiences and highlighted that such students face challenges during their transition (Li, Heath, Jackson, Allen, Fischer & Chan, 2017; Owens, 2011; Quan, Smailes & Fraser, 2013). Nevertheless, the aim of this study is to add to our understanding of how international students conceptualise and experience independent learning in particular. To date little focus has been given to this area of research. The methodology employed facilitates a focus on detail and depth for a small number of cases. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) argue that this can lead the researcher to uncover new insights, leading to

new knowledge and understanding. I hope that this study will provide accounts of experiences that will challenge those supporting international students within HE to conceptualise their performance as learners differently. I intend that the voices of international students that are captured here will disrupt current perceptions of them as learners and lead to more enabling and supportive understandings.

1.4 The study setting

The study took place in a large university in the UK. In terms of size, the university is in the top 10 in the UK by student enrolment, having enrolled more than 30,000 students during 2017/18. International students accounted for 2345 of these. All students who participated in this study were studying for either a master's or PhD and were at least six months into their course. The participant sample was a mix of both European Union (EU) students and non-European students. I decided on including EU students as while they are not defined by the university as international students, they have left their home country for the purpose of study.

The university has a dedicated international experience team that provides specialist advice and support for international students throughout the lifespan of the student journey. This includes pre-arrival information and visa application support; airport pick-up service and initial orientation to the city and the UK; academic support and advice on applying for a post-study work visa. The team use a variety of social media platforms to connect students, including a dedicated international students' Facebook page. Social activities

to help students settle into university life and the city culture as well as to make friends and develop support networks include peer mentoring schemes, film screenings, conversation clubs and day trips. A yearly on-campus festival organised by staff and students raises awareness of and celebrates the diversity of the student and staff population.

1.5 My position as an insider researcher

Insider research can be defined as research which is carried out within an established group of which the researcher is also a member (Greene, 2014). The growth in insider research being undertaken in education has increased over recent years. Much of this has been attributed to the expansion of professional doctorates, such as the Doctorate in Education, leading to more practitioners engaging in research in their own institutions (Greene, 2014; Mercer, 2007).

For my doctorate in education, I am conducting a study in the university where I work. This therefore positions me as an insider researcher as I hold prior knowledge and understanding of the complexity of the context in which education takes place. Merton (1972) claims that an insider researcher is someone who is in a unique position to study a particular issue in depth as they possess *a priori* knowledge of the participants, however, having knowledge does not necessarily mean the researcher is an integrated member of the group under study (Hellawell, 2006).

Being an insider researcher has several advantages, including greater access to participants. Insider researchers often do not have to worry about orientating themselves to the environment (Bell, 2005; Merriam et al., 2001). My own experience of being an insider researcher meant I was in a privileged position of knowing who the 'gatekeepers' were for gaining access to international students. I was able to access the international students' experience team to post announcements requesting participation in my study. I also had access to course and module leaders and research supervisors who I knew had enrolled international students.

As an insider the researcher may well be focused on an aspect of interest over which they have some ability to influence change and a topic that is likely to yield insights of interest to the wider research and educational community (Unluer, 2012). They are considered to be less likely to stereotype and pass judgements on their participants (Aguiler, 1981). Bell (2005) argues that participants may welcome the opportunity to discuss issues with someone who understands their unique set of circumstances. Trowler (2011) argues that an insider researcher is viewed as being culturally literate and therefore able to produce meaningful accounts and present a deeper understanding of data. When exploring issues that are complex an insider researcher is best positioned to comprehend this due to their inherent contextual understanding (Bell, 2005).

However, each of these advantages is related to a disadvantage. It has been argued that only the objective outsider can elicit an unbiased account of any

research involving human interactions, as closeness to the situation can hinder seeing the bigger picture and become a barrier to objective perception and analysis (Aguiler, 1981). Therefore, being an insider may lead the researcher to make assumptions about the meanings of events based on previous knowledge and experience, and therefore lose the ability to produce good, culturally neutral accounts (DeLyser 2001; Trowler, 2011). Insider researchers must be wary of not projecting their own personal beliefs onto the participants or to the data (Merriam et al., 2001).

The insider researcher may experience conflict between the duality of their position as both a researcher and a professional within a work environment (Greene, 2014). This may influence how participants respond to the researcher, as they may have pre-formed expectations of what is being explored, thereby causing interview bias (Costley, Elliott & Gibbs, 2010; Trowler, 2011). With regards to my own study, I would argue that whilst I considered myself to be an insider researcher many of the participants were unknown to me and most were not studying within the department of which I am an academic.

As an insider researcher, I was in a unique position of being able to research an issue of which I had knowledge and experience. When interviewing fellow doctoral students, I felt more of an insider than when interviewing master's students. This was felt in particular when doctoral students shared their anxieties on aspects of their research or when they discussed how much they relied on their supervisors. However, all the participants were doing full-time

doctorates, whereas I am a part-time student so there were aspects of their experiences that led me to feeling more outsider. Additionally, when interviewing students from my faculty, I felt more of an insider as I was considerably more familiar with the processes and locations that the students discussed.

The participants were a mix of European and Non-European, which also influenced my degree of insider/outsiderness as I consider myself to be European but a student undertaking study in a country that is home. A number of authors have considered positionality with respects to culture. Liamputtong (2011) argues that researchers involved in cross-cultural research should share the same social and linguistic characteristics of their participants. Ramji (2008, p. 103) refers to this as “cultural commonality”. Therefore, the most striking influence on my insider/outsider status was the differing cultures, language and the experiences of transitioning across cultural boundaries. Even though I have travelled extensively, this has always been either as a tourist or for university business, never as a student. When participants expressed challenges associated with transitioning into a different culture and way of learning this positioned me as an outsider.

Within the context of this study, the benefits of insider-ness exceeded the disadvantages. Access to participants, knowledge of terminology and familiarity of context, was achieved because of my insider status. I would consider my insider status to be a strength of this study. Being personally troubled by the disconnect between how I suspect international students

might be experiencing independent learning and how my colleagues perceive this, means therefore, that I am committed to developing a more informed understanding of the lived experience of the participants.

1.6 The nature of independent learning

The requirement to engage with independent learning is a feature of most higher education courses, referred to as personal and intellectual autonomy (QAA, 2020). Several terms are used in the literature to describe independent learning, including student-centred learning, self-regulated learning, autonomous learning and life-long learning (Spiro, Henderson & Clifford, 2012). Garrison (1997, p. 18) defines independent learning as "an approach where learners are motivated to assume personal responsibility and collaborative control of the cognitive (self-monitoring) and contextual (self-management) processes in constructing and confirming meaningful and worthwhile learning outcome".

For Chan (2001, p. 285), the fundamental principle is that "the locus of control and responsibility lies in the hands of the individual learner", suggesting that the responsibility or ownership of learning is placed on the student. This requires greater self-motivation and organisation as well as a greater self-awareness of individual learning needs and behaviours (Higher Education Academy [HEA], 2014). Whilst recognising the need for greater responsibility, the HEA (2014) also states that independent learning must be guided by teaching staff. Thus, independent learning does not necessarily mean

learning in isolation, but can also include academic staff setting the direction of learning activities.

It has been suggested that the international student's experience is perpetually fluctuating within a cycle of study, during which there may be graduation from dependence to independence (Spiro et al., 2012). Quan et al. (2013) argue that the first three months of study in a new environment appear to be particularly challenging as students come to terms with different approaches to study. However, McClure (2007) argues that adjustment for students is most difficult in the first six to 12 months. Participants for this study were recruited from the university population of international students who were nine months into a postgraduate course of study. By nine months it was assumed that students would have a body of experience to reflect upon in relation to negotiating independent learning although others may still be attempting to master it. The variety in the relationships of students to independent learning has provided a rich range of experience for this research.

1.7 Research aims

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of postgraduate international students' experiences of independent learning whilst studying in a UK HEI. The aim was to examine which factors support them to engage more successfully with independent learning and which factors make it more difficult. By participating in this study, students had the opportunity to express

how they perceived independent learning, what it meant for them, how it made them feel and how it impacted on their course experience.

A number of aims and research questions were developed to achieve this.

Aims

1. To explore what 'independent learning' means for postgraduate international students studying in a UK HEI.
2. To explore the experiences of independent learning for postgraduate international students studying in a UK HEI.
3. To identify the impacts of engagement with independent learning on postgraduate international students as they progress through a course of study.
4. To identify how these experiences could influence future course developments.

Research questions

1. How do postgraduate international students conceptualise independent learning?
2. How do postgraduate international students experience independent learning?
3. What meanings do they make of this experience?
4. What do postgraduate international students perceive to be the enablers and barriers to their successful engagement with independent learning?

1.8 Thesis structure

In chapter two I explore previous literature relevant to international students' experiences of studying in a country that is not home. The general aim for reviewing the literature in IPA studies is to widen the researcher's knowledge of the field, identify key contributors and learn something about the participants (Smith et al., 2009). In this chapter, I also identify the contribution that my study can make to the field. In chapter three I present the study design and outline my rationale for choosing IPA. Chapter four details the study methods, including participant selection and recruitment, data collection and analytical processes. An overview of themes and superordinate themes is presented which then informs the following two chapters.

In chapter five the participants are introduced through the use of brief participant stories. Following this I present my interpretations of the superordinate themes of 'feeling the struggle'; 'steering the course' and 'thriving not surviving'. In 'feeling the struggle' I present how participants experienced struggles that impacted on their engagement with independent learning. I suggest that independent learning is initially a struggle which leads to feelings of frustration and being lesser, self-doubt and annoyance at tutors. However, independent learning can also be viewed as a liberating experience, an investment for the future and a route to autonomy and creativity in learning. Within 'steering the course' I concentrate on participants' accounts of how they progressed through a course of study, which factors enabled them to stay on track and which had the potential to derail them. I also consider how international students define independent learning. My

interpretations suggest that early definitions of independent learning were that it was a solitary activity. However, this evolved into an activity that was supported by peers. The quality of feedback was viewed as a key factor that influenced progression. The development of relationships with both tutors and peers also influenced participants' experiences of independent learning. 'Thriving not surviving' presents the participants' accounts of successes arising from engaging with independent learning and includes a chance to be creative and a developing sense of freedom.

In chapter six I situate my findings drawing on the theoretical perspective of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) in order to discuss how the participants are experiencing a process of complex change that is shaped by wider structural and systemic policies and practices as well as local influences, and the impact this has on their educational experience. Prior to undertaking this study, I had no knowledge of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. I came across this model whilst searching for a theory that helped me to understand the sense of isolation and strangeness that student sojourners experienced as they adjusted to a new environment. I was drawn to the notion of how a change in one's environment impacts on an individual's development and experiences and that these experiences are intertwined with personal and social challenges not just academic. This chapter also draws on the concept of belongingness. Finally, chapter seven considers the achievement of the study aims, the limitations and the ways in which its findings may inform practice and future research in the educational field.

1.9 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have introduced and outlined the study: international students' experiences of independent learning within a UK HEI. Some key concerns and issues explaining why this study came about have been presented. I have argued that I occupied a position as an insider researcher and articulated the challenges and considerations that this posed for the study. The chapter concluded with an overview of the forthcoming chapters and sets the scene and context for this study.

The next chapter will examine the literature most relevant to this study.

2. Chapter 2: Research context

2.1 Introduction

In this study, the lived experiences of international students are explored in relation to the phenomenon of independent learning. In this chapter, I will consider the extant literature relating to international students' experiences in higher education as well as the concept of independent learning. This review of the literature provides a synopsis and critical appraisal of related research that helps put the study phenomenon in context (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). I will summarise current knowledge whilst identifying and reflecting on similarities, inconsistencies and gaps in the evidence base (Coughlan, Cronin, & Ryan, 2013). Therefore, I will establish what is already known about postgraduate international students' experiences of independent learning and where more knowledge is required. To achieve this, I developed the following key questions that I applied to review the current literature.

1. What methods are researchers using to examine these concepts?
2. How do researchers define independent learning and international students?
3. What do researchers tell us about the challenges and benefits of independent learning?
4. What do researchers tell us about the independent learning experiences of international students transitioning to higher education?

2.2 Literature searching methods

To address these questions, consideration was given to the scope of literature to include in the review. Initial eligibility criteria included year of publication, studies published in English language and types of study. A date range of 2005-2020 was applied with the option to extend the date range if further literature was required. In 2015 I was required to submit a review of the literature as a module within the EdD. At that time, I applied a ten year search range (2005-2015). Therefore, for the final thesis the date range was extended to include 2016 to 2020. This was in order to build on the previous review of the literature.

An electronic search for literature was conducted using the databases ERIC, CINAHL and ProQuest (searching 24 ProQuest databases). ERIC and ProQuest were selected as they provided access to a wide range of global educational databases and journals. CINAHL was selected as it was useful for accessing information relating to health. Whilst “health” or “nursing” were not specific search terms used, I was curious about the amount of evidence published that related to international nursing students. Experience from previous searches highlighted that little appeared to have been published on the independent learning experiences of international nursing students.

The initial key words included international student and independent learning. Additional key words were generated through the use of the databases thesauruses and subject headings. These included foreign student, overseas students, independent study, self-directed learning, and

autonomous learning. Truncation was applied to broaden the search by searching for alternative word endings. The use of quotation marks supported the search for exact phrases. Searches were combined using the Boolean terms AND/OR. A copy of an example search can be found in Appendix I.

All three databases generated different numbers of sources. ERIC generated 24 sources and CINAHL 118 sources. ProQuest generated 3788 sources, which was deemed to be too many sources to sift. Therefore, additional limiters were added, including the subject heading “higher education” and a requirement for papers to have been published within the past five years. This resulted in 1865 papers. Adding a further limiter of papers having been published within the past 12 months to the ProQuest search brought the number of sources down to 131. As the review was intended to be a broad consideration of what is already known about the topic rather than a full systematic review, it was decided to concentrate on the sources generated by ERIC, CINAHL from 2005 to 2020 and ProQuest in the past 12 months.

Once a manageable number of papers had been found based on the initial eligibility criteria, sifting of the papers was carried out. This was done initially by looking for duplication of articles across the databases and then reading the titles of the remaining papers. The clarity of some papers’ titles made it relatively easy to decide whether to include or reject them. For others, abstracts were read. Papers were selected based on an inclusion and

exclusion criteria. Selected papers either had a main theme of independent learning for international students or independent learning was included as part of a discussion of international students' experiences of undertaking study in a country other than their own. Participants also had to be undertaking full-time undergraduate or postgraduate study within higher education.

The main participants had to be international students. However, studies that also reported 'home' students and academics' views were included. Additional papers were selected that supported understanding of how independent learning as a concept is represented within the research. Excluded studies included those with a strong focus on online or distance learning or which considered cultural approaches to learning for students who were studying in their own country. I did not apply a preference for country of origin for either students or place of research; all countries and cultures were included. No preference was given to research design either; all study designs, providing they met the eligibility criteria, were included in the review.

A search on Google Scholar had previously generated some articles that seemed to speak directly to my study. I therefore searched for "independent learning and international students", which resulted in one further paper being selected (As-Saber et al., 2006). The Higher Education Academy (HEA) (now Advance HE) is a site where useful information and resources can be accessed. A search of that website resulted in one further paper

which met the inclusion criteria being selected (Gieve & Clark, 2005). When searching for and reviewing the articles, citations of interest within the selected paper were also followed up. After reading abstracts, 36 papers were selected for the review, including 32 primary research papers, one literature review and three discussion papers. Of the 36 papers, nine were found which related specifically to the major theme of international students and independent learning (As-Saber et al., 2006; Bache & Hayton, 2012; Pringle-Barnes & Cheng, 2019; Gieve & Clark 2005; Goode, 2007; Hockings, Thomas, Ottaway, & Jones, 2018; Spiro et al., 2012; Warring, 2010; Zutshi, Mitchell, & Weaver, 2011), six of which had been undertaken in the UK. Overall, studies were conducted in a range of countries including the UK, USA, Australia, Denmark, Netherlands, New Zealand and Singapore.

A concepts and methods matrix was developed to extract data for this review. The use of a matrix facilitated the identification of commonalities and differences of methods used by the researchers as well as the themes discussed throughout the papers. Themes were clustered under broader headings which include defining the terms 'international students' and 'independent learning' as well as the challenges and benefits associated with being an international student and engaging in independent learning. The research approaches used, and the origin of the participants were also considered to give a sense of the prevalence of certain cultures being represented, or not, within the literature.

2.3 Overview of research designs

The majority (n=21) of the research papers reviewed were qualitative in design. Four were quantitative and seven were mixed methods. I was interested in exploring whether any researchers had used my chosen design of IPA. Yu and Moskal (2019) explored structural conditions and institutional arrangements that facilitated or hindered meaningful intercultural contact and learning for international students from China studying in the UK. As part of a larger mixed-methods study about the church participation experiences of students from China, Yu and Moskal focused on 15 master's students studying business. Whilst they do not explicitly refer to the study as IPA, they do describe the development of superordinate themes and reference key writers in the field of IPA, namely Smith and Osborn (2008). Zhang (2016) used IPA to explore the lived experiences of 10 doctoral students from China as they transitioned to the USA. Data collection was via in-depth focus group interviews about improving students' academic and sociocultural experiences. Therefore, while the use of IPA is of relevance to my research, both of these authors focused on the same cultural group. Their focus was on a broader consideration of transition experiences rather than being specifically about independent learning.

Most of the authors of the reviewed literature tended to recruit only international students. However, some also collected the views of the academics teaching international students (Goode, 2007; Gu & Maley, 2008; Quan et al., 2013; Spiro et al., 2012; Zhou & Todman, 2008). Spiro et al. (2012) included academics' views as a way to compare teacher and student

interpretations of independent learning. Three authors also recruited domestic students along with international students (Chuang, 2012; Owens, 2011; Shevellar, 2015). This supported a discussion about the role of culture on the teaching and learning preferences of students. Using a five-point Likert type questionnaire to indicate learning preferences, Chuang (2012) explored whether there was a difference in instructional preferences between Western and Far East Asian graduate students in the United States and whether each group had a preferred method of learning.

Interviews were the most popular choice for data collection with 22 papers employing this method. Other data collection methods included focus groups, diaries, questionnaires and written reflections. One of the papers included written reflections that were part of course assessment work (Gieve & Clark, 2005).

2.3.1 Origin of the learner

Learners from China feature in many of the papers examined and were the only group of students in 14 of the papers (Gieve & Clark, 2005; Gu & Maley, 2008; Mathias, Bruce, & Newton, 2013; McClure, 2007; McMahon, 2011; Quan, He, & Sloan, 2016; Quan et al., 2013; Ryan, 2011; Saravanamuthu & Yap, 2014; Warring, 2010; Wu & Hammond, 2011; Yu & Moskal, 2019; Zhang, 2016; Zhou & Todman, 2008). Students from China are the second largest group of students choosing to study in the UK (behind EU students) and make up 35% of all non-EU students (International Student Statistics, 2020). In 2018/19, there were 120,385 students from

China enrolled in UK universities (International Student Statistics, 2020). Hence, this body of students is likely to feature heavily in UK literature. Quan and colleagues (2013) acknowledged that there are a plethora of studies undertaken with students from China as participants and that there needs to be further investigation into the experiences of students from other countries. Therefore, for my study I aimed to include a range of nationalities.

Only seven of the papers reviewed included students from the EU (Bache & Hayton, 2012; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Busher et al., 2016; Goode, 2007; Hockings et al., 2018; Spiro et al., 2012; Taušová et al., 2019). EU students are often classed as 'home' students at UK universities, as they pay the same course fees as domestic students, rather than the increased fees paid by international students. However, EU students have crossed borders to study and are therefore likely to experience similar challenges to international students. I would argue that EU students' experiences are currently underrepresented within the research. Therefore, I decided to design my study so that the voices of EU students would also be included.

2.4 Challenges facing international students

Making sense of the experience of studying in the UK can be a complex undertaking for international students. Gu et al. (2010) argue that the initial sense of shock largely applied to academic processes. However, Busher et al. (2016) contest these findings, arguing that the initial shock experienced by most international students applies as much to the unfamiliarity of living in a new environment as it does to learning. Transitioning to a new

environment can include adapting to a new life patterns, food, traditions, values and expectations, all of which can be emotionally and psychologically challenging, leading to feelings of boredom, loneliness and alienation (Gu & Maley, 2008). I wanted to see how such experiences impacted on a student's relationship with independent learning.

2.4.1 Culture shock

Adjustment has been defined as the level of adaption between the person and their environment; it relates to feelings of wellbeing and satisfaction as well as an ability to 'fit in' and negotiate aspects of the new culture (Wu & Hammond, 2011). One of the effects of attempting to negotiate a new culture is culture shock (Busher et al., 2016).

The concept of culture shock is well documented (As-Saber et al., 2006; Bache & Hayton, 2012; Blasco, 2015; Busher et al., 2016; Gu & Maley, 2008; McClure, 2007; Quan et al., 2013; Saravanamuthu & Yap, 2014). Culture shock is defined as the unexpected and often unpleasant feelings associated with adapting to a different culture (Busher et al., 2016). Various ways of describing this concept have been noted within the literature and include 'culture shock' (Bache & Hayton, 2012; McClure, 2007; Saravanamuthu & Yap, 2014), 'study shock' (Blasco, 2015), 'learning shock' (Gu & Maley, 2008), and 'academic shock' (Quan et al., 2013).

Blasco (2015) used the term 'study shock' to describe a student who had difficulty assimilating new knowledge due to incompatibility between new

and previous methods of learning. Gu and Maley (2008) used 'learning shock' to suggest that international students may be exposed to intense psychological and emotional strain when they study overseas. This can stem from insufficient language ability as well as unfamiliarity with different learning and teaching traditions and can be exacerbated when students have different expectations of their role from those of academics. Busher and colleagues (2016, p. 53) used the phrase "engaging with a strange culture" to represent the challenges in adapting to different ways of teaching and learning. The participants in their study described how their unfamiliarity with cultural practice represented formidable obstacles to be overcome. One of these obstacles was an insufficient command of English.

2.4.2 Language

Authors of several of the papers reviewed reported that one of the greatest challenges experienced by international students was that of language (Busher et al., 2016; McMahon, 2011; Wu & Hammond, 2011; Yu & Moskal, 2019). Everyday use of language was considered more varied than that which international students had experienced during pre-sessional English language classes. Native English language speakers often spoke more quickly, with a local accent (Busher et al., 2016) or used colloquialisms and unfamiliar references (Wu & Hammond, 2011).

Taušová et al. (2019) explored the relationship between language proficiency and acculturative stress. Using a quantitative, survey approach, they argue that there is an association between increasing language proficiency,

improving on campus satisfaction, reducing stress and mental health problems. This was supported by Luo, Wu, Fang and Brunsting (2019) who explored perceived language competence, and a range of psychological well-being outcomes. Lower levels of English were linked to negative mental health outcomes and lower life satisfaction on campus. Conversely, higher levels of perceived language competence were associated with increases in wellbeing. Wellbeing was considered to be associated with self-acceptance, environmental mastery and positive relationships with others. Language proficiency was also considered to influence higher levels of autonomy and personal growth.

Language barriers can therefore influence international students' academic engagement and performance. Wu and Hammond (2011) argued that international students often feel unprepared for speaking and essay writing in English. The Far East Asian participants in their study knew they were considered quiet in the classrooms and seen as not contributing to seminars or group discussions. This was supported by McMahon (2011), who reported that international students were often aware of their reluctance to ask questions in class. Insufficient command of English can lead some international students to feel challenged when expressing their ideas (Busher et al., 2016). However, since practising English language skills was seen as an essential part of the course (Yu & Moskal, 2019), international students remained motivated to study and meet new challenges (Wu & Hammond, 2011). With time, they began to feel more confident in their English language abilities (McMahon, 2011).

2.4.3 Meeting academic demands

Many international students experience culture shock as they adjust to a new learning environment (As-Saber et al., 2006). Such students often have expectations of the academic environment and can quickly become overwhelmed by the complexity of new learning approaches and the shift in responsibilities. Students may struggle to understand the structures and processes surrounding the requirement for independent learning and may feel they lack clarity regarding their responsibilities as learners (As-Saber et al., 2006).

A mismatch in expectations and the pressure to perform academically can be considered one of the most stressful aspects of learning, which harms confidence (Yu & Moskal, 2019). International students worry about failing exams and engaging in new assessment tasks such as essay writing (Gu et al., 2010). They often feel unprepared for the expectations of supervisors and academics and may experience uncertainty concerning attitudes, expectations of roles and methods of communication (McClure, 2007).

Blasco (2015) set out to identify areas where international students were bewildered by the Danish education system and to outline those students' key challenges. Drawing on sensemaking theory (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) and the concepts of disruption, noticing, bracketing and labelling, the aim was to address how participants categorised their experiences in terms of what was familiar and what was not. Blasco (2015) suggested that students were most challenged by the different steps that

constitute learning moments and assessment moments as well as the relationship between these steps and the behaviours needed at each step.

Students experience disruption when they do not understand what is going on and past learning behaviours no longer seem applicable (Blasco, 2015). Quan and colleagues (2013) referred to this as 'academic shock', since international students are faced with the challenge of adjusting to different learning styles and the need for certain academic skills. This disruption initiates the explanation-seeking process of noticing and bracketing and culminates in students labelling the difference between their new and previous educational experiences (Blasco, 2015).

One of Blasco's (2015) major findings was that international students lacked an understanding of the purpose of the different steps in the learning cycle; in particular, the connection between learning and assessment. International students experience anxiety around a lack of direction and not being able to either situate assessment within the wider context of studies or adapt behaviours (McClure, 2007). Blasco (2015) argued that there is a need for a holistic approach to explaining the learning cycle that clarifies the purpose and behaviours required at each step. During the process of noticing and bracketing, when students seek explanations about their experiences and are vulnerable in terms of coping academically, academic teams need to provide support to "make the tacit explicit" (Blasco, 2015, p. 100).

Wu and Hammond (2011) considered Lysgaard's (1955) U-curve hypothesis in their exploration of the challenges faced by Far East Asian international students adjusting to the UK. The U-curve hypothesis is about how adjustment to culture over time can be understood. It consists of four phases. Stage one is the honeymoon stage, where it is suggested that the international student becomes fascinated by most things. Wu and Hammond (2011, p. 429) described this as "encounter", during which participants engaged with pre-arrival and pre-sessional activities. The participants were excited and motivated by enhancing career prospects and taking advantage of social and cultural opportunities.

During stage two, international students experience culture shock or disillusionment as they are faced with the challenges of adjusting to a new culture. Wu and Hammond (2011, p. 430) described this as "challenge", with specific reference to term one. It was during this term that participants described their greatest challenges, including language barriers, struggling with subject knowledge, concerns regarding assessments and financial pressures. However, Wu and Hammond (2011, p. 430) referred to these as "cultural bumps" rather than culture shock. Most international students have limited time to make sense of the challenges, which can be costly in terms of grades. Thus, students must consider new ways of thinking and organising learning (Blasco, 2015). However, most participants in Wu and Hammond's (2011) study remained motivated and were keen to discover new ways of learning.

Stage three is the adjustment stage, whereby international students become more familiar with the environment and codes of behaviour. Wu and Hammond (2011, p. 432) described this as “varying levels of integration” which became evident by the end of the first term. During this time, participants were becoming more familiar with their environment. By the second term, the intensity of the challenges reduced but was still connected to academic aspects such as completing assessments and improving academic writing.

The final stage is mastery, in which international students are integrated into the new culture. This final stage did not feature in Wu and Hammond’s (2011) findings, as integration was addressed at stage three. They argued that the participants did not follow the pattern predicted by Lysgaard (1995) as they did not experience heightened excitement or deep disorientation. Whilst Wu and Hammond (2011) present the first model to include pre-arrival as part of the adjustment process, it does have limitations. Wu and Hammond (2011) claimed that by the second term, the intensity of the challenges reduced. However, this is a time when most master’s level students will be preparing for their dissertations, a substantial piece of work requiring considerable independent study. Wu and Hammond (2011) fail to account for students who struggle to adjust by this stage. They also make limited efforts to explain which coping strategies international students use to adapt.

Quan and colleagues (2016) extended Wu and Hammond's (2011) model by focusing on how transitions are made by postgraduate international students. After interviewing 20 postgraduate students from China, they identified a process-based, four-stage model, incorporating a defined timeframe for each stage.

Stage one, "improper confidence" (Quan et al., 2016, p. 334), signifies over confidence pre-arrival. Participants felt suitably prepared for study in the UK, were excited and underestimated the difficulties they would face. They reflected that a lack of awareness of British teaching and learning conventions later impacted their academic adjustment. The second stage is defined as "stress" (Quan et al., 2016, p. 334), and begins after the first few days in the UK. Faced with limited knowledge of academic conventions, the initial excitement is followed by three to four weeks of stress as students quickly become overwhelmed by the volume and content of information. Participants described developing the coping strategies of trying to keep calm, avoiding panic and broadening their perceptions of unfamiliar academic approaches.

Quan and colleagues (2016, p. 336) considered stage three to be "engagement". They predicted that this stage spanned from four weeks into semester one until the beginning of semester two. At this stage, participants were engaging with everyday learning activities and were committed to adjusting to their new learning environment. Stress reduced as students became more familiar with the learning environment and developed new

academic skills. Participants reported needing to adjust quickly, maintaining willingness to take responsibility for their learning, developing time management skills and forming supportive networks (Quan et al., 2016).

The final stage is “gaining academic competence” (Quan et al., 2016, p. 337). Extending from the midpoint of semester two until semester three, participants gained confidence, felt more independent and integrated into the new academic system. The most crucial coping strategy at this stage was competence in applying new academic skills to assessments.

The findings from Quan et al.’s (2016) study supported those reported by Gu and Maley (2008). This is another study where the only participants were learners from China and were reported to experience positive adaptations and development in their studies. Students were most pleased with their improved language proficiency, leading to increased self-confidence, increased involvement in classroom discussions, improved study skills, competence and creativity. Participants recounted a stronger sense of independence in learning, more enthusiasm, freedom and more control.

Many of the studies reviewed included positive experiences of student transitions and personal independence, often discussed as a linear process. However, the models presented do not include the experiences of individual students who may be struggling to adapt at the same rate as others, or those who have recurring bouts of stress. There is a sense that it is the student who has to change, with little attention paid to what academics and

institutions can do to facilitate the transition and make it a gentler process. Zhou and Todman (2008) argued that international students often appreciate the efforts made by UK staff to help them adapt but remained dissatisfied with the quality and effectiveness of that support. Staff thought students were adapting better than they were (Zhou & Todman, 2008). Therefore, discrepancies may exist between teacher and student views on adaptation. It cannot be assumed that students will make problems known to tutors (Zhou & Todman, 2008). Gu and colleagues (2010) found that as well as dealing with academic challenges, respondents felt unhappy with their social life, feeling lonely, powerless and without a sense of belonging.

2.4.4 Social integration and developing friendships

International students can feel isolated or lonely due to the need to adjust to unfamiliar social conventions (Busher et al., 2016). This can be compounded by the removal of usual family and friend support networks, leading to increased vulnerability (McMahon, 2011).

Many international students have reported finding it difficult to get to know their UK peers. Language difficulties, gaps in cultural values and behaviours as well as a lack of shared interests between domestic and international students pose a challenge for academic and social integration (Gu et al., 2010), resulting in weak friendships (McMahon, 2011). International students may therefore find themselves building friendships with co-nationals in order to receive emotional and academic support (Wu & Hammond, 2011). However, Yu and Moskal (2019) argued that cultural interaction through

social activity contributes to all students' interpersonal relations and awareness of each other. Facilitating diverse interactions and exchange of ideas leads to an accumulation of cultural knowledge and assists in enhancing the educational experience for all students.

2.4.5 Stereotyping of international students and the deficit discourse

Even though international students are a heterogeneous group, it is not uncommon to hear them collectively referred to as demanding or 'hard work'. Many authors have focused on the negative attitudes towards international students' capabilities, especially in relation to students from China (Ryan, 2011). International students are often blamed for lacking critical thinking and independent learning skills and are described as passive, rote learners (Mathias et al., 2013; Ryan, 2011; Shevellar, 2015). Shevellar (2015) argued that this can lead to international students being seen as the bearers of problems for their peers, teachers and themselves. However, Goode (2007) suggested that behaviour which is interpreted as dependency and over-reliance on tutors may instead be the highly agentic behaviour of trying to understand the "rules of the game" (p. 597). This can lead to international students being constructed as dependent when they appear passive and demanding or dependent when they try to make sense of what is required of them (Goode 2007).

Goode (2007) argued that the negativity surrounding students from an East Asian culture was evident in interviews with their doctoral supervisors. Students from a Middle Eastern culture were similarly characterised (Goode,

2007). These supervisors were aware that students were often viewed as problematic, with comments relating to the amount of time allocated to support and the need for these students to be less demanding. Supervisors were viewed by the students as valuing independence; asking for 'too much' support was taken as evidence of dependency. Dependency was linked to being demanding in terms of time, reassurance, feedback or direction. Whilst not exclusive to international students, Goode (2007) suggested that taking responsibility and being independent were associated with being a good student and being perceived as dependent resulted in students being labelled "not-so-good" (p. 594). However, supervisors recognised that these students were engaged in a process of learning and that, in time, they became more independent. Still, international students were considered more dependent than their UK peers (Goode, 2007).

Some authors attempted to dispel the stereotyping of collectivist cultures and present an alternative view that students from different cultures can adapt their learning style to suit the academic setting (Chuang, 2012; Gieve & Clark, 2005; Gu & Maley, 2008). Mathias and colleagues (2013) challenged the Western stereotyping of students from China as rote, passive homogenous learners, stating that this was a failure to understand the student in a changing context. In their study into the learning experiences of Chinese international foundation level students, they suggest that, like Western students, the participants approached learning with the intention of understanding. This could be a lengthy process for some, requiring a considerable effort. Students disliked memorising without understanding and

would only resort to this approach when subjected to exam pressure. Additionally, the evidence from student accounts is that not participating in classroom discussions does not necessarily mean students are not engaged; being silent in class may be an active demonstration of concentration. Mathias et al. (2013) argued that the participants in their study strived to be reflective, responsible, competent learners, willing to take a risk on the emotional challenge of change in order to adapt to a Western learning environment. Mathias et al. (2013) supports an earlier study by Chuang (2012) who concluded that both Western and Far East Asian participants responded to passive, active and alternative methods equally. The participants from Far East Asia were found to adjust their learning preferences to fit in with their new environment.

Gu and Maley (2008) stated that factors other than culture are just as important for determining how successful students will be in adapting to the practices of teaching and learning within a different environment. They asserted that a student's background, aspirations and motivation for learning were important indicators of their ability to adapt and that a sole focus on culture overlooks the importance of students' personalities. Therefore, it is important to avoid assumptions about individual students who may be perfectly capable of engaging with a different way of learning. Matthews (2018) supports the argument against reducing individuals determined by their cultural characteristics or emotional responses to the environment, for example culture shock, and thereby denying individuals any agency. Focusing on cultural characteristics contributes to the persistence of the

deficit model of international students, denying them causal power of thought and reflection and their ability to exercise control over their own lives (Matthews, 2018).

The deficit discourse surrounding international students is being challenged and an alternative discourse is being formed, positioning international students as active, self-forming agents (Marginson, 2014; Ploner, 2017; Tran & Vu, 2016). Rather than attempting to fix a skills 'deficit', McKay, O'Neill and Petrakieva (2018) argue that HEI's should value the diverse skills and attributes that international students have to offer thereby recognising the diversity and complexity of international students' experiences (Wu, 2015). This is supported by Heng (2018) who presents an opposing view of the deficit discourse surrounding students from China arguing that "different is not deficient" (pg. 32) and that a failure to adequately examine the causes of challenges within contexts may lead to unfair perceptions of international students. Reporting challenges students face without investigating why, makes it easier to view them as deficient and voiceless and therefore leads to a failure of HEI's to recognise the deliberate efforts that international students make to influence their experiences (Heng, 2018). Using a "hybridised sociocultural framework" (Heng, 2018, pg. 24) Heng argues that there is a need to situate participants' experiences contextually thereby providing a more holistic understanding of their experiences.

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological model Process, Person, Context, Time (PPCT) provides a theoretical framework that can be used to

holistically examine the connection between aspects of the context while recognising the personal characteristic and histories that individuals bring with them into any social situation (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The PPCT model will be discussed in more depth in chapter 6, however this model highlights the importance of relationships within context and how systems operate on and around the person influencing their learning experience. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model can assist in attempting to refocus the critical gaze and offer a redress of the deficit discourse surrounding international students.

Appreciating the complexity and diversity of experiences may minimise the entrenchment of a deficit discourse (Heng, 2018). This is supported by Ploner (2017) who argues that deficit narratives fail to take account of the diversity and varied aspirations and experiences of international students. Using the concept of resilience as a strategy for coping with challenging circumstances, Ploner (2017), places individual agency as central to influencing an international student's experience, rather than reaffirming the assumption that international students are required to adapt, adjust or acculturate. Ploner (2017) presents a variety of ways that enable international students to enact change, enable personal development and envisage a future self. Indeed, Ploner and Nada (2020) argue that rather than reinforcing narratives of dependency or assimilation, students' voices speak of agency, resilience and reflexivity as they navigate the unfamiliar.

2.5 Factors facing international students in undertaking independent learning

The requirement to engage with independent learning may create extra pressure and anxiety for many international students (As-Saber et al., 2006; Gu & Maley, 2008). Shevellar (2015) argued that to support the international student's experience and recognise cultural diversity in learning and teaching approaches, institutions need to engage with students' experiences and discourses regarding their educational experiences.

While scholars have suggested that there is a need for international students to engage in independent learning, there is no effective definition of what that means (Goode, 2007). Independent learning can mean different things to different people from different cultures. Gieve and Clark (2005) argued that autonomous or self-directed learning can include making decisions about what topics to focus on as well as setting learning objectives, assessing and evaluating progress and demonstrating self-motivation. However, difficulties can arise when academic language and terms are used ambiguously or with conflicting meanings (Spiro et al., 2012). This can be seen through the variety of terms used to signify independent learning, including self-directed learning (Gieve & Clark, 2005), autonomous learning, self-study (Spiro et al., 2012) and inquiry-based learning (Bache & Hayton, 2012).

Very few studies reviewed included a discussion on the definition of independent learning. One study that did was by Spiro and colleagues (2012). The student participants described a contrast between studying at

school and studying at home. The latter was linked to learning for yourself, or something you did on your own. 'Independent' was a term rarely chosen by the students, who preferred to use 'autonomy', 'doing it for yourself' and 'working on your own' to describe independent learning activities. Students also described the extent to which they relied on or supported other students with their learning, leading to an increased capacity to initiate learning and growing confidence. Therefore, Spiro et al.'s (2012, p. 614) overarching definition of independent learning is that it constitutes "learning activities without explicit teacher/tutor intervention".

Hockings et al. (2018) explored HE students' understanding, approaches to and experiences of independent learning. Using a qualitative approach, they recruited 126 UK, EU and international students from across 16 UK HEIs. Similarly to Spiro et al.'s (2012) definition, the participants defined independent learning as "learning without direct teacher contact" (p. 148).

While recognising the autonomous nature of independent learning, Zutshi and colleagues (2011) made a case to incorporate the social aspect of learning, moving away from the perception that learning is a solitary activity. They stated that independent learners should possess the skills of self-management, critical and creative thinking to achieve their learning goals. Students should develop skills by increasing autonomy, receiving frequent feedback, experiencing individualised engagement and engaging with the social aspects of learning.

To demonstrate independence, students are often required to engage in certain activities. Examples of such activities include reviewing materials from taught sessions; searching for and selecting information; setting and prioritising learning objectives; assessing progress and achievement; demonstrating self-motivation and self-discipline (Gieve & Clark, 2005; Hockings et al., 2018). Initiating discussions with peers and academics as well as seeking advice from other students are also seen as demonstrating independent learning. However, not all students have the confidence and cultural capital to do this (Hockings et al., 2018). Gieve and Clark (2005) suggested that international students spend long hours studying but Hockings et al. (2018) argued that international students reported studying for fewer hours per week than their UK or EU peers. However, this might depend on how international students define independent learning, considering the term's lack of clarity.

These definitions signify a shift in the balance of responsibility from what students may have previously experienced. For example, Hockings et al. (2018) argued that most students transitioning into HE are often unclear on the requirements of independent learning, having been used to a more teacher-directed approach. Students feel unprepared and overwhelmed with the lack of instruction or direction (Mathias et al., 2013). Students still wanted lecturers to teach all that they were expected to learn and experienced a loss of the familiar position of students' and teachers' rights and responsibilities (Vu & Doyle, 2014). In some instances, students felt 'short-changed', as independent learning was viewed as a substitute for tutor

contact time. Conversely, some students liked the freedom that independent learning gave them, as it provided an opportunity to delve deeper into topics of interest. However, further exploration of how international students experience independent learning and the issues that either support or hinder that experience is required.

Regardless of the terminology used, the underpinning philosophy of independent learning should be about enabling students to get the most out of their studies. How students interpret this concept and how it impacts their teaching and learning experiences are important. All higher education students are required to take responsibility for their learning, but the effect of promoting independence on students who may be accustomed to more support must be considered. Independent learning may suggest an activity that is done in isolation, but this need not be the case. Therefore, providing international students with the opportunity to discuss their experiences of and approaches to independent learning will enable academics and institutions to better support the students.

2.6 Addressing the gap

Independent learning is held up as an ideal within HE. However, the realities of students' demanding lives and diverse backgrounds may make its practice problematic. The review of the literature suggests a mismatch between educators' understanding of independent learning and students' experiences of carrying it out.

Most of the studies reviewed had a homogenous, linear approach to describing international students' experiences, failing to take account of individual students who may differ. Most of the papers tended to focus on one cultural group, with Far East Asian students being over-represented in the literature. I aimed to address that by inviting all cultural groups, including postgraduate international students from EU countries, to participate in the current study.

Additionally, there has been a lack of focus on postgraduate international students' individual stories of their lived experiences as they develop their approaches to learning in an unfamiliar context and the factors that help or hinder that journey. I therefore aimed to address this important gap in our understanding of postgraduate international students' experiences of undertaking independent learning. Taking an IPA approach that focuses on idiographic, in-depth experiences, using participants' own interpretations, I addressed the following research questions:

1. How do postgraduate international students conceptualise independent learning?
2. How do postgraduate international students experience independent learning?
3. What meanings do they make of this experience?
4. What do postgraduate international students perceive to be the enablers and barriers to their successful engagement with independent learning?

2.7 Chapter summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to present a review of the literature of independent learning experiences for international students. This review has been useful to my study as it has been demonstrated that, in the main, qualitative approaches have been used to research this subject. Due to the topic, it could be argued that this approach is suitable. The research is also dominated by the recruitment of students from Far East Asia, in particular China, as participants. There is a need for a wider range of cultures to be represented within the literature (Quan et al., 2013). In this thesis, I aimed to address this gap by inviting all postgraduate international students, including EU students, to participate.

The role of culture and its impact on the teaching and learning preferences of international students has been considered. It has been demonstrated that the international student experience can be variable and not always positive. Such students can be subjected to challenges and unwanted consequences as they attempt to adapt to a different teaching and learning culture. Challenges include language barriers, meeting academic demands, developing friendships, culture shock, stereotyping and being subjected to the negative discourse surrounding dependency. However, regardless of this, international students can adapt to unfamiliar approaches to teaching and learning. I was keen to understand how these issues impacted upon how students experience independent learning in particular.

The next chapter considers in detail the study design used to address the research questions.

3. Chapter 3: Study design

> "To do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings" (van Manen, 1997, p. 5)

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine in detail my reasons for selecting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as my research approach to provide a rationale for why and how this best suits my research aims. The design of a study positions a researcher in the empirical world and is shaped by that researcher's view of reality, which encompasses ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions (Jeon, 2004) as well as the concept of whether or not the world has a 'real' existence outside of human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As a researcher, I have personal philosophical assumptions and beliefs that inform my view of how knowledge is created (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, our choice of epistemological position impacts on how we undertake research and how we present our findings (Crotty,1998). The study design details the guidelines that bring together theoretical paradigms, strategies of enquiry and methods for collecting empirical material. Willig (2013, p. 40) argues that "good qualitative research design is one in which the method of data analysis is appropriate to the research question, and where the method of data collection generates data that are appropriate to the method of analysis".

In the previous chapter I presented the case that international students experience multiple challenges and there is a need to ensure that the voice and perspectives of participants are presented. I deemed that a qualitative approach would be most appropriate in meeting the study aims to explore postgraduate international students' experiences of independent learning, acknowledging the interaction between individuals and their environment as co-constructors of their reality (Darlaston-Jones, 2007). Since participants are viewed as the experts in their own experience I considered IPA to be the most well-suited approach (Smith, 2004).

In this chapter I discuss four elements that have been used to inform the design and undertaking of the current research project. The knowledge framework presented by Crotty (1998) is used to inform the discussion and justification for the chosen methodology of IPA. What this framework provided was a structure, for me as a novice researcher, to conceptualise, clarify and articulate the foundations for this study. This will include an examination of the epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodology and methods appropriate for IPA. Ethical considerations in relation to the study are also presented.

3.2 Knowledge framework

There are many elements that inform a study design. However, terminology can cause confusion and is often inconsistent in both research literature and social science text, with some terms being used interchangeably or in contradictory ways (Crotty, 1998). This is supported by Nicholls (2009), who

argues that vagueness surrounding definitions can be due to the fact that the boundaries between terms such as philosophies, methodology and methods can be fluid and lacking in consistency within the literature. In response to this, Crotty (1998) presents a knowledge framework or 'scaffolding' as a means of representing the different elements of research design. The knowledge framework is presented under the four headings of epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods, each of which categorises elements of the research process.

Crotty (1998, p. 8) defines epistemology as "how we know what we know". This includes determining what forms of knowledge are achievable and legitimate (Maynard & Purvis, 1994). The theoretical perspective clarifies the philosophical position that underpins our chosen methodology and aims to make clear the assumptions we bring to our research. Methodology provides the rationale for our choice and use of a particular method and links these methods to a desired outcome. Finally, methods are described as the techniques or procedures used to collect and analyse data.

Crotty (1998) omits the stage of ontology from the knowledge framework, arguing that it informs the theoretical perspective and therefore would sit alongside epistemology. Claiming that ontology and epistemology are mutually dependent, the theoretical perspective would be concerned with both what knowledge is and what it means to know. This suggests it would be difficult to conceptually distinguish ontology and epistemology when discussing researcher position. However, others place ontology as distinct

from epistemology in that it is concerned with "what the nature of reality is" whereas epistemology questions "how we know about reality" (Creswell, 2013, p. 40). Schwandt (2007) defines ontology as the philosophical position from which researchers operate in their search for knowledge. It presents a standpoint that is dependent on the ways in which researchers and participants conceptualise or perceive reality (Creswell, 2013). This supports the view that researchers need to be aware of their own ontological and epistemological position as this may well differ from that of the participants and so could lead to researchers unconsciously influencing the data. This can be through how the data is collected, interpreted or presented (Creswell, 2013).

The knowledge framework attempts to create a representative sample of each of the four categories, but Crotty (1998) acknowledges that this may not be an exhaustive list. He argues that the knowledge framework can provide a useful structure for the novice researcher by providing a means of exploring and conceptualising their research and considering how each of the elements fit together. The knowledge framework is arranged hierarchically, starting with epistemologies of objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism. Each of these epistemologies assumes perspectives about the essence of the world and how we know it, which then informs our choice of a particular method.

When Crotty's knowledge framework is applied to this study, an in-depth interview is the method that is appropriate to the chosen methodology of IPA. The theoretical framework of interpretivism and in particular symbolic

interactionism, phenomenology and hermeneutics informs IPA (Smith et al., 2009). At this stage, I have also included the theory of idiography, although this is not included in Crotty's framework. Interpretivism is informed by the epistemology of constructionism.

As a novice researcher, I found the knowledge framework a useful tool for identifying and examining the range of elements required for doing research. Hatch (2002) argues that it can be a natural process for doctoral level students to struggle with paradigm issues as well as differences in ontological and epistemological views as well as what these mean for doing research. Pallas (2001) concurs that issues can arise when students fail to actively confront these considerations early in their proposed research. This failure can risk the production of work that lacks logical consistency or theoretical integrity (Hatch, 2002). Marshall and Rossman (2014) refer to the correct application of the knowledge framework as resulting in 'epistemological integrity', whereby there is interconnectedness between the overall research strategy. This requires the researcher to reflect upon the viewpoints and procedures, by which the phenomena under investigation can be known (King, 2010).

The knowledge framework provided a useful starting point for considering which methodologies and methods may be used within the inquiry process and which best represents my ontological and epistemological position. Consciously and deliberately thinking about what I understand reality and knowledge construction to be and therefore being able to demonstrate this

throughout the research process has the potential to provide the study with the intellectual rigour required. Engaging in qualitative research would suggest that as a researcher I am willing to embrace the notion of multiple realities and through my inquiry am intent on presenting the multiple realities of the participants involved (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, by engaging with this study I wanted to know what independent learning meant for the participants. In order to achieve this, I focused on capturing and understanding their experience. In doing so I wanted to remain alert to the meanings that this experience had for them that differed from my own as well as those that connected with my understandings of independent learning.

Over the following pages the four elements of Crotty's framework will be discussed in relation to this study and my own perspectives.

3.2.1 Epistemology: Constructionism

The main reasons for choosing IPA over any other approach should be because it is congruous with my epistemological position in designing the research question and because it meets my assumptions about what the data can tell us. Therefore, "epistemology is a conceptual issue with a practical impact upon the research that we do" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 46). To do phenomenological research is to question what something is really like, or to ask what the nature of a lived experience is (van Manen, 1997). IPA provides a framework by which researchers can explore in detail the meaning and sense-making that participants attribute to particular experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Constructionism assumes that through interactions with the

world individuals construct meaning. This implies that people experiencing the same phenomenon will construct meaning in different ways (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). The constructionist paradigm is based on fundamental assumptions that support the IPA approach.

Firstly, the basic ontological assumption associated with constructionism is relativism. Within relativism it is perceived that through human interpretation multiple realities are constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Relativism implies that there is no objective truth to be sought. This supports the IPA approach, in which participants are not viewed as passive receivers of an objective reality but rather as actors who create, understand and interpret their world in a way that makes sense to them (Brocki & Weardon, 2006).

The constructionist position argues that, “meaning is not discovered but constructed” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty repeatedly state that the world is, “always already there” and that human beings are “thrown into” a world of objects, relationships and language (Crotty, 1998, p. 44). It is only through engaging with the world and objects that experience, and meaning is generated. So, what that means for my study is that independent learning as a concept is theoretical. It is only through engaging with independent learning that the participants are able to construct meaning and experience their own reality of it. Constructionism mirrors Brentano’s and Husserl’s concept of intentionality. Intentionality indicates an inseparable connectedness of the human being to the world (van Manen, 1997) and whereby meaning is imposed on all experiences, be it consciously or

unconsciously. Experience, or consciousness, is always consciousness of something, whether that is a 'real' object or a memory or imagination. IPA is concerned with examining subjective experience, "but that is always the subjective experience of something" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 13).

3.2.2 Theoretical perspective: Interpretivism

The theoretical perspective can be defined as the "philosophical stance lying behind a methodology" (Crotty, 1998, p. 66). Several theoretical perspectives can result from each epistemological and ontological position, which therefore can lead to a number of different methodologies. Therefore, the many ways of viewing the world inform the different ways of researching the world. The theoretical perspectives underpinning IPA are influenced by interpretivism. This concept was conceived as a reaction to positivism and in an effort to understand and explain human and social reality (Schwandt, 2007). Interpretivism can be related to specific theories relevant to IPA including symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography.

3.2.2.1 Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism can be defined as interpretivist in its research perspective. According to Schwandt (2007), it aims to provide a theory for and a method of understanding the process of meaning making. Symbolic interactionism stems from the philosopher, social psychologist and pragmatist George Herbert Mead (Crotty, 1998). Pragmatists would argue that knowledge of the world is created through an active process of interpretation of the meaning of objects (Baert, 2002; Benzies & Allen, 2001). Mead's

understanding of interaction is related to the pragmatist notion of truth, in that truth does not reside within objects and can only be made true through everyday interactions (Pascale, 2011). Therefore, meaning can only be ascribed to an object through the process of interaction, and experiences can only be understood through the many and varied relationships with others (Smith et al., 2009). This pragmatist, relativist view supports the notion of multiple ways of knowing the world (Clarke, 2003).

Influenced by symbolic interactionism, IPA is concerned with how meanings are constructed for individuals both personally and socially (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Symbolic interactionism uses culture as a lens through which to explore understanding (Crotty, 1998). While not its primary purpose, IPA understands that experience is inevitably entangled with language, physical, social and the cultural world (Smith et al., 2009).

3.2.2.2 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophy developed through the works of philosophers including, Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Therefore, multiple contrasting forms of phenomenology exist which are based on individual interpretations, some of which have informed the methodology of IPA.

Brentano is often considered a precursor of the phenomenological movement who exerted a strong influence on Husserl. Phenomenology as developed by Husserl considered experience as the central source of

knowledge and aimed to study things “as they appear” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132). For Husserl, phenomenology is concerned with the careful study of human experience and argued that “we should go back to the things themselves” (Husserl, cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 12), referring to the experiential content of consciousness and the need to focus on each particular thing in its own right (Silverman, 1980). In order to examine the lived experiences of individuals, Husserl recommended moving away from our ‘natural attitude’, which he defined as the original pre-reflective, pre-theoretical position (Yardley, 2000), thereby safeguarding the interpretation. To allow for a richer understanding of experience, untouched by preconceptions, Husserl proposed a process known as phenomenological ‘reduction’, in which the researcher’s previously held assumptions or beliefs are examined and acknowledged and then put to one side or ‘bracketed’ in order for the ‘true’ form of the phenomena to be disclosed, allowing for a portrayal of the ‘essence’ of the experience (Lowes & Price, 2001; van Manen, 1997).

While Husserl was concerned with perception, awareness and consciousness, Heidegger was more focused on the practical activities and relationships that individuals engage with in order to make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger used the phrase “being in the world” to refer to the way human beings exist, act or are involved in the world and that experience is unavoidably situated in context (van Manen, 1997, p. 180). He proposed that knowledge existed through interpretation, grounded in the lived world of things, people, relationships and language. This means that

our being in the world is always of its time and place, always temporal and always in relation to something (Smith et al., 2009). Within IPA, this means that as well as considering the individual's experience, the role played by the researcher in interpretating through their own experiences is recognised.

Merleau-Ponty shared some of Husserl and Heidegger's commitments to understanding our 'being in the world' while also echoing Heidegger's stance for a more situated phenomenology. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), Merleau-Ponty introduced the concept of 'embodied' nature, which relates to our individual relationship and situated perspective of the world. All experiences begin from a position of difference as we see ourselves as different from everything else (Dowling, 2007). This means we can never truly share another's experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Sartre echo's Heidegger's views on action orientated meaning making but also focuses on the developmental aspect of individuals. The expression "existence comes before essence" (Sartre, cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 19) indicates that the self is not discovered but rather an on-going process of becoming. In this sense the individual therefore has the freedom to choose and be responsible for their actions. However, it needs to be considered that this occurs "within the context of the individual life, the biographical history and the social climate in which the individual acts" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 20).

All of these stances have contributed ideas that inform IPA. Husserl's work established the importance of a focus on experience and perception.

Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre have emphasised the situated and interpretative nature of knowledge with a focus on understanding our involvement in the lived world. However, Smith et al. (2009) argue that rather than trying to operationalise one particular approach to phenomenology, IPA should be seen as an attempt to further the philosophy's intellectual position.

3.2.2.3 Hermeneutics

A further major theory that is informed by interpretivism and which underpins the methodology of IPA is hermeneutics; that is, the theory of interpretation. According to Rundell (1995, p. 10) hermeneutics, "has become part of our cultural self-understanding that only as historically and culturally located beings can we articulate ourselves in relation to others and the world in general".

Hermeneutic theorists who have influenced IPA include Schleiermacher, Heidegger and Gadamer. Schleiermacher's approach to hermeneutics offered a holistic approach to the interpretative process that would highlight all human understanding and not just provide a system for interpreting texts (Crotty, 1998). Schleiermacher promotes a notion of empathy, in that by engaging with the text the researcher is able to put themselves in the place of the researched and recognise what they are intending to convey. His aim was to understand the individual even better than they know themselves (van Manen, 1997). However, Smith et al. (2009) caution that from an IPA perspective, we should not position our analyses as more 'true' than the

claims of the research participants. Instead, our analysis might offer meaningful insights that go beyond the explicit claims of the participants.

IPA is an interpretative approach, which means Heidegger's explicit acknowledgement of phenomenology as a hermeneutic activity is compelling. In *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger's take on hermeneutics is the revelatory aspect of 'phenomenological seeing', which is concerned with bringing out meanings which may be hidden. The aim is to examine 'the thing itself' as it appears to show itself and then make sense of that appearing (Smith et al., 2009).

Heidegger also discusses the concept of 'fore-conception'. Fore-conception is a move away from Husserl's attempt of objectivity by 'bracketing' ones knowledge and prior assumptions, to a more complex and dynamic process. While fore-conceptions may precede our encounters with new things, pre-conceptions of research should be recognised and made clear as a crucial part of the research process and may help the researcher to develop new understandings of their own pre-conceptions. Therefore, within IPA both the researcher and the participants, are viewed as active agents. The research participant interprets their experiences as they describe them, influenced by many factors, the researcher then makes their own interpretations, which in turn is influenced by their own experiences. This connects the role of bracketing in IPA as a more reflexive practice (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Therefore, while a researcher always brings their prior experiences,

assumptions and pre-conceptions to the process of interpretation, these should not be viewed as an obstacle.

In *Truth and Method,* Gadamer (1990) supports Heidegger's views on fore-conceptions in that the researcher may only come to understand what their pre-conceptions are once they have commenced their interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). For Gadamer, hermeneutics also have a historical dimension in that interpretation involves a conversation between past and present. With regards to IPA, most texts (or data) are generated via interviews and are usually carried out in real time with analysis occurring relatively soon afterwards. However, Gadamer's notion of history could support the perspective that interpretation is affected by the point in time at which the interpretation is made (Kvale, 1996).

The hermeneutic circle can be seen as informing the approach of IPA, as the researcher focuses intently on the participant and their words throughout the research. Throughout there is a "return to the thing themselves" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 11). Smith (1996) recognises the intrinsic obstacles in attempting to completely understand the inner world of another as the researcher's conceptions both influence and challenge the "process of interpretative activity" (Smith, 1996, p. 264). Regardless, the researcher aims to "get as close to the participant's views as is possible" (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006, p. 104), re-introducing their own ideas and reflections later in the reflexive process. This process demonstrates the 'double hermeneutic' approach (Smith & Osborn, 2008), as the participant actively interprets their

experience through their account of it, and the researcher in turn interprets through their analysis. Consequently, the research process is an active and dynamic interaction and may lead to the revelation of hidden meanings. Smith and Osborn (2008, p. 53) described this as "is something leaking out here that wasn't intended?" This question emphasises the need for IPA to extend beyond the descriptive, and in keeping with symbolic interactionism, conceptually consider the language used by the participants during the interpretative analysis phase. Heidegger referred to language as "the house of Being", the tool through which our experiences are both consciously and unconsciously, enabled, restricted or shaped (Smith et al., 2009, p. 194).

3.2.2.4 Idiography

Idiography is concerned with the particular and focuses on detail and depth in a small number of cases, or even a single case. Smith et al. (2009) argue against the nomothetic approach, which deals in large samples and generalisations at the expense of illuminating individual experiences. In contrast, idiographic approaches seek to understand how a specific experience of a phenomena has been understood from a particular perspective and within a particular context. Smith et al. (2009, p. 32) argue "in some ways the details of the individual also bring us closer to significant aspects of the general". Therefore, a detailed exploration of a particular phenomena using IPA may uncover new insights and highlight flaws in existing theory, leading to new knowledge and understanding.

3.2.3. Methodology: Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Methodology can be defined as the framework within which research is undertaken. It sets out the theories and practices for how to go about conducting our research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In essence it describes the strategy, design or plan of action that lies directly behind the choice and use of particular research methods (Crotty, 1998).

The selected methodology should be one that will address the research aims underpinned by the philosophical beliefs and world view of the researcher. According to Smith and Osborne (2008, p. 53) IPA is, "phenomenological in that it involves detailed examination of the participant's life world; it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal perception of an object or event". Therefore, IPA seemed a perfect fit for my research as it was exactly this that I wanted to investigate in relation to independent learning and for addressing my research aims.

Developed by psychologist Jonathan A. Smith, IPA was seen as an approach to undertaking qualitative research in psychology which offered a theoretical foundation and detailed procedural guide (Brocki & Weardon, 2006). Smith (cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 4) argued for "an approach to psychology which was able to capture the experiential and qualitative, and which could still dialogue with mainstream psychology".

Despite originating in psychology IPA is increasingly being used in other disciplines, including human, health and social sciences. Whilst IPA started to

gain prominence in the 1990s, it clearly draws on concepts and theories that have a longer history. As discussed, the foundations of IPA can be traced back to phenomenology and follow Husserl's lead by "going back to the things themselves" (Husserl, cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). IPA also concurs with Heideggerian perspectives and requires the researcher to extend beyond description and present a detailed interpretation and illuminating insight into participants' lived experiences.

While participants are the experiential experts, the phenomenological and hermeneutic underpinnings of IPA position the researcher as a central piece of the interpretative process. Engagement in an active and dynamic process of interpretation involving both the researcher and the researched is required in order to highlight participants' experiences (Peat et al., 2019). This approach is referred to as the double hermeneutic approach to analysis, in that the researcher is making sense of the participant making sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009).

When considering the researcher's own views on the research process, the Husserlian phenomenological tradition identified the need to 'bracket' our pre-conceptions and assumptions. However, IPA is more in keeping with the Heideggerian position, in that rather than bracketing our preconceptions we should make clear how they consistently reveal themselves throughout the research process (Peat et al., 2019). This moves the researcher to a more reflective position, in which potential assumptions are acknowledged. Therefore, IPA suggests a shift in the researcher's attention away from 'the

self' to the lived experience of 'the other' (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher aims to get as close to the participants' experiences as possible and re-introduces their own ideas and reflections later in the process, while at the same time avoiding them being a barrier to making sense of the participant's experiences (Peat et al., 2019).

IPA strives to present a detailed examination of the particular case. "It wants to know in detail what the experience for this person is like, what sense this particular person is making of what is happening to them" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3). This requires an idiographic approach, based on small numbers of participants. The aim is to explore in detail the similarities and differences between each case. Any claims are therefore contextual to the participants and the setting in which the study was conducted.

A further critical part in the IPA process is a return to the mainstream literature and theory. Through making connections with the extant literature IPA attempts to understand the 'insider' perspective.

> IPA's concern with the links between talk, thought and experience (or behaviour) mean that there is a focus on the 'wholeness' of the individuals' experiences as opposed to focusing on the separate parts of the phenomenon under investigation. (Dickson, Knussen & Flowers, 2008, p. 461)

Therefore, the IPA approach seemed appropriate for exploring postgraduate international students' experiences of independent learning as it encourages

examination not just of the individual experience, but also the context in which this occurs (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006, p. 113) suggest that, "the analyst in IPA is doing more than this [descriptive account]; he or she is also offering an interpretative account of what it means for the participant to have such concerns, within their particular context". This would seem very relevant to postgraduate international students in terms of the ways in which the environment affects the individual. Access to 'insider interpretations' of this phenomenon are currently lacking within the research, and IPA has the potential to expose these, and in doing so, bring forth new understandings.

3.2.4 Method

Crotty (1998, p. 3) defined methods as the "techniques or procedures used to gather or analyse data related to the research question or hypothesis". There exist many potential methods that can be employed in a particular methodology, although some are more suited to IPA than others. Phenomenology as a theoretical perspective is discovery orientated. It wants to find out what a certain phenomenon means and how it is experienced (van Manen, 1997). The methodology of IPA seeks to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Kvale (2007) advocates for the interview as a particularly useful means of doing this:

> the interview is a uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subject's everyday world […]

and can convey to others their situation from their own perspective and in their own words. (2007, p. 11).

As a method, a semi-structured life world interview is often described as a conversation with a purpose (Smith et al., 2009), the aim of which is to develop a conversational relationship about the meaning of an experience (van Manen, 1997). Describing the interview as a conversation acknowledges the active participation of both the participant and the researcher in the process.

A detailed account of the method used to address the aims of the study will be presented in the next chapter, along with a logical account of the steps undertaken to carry out the semi-structured interviews and analysis.

3.3 Ethical considerations

Prior to commencing the study, ethical approval was sought via the University Ethics Committee (Appendix II). A number of ethical issues were addressed as part of this process and throughout the study. These were considered in line with Sheffield Hallam University's Research Ethics Policy and Procedures (2015) and the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018). The fundamental principles of respect, competence, responsibility and integrity will now be discussed (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The principle of respect requires researchers to maintain privacy and confidentiality, avoid deception and acknowledge the self-determination of

research participants. This is reflective of Kant's deontology, which states that people may not simply be used as a means to an end and should instead be seen as rational, autonomous agents (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015).

Providing detailed information ensures that participants are able to make up their own mind about taking part in the study. In order to facilitate this, information was provided in a clear, jargon-free way through the use of a research announcement, participant information sheet and participant consent form (Appendix III, Appendix IV, Appendix V). Collectively, these documents ensured that participants were fully aware of the potential benefits and risks as well as their rights while engaging with the research. The documents also informed them of what their participation in the study would involve, the main points for discussion and the way in which the data would be stored and used.

Participants were told that the findings from this study would inform the thesis, and therefore individual interpretations of their experiences of independent learning may be included in the thesis report and discussed within supervision meetings as well as being presented at conferences and in publications such as academic journals.

Participants were informed that all data would be stored securely and confidentially. Any personal details (such as names and email addresses) would be stored separately from the interview data and would be password protected. On completion of the research, and in accordance with university

guidelines, data would be securely held for 10 years before being destroyed. Data would be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998) and Sheffield Hallam University's Research Ethics Policy and Procedures (2015). Volunteers were sent a copy of the participant information sheet and consent form prior to making any arrangements to meet. This provided them with the opportunity to review the information and ensure that they were making an informed choice in deciding to take part.

Pre-existing relationships can complicate consent, particularly when the researcher is in a position of power over the potential participant (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007). The relationship between researcher and participants could be conceived as hierarchical (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Therefore, as an academic member of staff, potential participants may have viewed me as relatively more powerful and so found it difficult to refuse to take part. However, none of the participants were previously known to me, and therefore 'gatekeepers' were used as a means of contacting the students. These gatekeepers included course and module leaders as well as the international student support team. The participant information sheet clearly stated that participation was voluntary and that refusing to take part would have no adverse effects on participants' course or role as a student.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw; however, this needed to be within the boundaries of what is realistic. Smith et al. (2009) argue that giving participants a time limited right to withdraw is a more pragmatic approach. Participants were told that withdrawing individual data was

possible up to two weeks after the date of the interview. It was explained that after this point, it might be difficult to withdraw individual data from the overall analysis.

Participants were reassured that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained as far as possible. When arranging to meet for individual interviews, personal details were not added to my electronic work calendar. Following the interview, the audio file was transferred to a password protected computer and the original deleted from the recording device. The interviews were transcribed using a professional transcriber. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym or have the option to be referred to by their own name. None of the participants expressed strong views on either approach, therefore with their agreement, culturally sensitive pseudonyms were given. To support confidentiality, all identifying data, such as course of study was removed from the transcript.

The principle of competence relates to the researcher's awareness of professional ethics, standards of ethical decision-making, and limits of competence (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Engaging with the taught elements of the doctorate and the completion of a research development action plan allowed me to access relevant support and training to ensure I was safe and competent to undertake this study. This included regular contact with my supervisors, discussion with peers at research support groups, and developing my competence through attendance at conferences.

The principle of responsibility relates specifically to beneficence (doing good) and non-maleficence (avoiding harm). Researchers should evaluate the extent to which talking about issues might constitute harm (Smith et al., 2009) and consider the possibility that participants may experience anxiety, stress, guilt and damage to self-esteem during data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A potential risk to the participants in the study could have been that as a result of discussing their own practices regarding independent learning, some may have come to question their own abilities and doubt their own approaches to study. If this had been the case, the participant would have been provided with the opportunity to debrief. If required, they would have then been signposted to appropriate support services. Conversely, participating in an individual interview could provide the participant with a safe space to reflect on their current teaching and learning practices, confident that their views would not be used against them or result in them being disadvantaged as a student. Additionally, participating in the study could give the student further insights into qualitative research methods that may inform their own research projects.

If during the course of the interview a participant raised a safeguarding concern then the interview would have been immediately terminated. With the consent of the participant and following the university's safeguarding policy (Sheffield Hallam University, 2019) a referral would have been made to the Safeguarding Officer. The participant would also have been signposted to other appropriate support services.

During the course of recounting their experiences participants may have disclosed concerns regarding a member of staff. If that had occurred then I would have discussed with my supervisors on the most appropriate course of action.

Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that debriefing is not common in qualitative research, as it does not typically involve deception, however I decided to have the potential to utilise it in this study for the reasons explained above. Participants were also offered a brief summary of the analysed interview, should they wish to see it, however none of the participants requested to see a copy.

The principle of integrity requires that researchers demonstrate honesty and accuracy with regards to their study. In order to meet this principle, I received support from two peers as 'critical friends', along with supervisors reviewing my interpretation of transcripts. Their input in reviewing anonymised transcripts along with codes and themes has served as a check and led me to reflect on my initial interpretations of the data. However, the aim of this is not to represent a single 'truth' but is rather an attempt to "ensure that the account produced is a credible one, not that it is the only credible one" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 183).

3.4 Chapter summary

Based on the aim of the current research, which is to explore postgraduate international students experience independent learning, the design of the

study has been comprehensively presented within this chapter. The use of Crotty's (1998) knowledge framework to explore epistemological and theoretical positioning provides an effective structure to present the rationale for my choice of methodological approach. I found this particular framework useful because it provided an effective structure to present a rationale for my choice of study approach. The nature of the research question has led me to avoid a positivistic, quantitative approach that assumes one reality and instead to choose an approach to inquiry whereby multiple realities can be examined and constructed. This situates me within the paradigms of constructionism and interpretivism, as I believe that experiences of independent learning will cause individuals to generate their own meanings and understandings of the phenomena.

Constructionism and interpretivism are intrinsically linked to IPA and inform all foundational elements of the methodological processes and methods. A specific rationale for the choice of IPA as a research methodology for this study was given. IPA explores in detail the meanings particular experiences hold for participants. Its analysis places an emphasis on the language used and the meanings, conscious or unconscious that it may hold for the individual. Semi-structured interviews provided the method of examining postgraduate international students' experiences of independent learning by exploring all of the issues that impact on their daily lived experiences. Considerations as to the principles of rigour, reflection and reflexivity have been discussed. Finally, ethical considerations were discussed using the principles of respect, competence, responsibility and integrity.

The following chapter provides further discussion of the methods used to investigate the area of interest. This will include participant recruitment and selection methods, detail on data collection strategies and finally data analysis methods.

4. Chapter 4: Study methods

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I describe how I endeavoured within the study design to meet the critical requirements of interpretative phenomenological analysis. I did this by ensuring the primacy of the participants' interpretations of their experiences and by enabling those participants as active agents in the production of knowledge (Smith, 1996).

The focus of this study was on capturing, representing and interpreting the ways in which postgraduate international students experience independent learning. This included understanding what participants perceived as the barriers and enablers to engaging with independent learning. The recruitment and selection process of participants is explained, including the rationale for sample size. A total of nine participants were recruited. Three students were studying at PhD level while six were at master's level. Data generation methods are presented. Data were collected via individual, semi-structured interviews for seven of the participants, while the final two participants requested to be interviewed together. Data analysis methods are presented, using examples from transcripts to highlight coding processes. Examples of how the themes were generated are also provided to support the transparency of the analysis process.

4.2. Pilot study

The taught element of the EdD provided me with the opportunity to undertake a pilot study. A research pilot proposal form was submitted and reviewed by the teaching team on the doctoral of education programme to check the proposal was in line with SHU regulations and procedures for ethics. The purpose of the pilot study was to provide suggestions about the most appropriate data collection methods from international students. While in-depth interviews remain a common approach for collecting qualitative data, proponents of IPA allow for some flexibility. Few existing researchers have involved international students in research design. Therefore, the pilot study was intended to enable current international students to discuss their ideas about how future postgraduate international students might best be facilitated in sharing their experiences of independent learning. The pilot study also provided the opportunity to consider the value of the research and determine whether the research aims were worthy of investigation from the students' perspective. International students themselves appeared best placed to determine whether the study was of value and whether independent learning as a topic was of importance to them.

Initially, the pilot study was intended to be a focus group in which a small group of international students could discuss a range of data gathering approaches. Unfortunately, recruiting participants was a challenge. Therefore, individual, semi-structured interviews were carried out with two postgraduate students. Participants were provided with a participant information sheet and

consent form (Appendix VI and Appendix VII) that included highlighting those findings from the pilot study may be included in the thesis.

The pilot study confirmed that the research topic was of value to both students, as they discussed the challenges they had experienced with independent learning. Pseudonyms are used for the extracts below. The first two extracts highlight the value of the study.

> When I first got the email I thought yes this is one of the concerns that I was having so I thought it would be useful for me to talk about it because during the whole process I might be able to find a better way to present the issues that the students are having, to have a better way of explaining that to the course leaders. (Mira)

> I needed someone to just explain it to me, all the time she tried to remind me you are on independent study, so you have to do it yourself. Sometimes I get upset because I told her many times I'm an international student and there is conflict in the system and now the British system. (Lela)

The following two extracts highlight that the pilot study participants believed interviews were the most appropriate data generation method.

> I think if you do a survey then the amount of information you get is very limited but if you interview people they get to get comfortable with you and talk and they would elaborate more on everything that you might need to know so I think the best way would be in an interview (Mira)

> Maybe interviews because you're getting more confidence to discuss and express yourself (Lela)

4.3. Recruitment of participants

> "It should be remembered that one always has to be pragmatic when doing research; one's sample will in part be defined by who is prepared to be included in it!" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 56).

IPA researchers typically seek a reasonably homogenous sample of participants who have a shared perspective on a phenomenon of interest (Larkin, Shaw, & Flowers, 2018). Purposive sampling is the approach most often used in qualitative studies, where the aim is to recruit participants who can provide an in-depth understanding of the topic (Patton, 2002). In this study, participants were selected purposively so they could offer an insight into their lived experiences of independent learning. In keeping with IPA, the aim was not to achieve a random or representative sample but rather to invite participation from individuals for whom the research question would be meaningful (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, all postgraduate international students at the university who were at least nine months into their course were invited to participate.

In this study, an international student is defined as any student who has crossed borders to study (OECD, 2013). This definition is in line with the Quality Assurance Agency (2020), which broadly defines an international student as one who does not come from the UK. However, it opposes the

university definition of an international student, which is based on the fee-paying status of the student. The definition used in the current study allowed students from EU countries to participate.

The first three months of study in a new environment appeared particularly challenging as this is a time when students come to terms with different approaches to study (Quant et al., 2013). However, McClure (2007) argued that adjustment is most difficult in the first six to 12 months. Therefore, after nine months, students will have a body of experience upon which to reflect in relation to their negotiation of independent learning.

Participants self-selected on the basis that they considered themselves postgraduate international students. They were invited to take part in the study via various methods. Announcements (Appendix IV) were posted by the international student support team to the International Students' Facebook page, resulting in the recruitment of four students. Contacting course leaders and posting announcements to Blackboard resulted in three more students being recruited. Advertising via the PhD support networks attracted a further two students. All potential candidates were unknown to me until they volunteered to take part in the study. They were sent a detailed information sheet and a consent form prior to making any interview arrangements. Two further students made initial contact following a post on the International Students' Facebook page. However, when contacted to arrange an interview, they withdrew their offer to take part. Participant profiles, including brief accounts of individual stories, are presented later in the chapter.

4.3.1. Sample size

Various factors influence sample size, including the qualitative method used, the scope of the study, the quality of the data, what may be considered credible and what can be done with available time and resources (Patton, 2002). Researchers using IPA do not aim to generalise, meaning that sample sizes should allow for the development of meaningful points of similarities and differences between participants, while avoiding the chance of the researcher being overwhelmed by the amount of data generated (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Smith, et al. (2009) argued that for professional doctorates, a sample of between four and 10 interviews provides the opportunity to explore the complexity of human phenomena and benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases while reflecting the detailed accounts of individual experiences. Therefore, in keeping with the idiographic approach of IPA, I decided that a sample of nine participants would be suitable to produce a study with depth and importance.

4.4. Conducting semi-structured interviews for IPA

Interviews are one of the most commonly used methods of data collection in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012). Kvale (2007, p. 19) presented two contrasting metaphors of the interviewer – "miner" or "traveller" – to illustrate different theoretical views. For the miner, knowledge is positioned as buried metal, waiting to be uncovered and uncontaminated by the miner. The traveller is someone who understands the interview as "a journey that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home" (Kvale, 2007, p. 20). Knowledge unfolds through the traveller's interpretations and, during a process of self-

reflection, the traveller might change, uncovering taken for granted assumptions and values.

A semi-structured lifeworld interview attempts to understand themes of the lived daily world from the participants' own perspective (Kvale, 2007). The lifeworld is a phenomenological concept introduced by Husserl to describe the world as it is experienced (Smith, et al., 2009). A lifeworld approach seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees' lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of a particular phenomenon and to bring forth elements of an experience that they find important (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). This approach may also highlight the 'messiness' of a lived experience as participants reflect on the contradictions in the world in which they live (Kvale, 2007).

Ashworth (2015) argues that any experience is inevitably interwoven with the rest of the individual's lifeworld. Therefore, for the participants of this study there is a need to capture the whole subjective experience in which the individual is engaged as they experience the phenomenon of independent learning. This may include reflecting on past experiences, culture, thoughts and feelings, relationships and the future self. Failure to do this could risk missing important aspects of the experience (Ashworth, 2015).

Smith and Osborn (2008) positioned semi-structured interviews as the exemplary method for IPA, as they invite participants to offer rich, detailed first-person accounts. Rich data indicate that participants have had the

opportunity to tell their stories openly and reflectively (Smith, et al., 2009). During the interview process, the researcher and participant give and take from each other (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006), meaning the interview becomes a site for the construction of knowledge, which the researcher and participant produce together (Hand, 2003). Therefore, the relationship between researcher and participant is important if this process is to achieve the desired results.

However, Kvale (1996) argued that an interview is not a conversation between equal partners, as the researcher defines and controls the situation. Oakley and Roberts (1981) suggested that the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship between researcher and participant is non-hierarchical and when the researcher is prepared to invest their identity in the relationship. They argued that there should be "no intimacy without reciprocity" (Oakley & Roberts, 1981 p. 51). In other words, researchers need to consider how the balance of power can be shifted in favour of the participants. During the processes of recruitment and interviewing, I considered how the balance of power could be addressed. Whilst it was relevant to share with the participants that I was an academic member of staff, I also focused on my position as a student in an attempt to reaffirm my 'insiderness' (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006) argued that researchers must use a relatively flexible approach to interviewing so that participants can set the direction and flow of the conversation. This was reflected during the interviews. Even though I had developed some broad interview questions, (Appendix VIII) these were only

used during the interviews to either prompt further discussion of a point of interest or when the participant indicated that they had finished discussing a particular issue. Ensuring opportunities for the participants to ask questions during and after the interview also enhanced reciprocity (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006).

4.4.1. The interview process

Several dates and times for interviews (pre- Covid) were sent to the participants so they could select a time to suit their schedule. As participants were based at different campuses, they could choose where the interview took place. Once dates and times were agreed, I booked the venues. These were quiet rooms based on campus. Participants were sent a copy of the information sheet and consent form (Appendix IV and V) and were requested to bring these with them for the interview. Eight interviews were arranged, although when the final participant (Aleni) arrived for her interview, she brought along a friend (Neela), who was also an international student undertaking the same course. At first, this created a dilemma, as when I suggested carrying out two separate interviews, they requested to be interviewed together. Given the interview's focus on the individual student experience, I was concerned about whether one student would dominate or influence the conversation. However, Marshall and Rossman (2011) argued that the interviewer must remember that interviewees have given up their time to participate. Each person will have their reason for this, which may include a need to tell their story. Therefore, motivated by not wanting to lose an additional willing participant, or inhabit a more powerful position as the

researcher, I agreed to interview these participants together. Throughout the interview, I made every effort to ensure that both participants had an equal opportunity to share their story.

All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. I chose not to make notes during the interviews, as I wanted to focus on what the participants were saying and not become distracted. Marshall and Rossman (2011) acknowledged that it is best to spend time listening to the participant's story as this may create the opportunity for more focused questioning later. This is supported by Smith and Osborn (2008), who argued that attempting to write down everything the participant says will lead to the researcher missing important nuance and will impact on the ability to establish rapport. Interview questions were framed around the research aims (Appendix VI), although initial questions were framed around 'settling in'. Through these questions, I gathered general information about the participant, for example, which course they were studying, how long they had been in the UK and how things were for them. This helped establish rapport.

Denscombe (2014) argued that a skilled interviewer will often start by asking about a topic in which the interviewee already has well-formulated views. This provides the opportunity to discuss something participants are familiar with rather than commencing the interview by expecting the participant to consider abstract or new ideas. At times during the interviews, the students would compare their previous experiences with their current ones. The sequence of further questions was influenced by the story the student was recounting.

However, during the interviews, all were asked to consider how they would define independent learning, share any barriers that they thought impacted on their experience and share any factors that enabled their experience.

Table 1: Participant details

Participant pseudonym	Faculty/Department	Level of study	Length of interview (mins/secs)	International/EU
Sara	Sheffield Business School	MSc	24.33	International
Khalid	Faculty of Health, Wellbeing and Lifesciences	PhD	40.24	International
Mia	Sociology and Politics	MA	33.03	EU
Hani	Faculty of Health, Wellbeing and Lifesciences	MSc	38.51	International
Lin	Art and Design	MA	42.32	International
Jeannet	Faculty of Health, Wellbeing and Lifesciences	PhD	31.23	EU
Hue-Wen	Faculty of Health, Wellbeing and Lifesciences	PhD	46.44	International
Aleni	Faculty of Health, Wellbeing and Lifesciences	MSc	42.23	EU
Neela	Faculty of Health, Wellbeing and Lifesciences	MSc	42.23	International

4.5. The analytical process

In keeping with IPA philosophy, an idiographic approach to analysis was taken (Smith et al., 2009). Immediately following the interviews, I noted initial thoughts and impressions in my reflective diary. Examples of initial notes included thoughts about participants' body language, any questions or phrases the participants had difficulty responding to,

any metaphors they used, initial thoughts on what was emerging from the interviews and reflections on my performance as an interviewer.

The interviews were sent to a professional transcriber and fully transcribed. Each interview was then read and re-read alongside the original recording. Barbour (2014) argued that it is good practice to read the transcript whilst listening to the recording. Doing this allowed me to remain as close to the original interview as possible and to be immersed in the data. During this process, I annotated the transcript and noted any laughter, pauses or other verbal cues that were not included by the transcriber. At times, the transcriber had trouble hearing certain words spoken by the participants. While I could fill in some missing words by listening repeatedly to the audio, others remained inaudible. Unfortunately, one participant's accent was so strong that the transcriber was unable to transcribe their interview (Khalid). I therefore had to adapt my approach to analysis with this interview. This approach will be explained in more detail later in the chapter.

Following this process of familiarisation with the data, I proceeded to the next stage of analysis, described by Smith and Osborn (2008, p. 67) as "free textual analysis". Each interview was transferred onto a data analysis template. This consisted of three margins, with the transcribed interview in the middle, one margin for exploratory comments and the other for emerging themes. The first stage involved completing initial annotations in the exploratory comments margin. Descriptive comments referred to anything that appeared important to the participant, including emotional responses. These

were highlighted in blue. I also noted anything of interest relating to the language used, in particular the use of metaphors, repetition or contradictions. These were highlighted in green. Limited conceptual comments were also included in this first stage. This stage is more interpretative and interrogative and occurred to a greater extent once all the interviews and initial analysis were completed. Therefore, these were added to following repeated readings of each transcript as I became increasingly familiar with that participant's story, thus revealing new insights. Conceptual comments were highlighted in yellow. Each interview was analysed individually before repeating the process with the remaining transcripts.

Table 2: Section of a transcript including exploratory comments and development of themes.

Themes	Text	Exploratory comments
Peer support as motivation	ALENI: It's a motivation to know that your colleagues are working with you at 3am in the morning, you're not alone in the library, it's okay to be there. NEELA: If you were the only person sitting there even if	Studying at unsocial hours, feeling like you are not alone, acts as a motivator. *Its ok to be there-? Meaning that if there were not other students there then it would not be ok to be there? Feeling isolated/alone?*

Peer support as motivation	someone else is also sitting and doing the same work just in the other room or something but you don't know that they are doing the same thing so if you know that there are more people apart from you in the same situation who are struggling to finish their assignment or who are panicking or they are stuck in the same kind of situation I think it gives you a bit of relaxation, for me it does. *Q: So it's a bit of a comfort knowing that other people are in the same situation?* ALENI: Yes NEELA: And you never know who will help you out in what kind of situation, suddenly if someone is for example even if I don't ask questions someone	Knowing other students are having the same experience- struggling on *Using words like struggling and panicking- negative response to managing a deadline/submission* Feeling like you're all in it together- struggling on
Peer support as motivation		Gains benefit from someone else asking the questions

	else is also writing the same down and they're asking to someone else and I will just listen and I'm like "okay" that was supposed to be my second question but I got my answer.	
Feeling the struggle Peer support as motivation	ALENI: I think also it's important that we're all internationals because you know English people especially those who have studied here before like their Bachelor year kind of know what to do, what to expect, how to find something while we started from zero so we are helping each other. *Q: How does that make you feel?*	Comparing self to English students, by comparison feel like starting at the bottom (zero) <u>Feeling lesser</u> ? Know nothing? Support as a group of international students <u>Reminds me of Bourdieu-culture capital</u> <u>Feeling other- not understanding the rules of the game</u> *Struggling with this thing- is this thing elusive? Something difficult to get hold of? Difficult to define?*
Feeling the struggle	NEELA: I feel good when I see them also lost in the same situation, I feel like I'm not the	*"I feel good"*

Defining success	only one struggling with this thing because when I came I was like "am I the only person not understanding anything in the class" in some modules it was like everything was just flying, I couldn't understand anything. ALENI: It does feel like we're a step behind from our English classmates, especially those who studied here before in the same university because from university to university things might differ but I think we have come a long way until now and if you compare our assignments from international students and maybe English students there might not be … NEELA: A very big difference maybe?	It's a comfort to see other students struggle, makes you feel like you are not the only one In the early stages when you don't understand anything- this must feel very isolating for a student- feeling lesser to other students Conjures up an image of the words flying by her in lectures, too fast for her to grab. At the same time, flying is an impossible task - did she feel like she was being asked to fly in these early lectures? Feels like you are behind your English classmates- already feeling at a disadvantage. Trying to understand the rules of the game But making progress- come a long way sounds like a weighty journey

Defining success	ALENI: Yes, I think at the end of the day it all comes down to how much work you put in and not your first language or where you come from or what you've done before	Success is measured by how much work you put in- this seems to contradict the earlier discussions about culture etc.

Having coded each transcript individually, I then re-read the data and began to organise it into overarching themes that represented key aspects of the participant's experience of independent learning. Developing the themes was an iterative, lengthy process which included working with initial notes and exploratory comments and then focusing on discreet chunks of data, rather than the transcript itself (Smith et al., 2009). A theme captured something significant about the data that was connected to a research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As themes emerged, they were checked against the transcript to ensure they were reflective of the participant's actual words (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This represents the hermeneutic circle, as the initial whole becomes a set of parts, to return to the whole in the presentation of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). At this stage, I utilised the support of two critical friends, one of whom was familiar with the use of IPA. Having read the transcripts, including the analysis and development of themes, these critical friends gave feedback about the consistency of analysis and whether themes seemed appropriate to the data. Their feedback was supportive of my approach.

Having analysed all the participants' transcripts, I then addressed the remaining un-transcribed audio file; that of Khalid. Using the themes developed from the previous participants, I repeatedly played the audio file at a reduced speed and noted similarities with other participants. I attempted to transcribe the interview myself. However, even playing the recording at a slower speed, it remained difficult to comprehend a considerable amount of Khalid's speech. Despite this, I felt it was important to glean as much of his experience as possible and not simply discard the data. Khalid had given his time to recount his story and so I wanted to interpret as much of it as possible. Where possible, I noted Khalid's words which reflected certain themes. After noting the similarities, I replayed the audio file and focused on any differences between Khalid's story and the other accounts, therefore acknowledging convergences and divergences in the data (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

The final stage in the process involved the meaningful clustering of themes that addressed related issues across cases (King & Horrocks, 2010). This allowed me to review themes across the entire data set and merge overlapping themes. Each final cluster of themes, referred to as a superordinate theme, was given a suitable title that reflected its commonalities (see Table 2). I considered that the theme 'feeling the struggle' should acquire superordinate status, bringing together the remaining related themes as this represented well the themes in the group. Smith et al (2009) refer to this as subsumption. For the remaining two superordinate themes, I

used abstraction to organise like with like and create a new name for the cluster (Smith et al., 2009).

Table 3: Presentation of superordinate themes and supporting narratives

SUPERORDINATE THEME	SUPPORTING NARRATIVE
FEELING THE STRUGGLE THEMES • Feeling the struggle • Language as a barrier • Past experiences • Mental wellbeing	**Feeling the struggle:** *small, small things also matter* **Language as a barrier:** *the language would be quite a big barrier* **Past experiences:** *after I came here, I didn't know how to study by myself* **Mental wellbeing:** *you're not fighting alone physically but you are fighting alone mentally*
STEERING THE COURSE THEMES • Defining and demonstrating independence • Role of feedback • Relationship with supervisor/tutor • Peer support as motivation	**Defining and demonstrating independence:** *I have to find my own way through* **Role of feedback:** *I was totally relying on that feedback* **Relationship with supervisor/tutor:** *Please, just give me the answer!* **Peer support as motivation:** *it's a motivation to know that your colleagues are working with you*

THRIVING NOT SURVIVING THEMES • Defining success • Freedom	**Defining Success:** *I think the independent study is one of the most important things to be successful for me now* **Freedom:** *it gives you the freedom to be creative, to go your own path*

These themes will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

4.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have presented an account of how IPA was used. I have demonstrated that the pilot study confirmed the value of undertaking the study and the data generation method employed. The steps taken to recruit nine participants have been outlined, along with the use of in-depth interviews to generate the data.

Data analysis methods have been presented to explain the systematic process of working with the transcribed interviews, leading to the generation of themes and finally superordinate themes. Participant voices have been used as a narrative alongside the presentation of the themes. The participant voices will be used as headings to represent the themes in the following findings chapter.

5. Chapter 5: Findings

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will present and discuss the research findings. I aimed to provide a detailed interpretation of the data and identify how this interpretation develops our understanding of how postgraduate international students experience independent learning. While proponents of IPA do not prescribe a particular method for presenting research findings, it is common practice to employ narrative extracts for this purpose. Therefore, a large proportion of these findings are evidenced by transcript extracts of the participants describing their experiences and are supported by my interpretation of the text (Smith et al., 2009).

In the previous chapter, I presented an overview of the development of the superordinate themes along with example narratives to show how the particular themes came into being. Taking each superordinate theme in turn, I will detail the experiences that can be categorised within, and constitute, each theme. I do this by selecting several extracts to represent the variety and range of experience within the group. Individual extracts were chosen because they are either rich in emotion, capture the views across most participants, present illuminating metaphors or capture the imagination (Smith et al., 2009). Additional extracts are selected because they illustrate contradictions or complexity across these experiences. It is suggested that extracts help the reader evaluate the evidentiary base for the interpretation of data (Smith et al., 2009). This also ensures the centrality of the participants to

the research, in keeping with IPA's idiographic approach. In an effort to retain the individuality of each participant, brief profiles have been provided, before moving onto an in-depth thematic analysis of the data. This chapter also includes a consideration of my position with independent learning. I feel that it is important and relevant to include this as my interpretation of the participants' experiences is influenced by my own experiences and assumptions (Smith, et al., 2009).

5.2 Participant profiles

Participant profiles have been provided to establish context for individuals' previous experiences of independent learning and offer a sense of their current experiences. These are predominately presented descriptively rather than interpretively. Individual quotes have been added to highlight key experiences and maintain the idiographic approach. As these are the participants' spoken words, no amendments to grammar have been made. Some participant-specific information has been excluded, for example, course of study, to maintain anonymity. Participants have also been given pseudonyms. Profiles are presented in the order in which the participants were interviewed.

Sara

Sara is a master's student from Malaysia who completed all of her previous education there. This was Sara's first time in the UK. She described how the first few weeks of study in the UK came as a shock, commenting on how different the teaching and learning methods were. Throughout her account,

she repeatedly used the metaphor of 'spoon-feeding' to describe her previous experiences of learning, suggesting that learning was tutor-led rather than student-led:

> I can say that the difference between the education in Malaysia and in UK the education in Malaysia is more spoon-fed, so the lecturer tells you everything you need to know you just have to listen.

During the first few weeks of the course, Sara was afraid to ask questions, fearing that the other students would laugh. She confirmed that this was due to her previous experiences and fear of asking a 'stupid question'. However, she referred to her tutors as kind and attentive. She also observed how easily her classmates questioned the tutor and therefore eventually felt enabled and encouraged to ask questions. Although Sara found her tutors supportive, she referred to them as being the last resort when seeking help.

Sara tended to experience independent learning individually, occasionally drawing on support from her peers:

> I normally try to learn it myself but if I can't I will ask my classmates.

She frequently referred to paying attention in class and having the courage to ask questions. Sara considered reading and searching for material to demonstrate her engagement with independent learning. At times, she seemed to convey that she had become comfortable with independent

learning, but it appeared that independent learning was not a regular part of Sara's learning and was only undertaken to prepare for assessments:

> I study more time a few weeks before an exam normal times I would just pay attention in class.

Khalid

Khalid is a PhD student from Iraq. Prior to commencing his PhD in the UK, Khalid had studied to master's level in his home country and then travelled to the US to develop his English. While there, he commenced a PhD but, after experiencing problems with his supervisory team, he transferred to the UK. Khalid discussed how the Western style of learning differed from the teaching back home in Iraq. However, he found that this allowed him to be more 'creative'. He talked about the 'freedom' within learning that he has within the UK, which he described as positive:

> …freedom I get to developing research more open than back home.

When discussing how he felt about his current experiences of independent learning, Khalid described at length his increased opportunities for success. As well as undertaking research, he had also submitted papers for conferences and received two awards for conference and poster presentations. He described this as hard work but also as 'positive when you achieve something'. As well as describing himself as 'having a passion' and 'being open minded', Khalid attributed some of his success to the support he

had received. He referred to support as having 'the very basic tools from the beginning'. These included having a desk, a PC and the equipment and facilities to carry out his research. He also found it beneficial to be located close to other PhD students. Research training and the opportunity to listen to research seminars were also viewed as sources of support. Khalid described how the 'best support' came from his supervisory team. He indicated how important it was that they were accessible, saying:

> I feel the pain of a friend who can't see their supervisor.

In contrast to this experience of his friend Khalid conveyed a relationship that he felt was supportive.

Mia

Mia is a master's student from Germany who had completed all of her previous education there. This was her first time in the UK. Mia felt that her experience of independent learning was similar to her undergraduate degree, meaning it came easily to her:

> I think for me it was quite easy because I was used to independent learning.

Mia saw independent learning as an activity that was carried out on her own. However, there were times when independent learning was viewed as a peer-supported activity.

Course structure was an important factor that impacted Mia's ability to successfully engage with independent learning. She repeatedly referred to her need for structure and direction. A lack of structure led to feelings of frustration, and she described feeling lost or getting on the wrong track:

> …when I don't have a structure I find it quite difficult so I like to have some instructions from my course leader or the module leader on how to do it but if there's no structure behind it at all then I wouldn't know where to start and I might get lost.

Mia felt that for motivation to occur, there needed to be a strong connection between independent learning and improving class participation. Feedback from course tutors, both formal and informal, could impact motivation both positively and negatively.

Hani

As a master's student, Hani had spent time living and studying in several countries, predominately North Africa and the Middle East, although she was born in the United Arab Emirates. Most of her education had been teacher-led; she spoke of memorising as a key part of her learning. However, she soon began to learn that this approach would be difficult to maintain in the UK:

> Then I just go and try to memorise everything, and I think that doesn't work.

Hani conveyed that she felt a clear need to take responsibility for her learning and so develop confidence in her abilities. She discussed how, over time, she recognised the need to be able to identify her strengths and limitations with regards to knowledge:

> It's your responsibility to go through it and identify what you need to cover or not.

Hani viewed feedback from tutors as important support for identifying her strengths and limitations, especially given in the early part of the course:

> …the most important feedback is the feedback you receive at the first assignment, the first assessment because it's a first in everything.

Lin

Lin is a master's student from China. She had completed all of her previous study in China and this was her first visit to the UK. What struck me the most about Lin's story was the emotional connection she had to her learning. She had experienced a relationship break-up while in the UK, which was a key influence on her experiences. She recounted loneliness, sadness and a loss of control, and described how these feelings impacted her learning:

> …just one month I broke up with my boyfriend so I feel like so sad because for me my feelings got hurt so I feel upset all day, I can't do anything and missed a lot of classes, I missed a lot of opportunities.

Another key feature of Lin's story was how working and volunteering opportunities impacted her learning, both negatively and positively. Lin recognised that she was spending time working when she should have been studying. However, she felt that these activities could be considered independent learning opportunities as they influenced her CV and therefore her employability:

> I want to take those experiences to improve my CV to make myself in the future more competitive.

Lin spoke of conversations she had with her parents regarding her developing independence. Her mother was a teacher in China and both parents had studied to master's level. Lin's mother encouraged her to study hard so she could return to China and 'get a good job'.

Jeannet

Jeannet, a student from the Netherlands, was four years into her PhD. This was Jeannet's first time studying outside of her home country. She felt she had started to develop her skills as an independent learner at undergraduate and master's level, and while she considered herself to be independent with her PhD, she frequently referred to the impact that her fellow PhD students and supervisors had on her experience:

> …so I think in one way it's independent but in another way you always have someone around you to ask questions.

Jeannet reflected on the challenges presented to both her and other PhD students. Long working hours and the pressure to succeed impacted on her mental wellbeing. She hinted that whilst not explicitly verbalised, there was a culture in which PhD students were expected to work long days, and there was often 'a look' if a student left the office before 5pm. In contrast, there was also a sense of support or community, which Jeannet referred to as 'PhD Assemble', referencing the Marvel film Avengers Assemble. This sense of community provided Jeannet with the forum to seek support from her peers.

One challenge for Jeannet in terms of managing her independent PhD learning was a lack of deadlines:

> I guess that is the more difficult thing about independent learning that there are no strict deadlines.

Hue-Wen

Hue-Wen is a PhD student from Taiwan who had undertaken all of her previous education in her home country. She reflected on her previous education in her home country and the strong focus on performance there. When discussing her current experience of independent learning, she compared her PhD to a journey. She repeatedly questioned herself and doubted her progress.

Hue-Wen described her first two years as difficult. Challenges and frustrations were framed as coming to terms with a different way of studying, while language was a barrier. She reflected on how language impacted her engagement with learning and described needing to show courage when asking others for support. However, Hue-Wen described a determination to succeed and found that getting information through talking to people was an important source of support:

> I found the UK is really a social involved society, you always get more information when you talk to people.

Hue-Wen felt lucky with her supervision team but realised this might not be the case for all PhD students:

> I'm quite lucky, I don't know about other people but in my case I think I'm quite lucky.

She valued prompt email responses to her questions but felt frustrated when her supervisors directed her to search for her own answers. She recognised that this was part of the process of completing a PhD, but conveyed a sense of pleading in her response:

> …please just give me the answer.

Hue-Wen's story was similar to Jeannet's in that she described the impact that long working hours had on her mental wellbeing. The support given by

other PhD students was important to Hue-Wen. This brought to mind an image of all the international students struggling together.

Aleni

Aleni is a master's student from Cyprus. All of Aleni's previous education had been undertaken in her home country. She commented that for her undergraduate degree, she had stayed in her home city. This was Aleni's first visit to the UK. She found studying in English difficult as it made her feel like she was starting all over again. She said that studying was different here and that it felt simpler back home.

Aleni felt that it took a while to understand what was required of her and that she described spending a lot of time in the library. However, she reflected that this was probably expected of someone doing a master's degree:

> …spending eleven hours a day in the library is not the best-case scenario but for a master's degree I guess it's normal to have so much to do.

She expressed frustration at feeling like she was on her own and questioned the role of the academic staff. As well as adapting to the new study methods, Aleni conveyed other challenges that she had been faced with:

> …whole first semester I was just trying to adapt to the culture and everything.

She used the weather as an example of something that others might take for granted, but which had impacted deeply on her experience.

Aleni spoke at length about the peer support she had received from her classmates. Knowing that other students were in the same situation seemed to normalise the struggles she was facing over managing her study.

Neela

Neela is a master's student from India. All of Neela's previous study had been undertaken in the state where she lived. This was her first time in the UK. There were many similarities between Aleni and Neela's stories, in particular the value that she gave to peer support.

Neela described the differences in her experiences between the UK and back home. She recounted how approaches to assessment were different and expressed surprise over spending less time in the classroom. She conveyed the challenges of having to read more literature and write academically but also expressed that learning felt less strict than back home and that she liked the opportunity to speak her own mind and present arguments in written work. However, Neela questioned the value of feedback. She had hoped that feedback would be a valuable tool to help her to improve but found that the level of detail was not sufficient to enable her to do this:

> …why did I get less mark, what additional things do I need to add so this kind of feedback you know.

Neela recounted how adjusting to life in the UK had impacted her experience. She described the challenge of managing study along with fitting in time to shop and prepare food. Coming from a country in which the shops had stayed open until late at night, Neela felt like she had a reduced day in which to complete all her tasks.

5.3 Superordinate theme: feeling the struggle

In feeling the struggle, I consider all the data relating to the themes of:

- **Feeling the struggle:** *small, small things also matter*
- **Language as a barrier:** *the language would be quite a big barrier*
- **Past experiences:** *after I came here, I didn't know how to study by myself*
- **Mental wellbeing:** *you're not fighting alone physically but you are fighting alone mentally*

In this superordinate theme, I capture and interpret the ways in which participants experienced struggles that impacted on their engagement with independent learning. Participants discussed past experiences of learning; all but two (Hani and Khalid) had previously only ever studied in their home countries. They described difficulties in adjusting to a new country as well as unfamiliar approaches to learning and a language barrier. These new experiences left participants feeling isolated, frustrated, overwhelmed or lost. They also reported feeling lesser than their peers. Participants had to attempt to understand the rules of an unfamiliar approach to teaching and learning.

5.3.1 Small, small things also matter

These postgraduate international students experienced difficulties as they moved to a new country. The extent of those difficulties related not only to their courses but also to wider issues of attending university in a country that is not home.

This was particularly striking in Aleni's account, below:

> If I give you a very simple example, the weather, coming from a sunny environment to this rainy grey weather, at the beginning I was depressed "why, why is it like that", it's too cold I'm not going to go out of the house but you have to do it, it's going to be like that you still have to get out of the house, you still have to go to the library and study so many hours, that's how it is, you just have to face it and deal with it, that's how it is.

This extract illuminates several issues that seemed to me to be important. Aleni described a situation in which independent learning was not undertaken in a vacuum but was impacted by factors that may not be considered or appreciated by her tutor. By presenting a 'simple example', the weather appears to be a barrier to independent learning as it is depressing and stops her wanting to leave the house to go to the library. Interestingly, Aleni selected an example of something which no one can control. Her description presents a state of unhappiness, moving from feelings of despondency to a fatalistic acceptance that she just has to deal with it as she cannot change it. The 'it' for Aleni appears to be adjusting to a reality she has no power to influence and the need to manage her feelings about that. Moving from home

and warmer temperatures and being faced with the UK weather may have challenged Aleni's sense of place, both culturally and geographically. The demand to study for so many hours during grey weather could be viewed as a metaphor, describing a situation that is grey and endless in contrast to more familiar, sunnier times.

Likewise, Hani also described the extent to which factors beyond her studies resulted in feelings of shock:

> Shock can come from different things so it's a shock from the environment you've been in, shock from everything very changed and everything is very new, everything is very new style and you don't know anyone, and you are the only one here.

Shock for Hani denotes an event that is both sudden and unanticipated. The repetition of the word 'everything' suggests that the changes Hani was dealing with were widespread and overwhelming. She was experiencing many important things for the first time. Hani's repeated use of the word 'very' emphasises the high degree of adjustment she has to come to terms with. She described that she did not know anyone and was alone, depicting an image of a solitary student. She was bombarded with an unfamiliar and strange environment that she had to learn to navigate and manage, without support thereby exacerbating the struggles that she was feeling.

Aleni shared the experience of everything changing and so having to negotiate the unfamiliar alone. She struggled to adjust to studying in a different country:

> Just being on your own in a foreign country is already a challenge, especially for me as I did my bachelor's in the same city where I grew up, coming here and being on my own in England where I've never been before, speaking English, everything is different. The culture, the education, everything, it's still Europe but it's still very different so yes it was a challenge and I believe that the whole first semester I was just trying to adapt to the culture and everything so now I just know what to expect, I just know why some things are different and that I cannot change some things. I guess we're just dealing with it now whereas in the beginning we're just trying to understand some things.

Aleni was aware of the effort it took to adapt to an unfamiliar environment. The issues were complex and intertwined as she described coming to terms with an unfamiliar culture while being isolated from family and friends at home. This was her first time studying outside her home city, and the transition felt like a considerable obstacle to overcome. She was expected to learn in a language that was not her own while adjusting to an environment in which everything was different, including the system and practices of education. Aleni tried to make sense of everything that was new at the start of the course. In a sense, she was trying to understand the 'rules of the game'. She had to understand a different way of life before she could begin to engage with it.

Neela shared similar views on the extent of the differences she experienced:

> Small, small things also matter like the timing of the shops, the weather, the environment, the people, everything.

In this extract, I interpreted Neela's phrase 'small, small things' as referring to activities that would normally be considered unimportant. However, by the end of the extract, it is clear that she saw all things as impacting on her experiences.

She continued to talk about the timing of the shops opening, having to shop and prepare food and then fit in time to study:

> When I came here I was like after 6 o'clock the city was feeling like dead, when I was walking out I could feel that I was the only one walking here, everything is so dark, everything is shut, here I feel like we have only 12 hours in our day, not 24 hours.

There is a sense of irony that Neela referred to these factors as small, small things when, in reality, they were experienced as substantial hurdles to struggle through. As in the previous extracts, there was a consistent image of total aloneness. Neela referred to being the 'only one', while her use of words like 'dark' and 'shut' suggests a gloomy, dismal reality. This environment appears aligned with how she felt.

Lin also emphasised isolation. The breakdown of Lin's relationship relegated independent learning to beneath the greater challenge of managing heartbreak:

> I think the most important for me is my emotion because this life I was talking to is before and now I'm trying to go back to the life before because just one month I broke up with my boyfriend so I feel like so sad because for me my feelings got hurt so I feel upset all day, I can't do anything and missed a lot of classes, I missed a lot of opportunities.

Lin described trying to endure a difficult situation by 'trying to go back to the life before' and attain a former self that had been lost. The break-up of Lin's relationship had a profound impact on her experience. She referred to this difficult time in the moving account below:

> I'm alone here and here I don't have too many friends just some Chinese people but I don't want to talk to them about this, it's very bad so I just stay alone, cry alone and sometimes I feel afraid to tell my parents because they are very far from me so they feel too much worry for me so sometimes I don't want to tell them what happened, like what did he do to me, I feel afraid to tell them so I have to take this by myself. So that time I was under too much pressure from him, from university, also I have to go to do my part time job and I have to force myself to smile in front of other people, to hide my true feeling so it's very hard for me those times but now I'm okay.

Again and again, participants emphasised images of loneliness. Lin described the lack of a support network, resulting in a lone struggle. However, by forcing

herself to smile, she was trying to portray herself as a student who was coping, keeping the true nature of her experience hidden. Lin's use of both past and present tense supports the image of a student who is struggling to cope with the demands placed on her. She started in the present, 'I'm alone here', suggesting that this was how she continued to view her situation. She then switched to the past tense to describe the break-up and her struggle to cope. She ends with 'but now I'm okay', seeming to contradict the earlier sense that this situation is current. The phrase 'okay' suggests acceptance of a less than satisfactory reality, adding to the doubt that Lin is truly coping. For me this is an example of a student who is trying to make sense of what is happening to them during their account-giving.

5.3.2 The language would be quite a big barrier

Some participants saw studying in a different language as contributing to early difficulties. Hue-Wen recounted how the language barrier could impact on students' early years of studying in a different country:

> …the way people communicate is quite different and also I would say in the first one or two years the language would be quite a big barrier for you to kind of like, you might be shy or you don't have the courage to ask people even though you have daily conversation you might be still okay about your English so I think in the first this would be a barrier or a difficulty.

Hue-Wen suggested that the language barrier could be a considerable obstacle to overcome, presenting an image of a student who is reticent or

fearful and so may feel unable to ask for and access support. Therefore, language difficulties could add to Hue-Wen's feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Studying in a different language made Aleni feel that she was starting from the beginning with her studies:

> …which made it quite difficult coming here and studying all over again in English.

Sara found dealing with different accents a challenge:

> I would say language barrier because sometimes I don't understand because of the accent.

Language challenges may impact on a student's experience as learners. However, Hani felt that language should not be a barrier if she continued to develop her English language skills:

> It could be a barrier at the beginning but to be honest it shouldn't be a barrier as long as you go through it because your language will also be developed as long as you are here speaking English with everyone.

Hani's use of 'you' rather than I appeared to suggest that she is not alone in finding it hard to begin with, but that it should become easier for everyone as time goes on.

Mia felt confident with her English skills:

> …when I read a text I understand it so I can focus on the content, I don't have to focus on the language, that saves a lot of time and effort definitely.

In these extracts, the participants demonstrated the hurdles they had to overcome as they transitioned into a new environment. These challenges were widespread and not just related to learning yet had the potential to impact on learning experiences. For some participants, adjusting to a new environment led to shock, isolation and depression. Several highlight a feeling of isolation. Participants were coming to terms with an environment in which the culture, language and weather were all completely new, whilst also studying for long hours and managing relationships. Adjusting to a new regime in a different country can fundamentally impact students' emotional state and sense of self more than university staff may realise. Postgraduate international students may view their lived experience as grey and endless while trying to understand the rules of an unfamiliar game. However, for some, these experiences do improve over time.

5.3.3. After I came here I don't know how to study by myself

All participants reflected on their previous experiences of learning. These experiences emerged as critical contributors to how participants experienced independent learning at the time of the interviews. Previous learning experiences also impacted on how participants compared themselves to other students, both international students and those from the UK.

Sara described her initial reaction:

> At first I was quite shocked at the difference between the teaching methods […] I can say that the difference between the education in Malaysia and in UK, the education in Malaysia is more spoon-fed.

I found there to be several important things of note within this extract. Sara used a metaphor of being spoon-fed. This creates an image of a transactional approach to teaching and learning. It is unclear whether Sara first heard this term in the UK or if it was already familiar to her. This metaphor could be used to describe a student who is lacking in independent learning skills. Spoon-feeding also seems to be derogatory, suggesting that the home country mode of learning was of a lesser status than becoming more independent. However, Sara's reaction suggests that she had no experience of learning independently and had no prior expectation of being asked to do so and is therefore shocked to find she was expected to study in an unfamiliar fashion.

Later in her account, Sara referred to 'asking stupid questions'. It transpired that she initially felt reluctant to ask questions and engage in classroom discussions:

> I'm Asian and I came here I was quite afraid that if you ask some question in class they'd all laugh at you.

This extract suggests that Sara feared other students' responses. Sara's emphasis of her Asian heritage and her fear of others' ridicule suggests that she felt like an outsider. Therefore, Sara's past experience of learning, and fear of appearing lesser, impacted on her engagement with classroom discussions.

Other participants also suggested that adapting to a different approach to study left them feeling like an outsider who differed from other students, particularly those from the UK. Aleni said:

> English people especially those who have studied here before like their Bachelor year kind of know what to do, what to expect, how to find something while we started from zero.

Aleni compared herself to UK students and was also left feeling lesser. English students were seen as having an advantage, leaving her feeling like she was unable to contribute anything of value to her learning. In comparison to her UK peers, Aleni felt she lacked the important skills and knowledge for successfully engaging in independent learning. Comparing self to others and feeling lesser could contribute to Aleni's sense of total aloneness mentioned previously.

Likewise, Neela also compared herself to other students and expressed the feeling that she was the only one struggling to adapt to a different approach to learning:

> When I came I was like "am I the only person not understanding anything in the class" in some modules it was like everything was just flying, I couldn't understand anything.

Neela felt as though the pace of learning moved rapidly, leaving her with a sense of falling behind her classmates. This extract created an image of words flying past, too fast to grasp. Flying could also be viewed as an impossible task, but something she was expected to undertake so early on in her course. However, this was viewed as a personal failing rather than a structural failure of the university to recognise where support was required.

Hani described uncertainty over what she was required to do:

> What do I need to do, why is everything changed, why is everything hard to read within the time? When I come here I was just thinking that still I needed to go through the same thing and everything is the same, I didn't feel in my mind or consider the differences in different institutions, different countries and different educational backgrounds. Then I just go and try to memorise everything, and I think that doesn't work.

This extract highlights the ways in which Hani's expectations did not match the reality of her lived experience. She expected that she would be able to

apply her old approaches to learning; she did not expect the changes to be so pronounced. However, applying her previous methods was unsuccessful.

Both Neela and Hani questioned what they needed to do, asking what the 'rules of the game' were. The learning skills with which they were familiar were no longer deemed applicable.

Lin described feeling unprepared for engaging in independent learning. She had no perceived concept of what she should do and felt she was left to make sense of this herself:

> After I came here I don't know how to study by myself sometimes I don't know what should I do, what should I study, I have no idea so I have to figure it out by myself.

Like Neela, Lin is conceptualising her unfamiliarity with new modes of learning and expectations as a personal failure rather than a failure on the part of the university to appropriately support her.

Aleni's account presented a sense of frustration over the process of engaging with independent learning. Aleni was also transitioning from a learning environment that was more teacher-directed, which led her to question the role of her current tutor:

> The weird thing is that here we have to do most of the work on our own while back where we came from we had the lectures; we were basically taking everything from them, so we knew what to do and when to do it.
>
> In the beginning it was frustrating for sure because you were like "we're on our own, where's the help, what do they do, what do they teach us actually?"

Aleni referred to this situation as 'weird'; her words conveyed a sense of disbelief. There was frustration directed at the tutors, whose role differed from Aleni's expectations. Her phrase 'in the beginning' drew attention to the passage of time during which this frustration was experienced. This suggests that while Aleni may be frustrated in the early stages of her course, this may subside. However, this may be because students learn to accept the situation.

Hani also referred to the passage of time:

> Something I struggled with at the beginning of this course because I had huge learning materials and huge books and articles and then I said what I need to do with this, do I need to go through it?

Hani described trying to adjust to an increased volume of course materials. Her questioning of what she needed to do with the materials suggests she felt that little direction had been provided by the course tutor. However, referring

to the beginning of her course suggests that like Aleni, over time, Hani came to terms with what was required.

Jeannet also became familiar with what was required over time:

> It's really depending what kind of stage you're in I guess, we had a lot of new PhD students starting and they just have a lot of overall questions like "where can I find the library?" and so you give them more information. [….] I think for me I don't have many questions myself, but I think I'm at a stage now where I know what I'm doing.

Jeannet described a situation in which learning was viewed as a series of stages that students go through to achieve independence. She suggested that new students are expected to require more support, but that they adapt as they become more familiar with what is required of them. Within both Jeannet and Hani's accounts, there was a sense that the skill of independent learning was intuitively acquired rather than being taught by tutors. This is reflected in Mia's account below:

> I think for me it was quite easy because I was used to independent learning but we had a lot of international students on my course, some of them were not used to it at all, they have never done it and they felt overwhelmed by it because they didn't know what was required of them.

While Mia began by describing how she felt comfortable with independent learning, as the conversation progressed, she referred to the fact that

international students might find engaging in independent learning overwhelming. At this stage, she is comparing herself to other international students but does not appear to identify herself as one:

> Personally I felt supported enough but I can imagine that especially at the beginning some guidance of what is expected of us, what should we do would be helpful yes I think it would have been more effective and less emotionally overwhelming for me if I had the guidance in the first place.

As the conversation progressed Mia expressed how she felt supported, but hypothetically relates to how guidance may have been helpful in the beginning. It is at this point that she identifies with the international student's experience and acknowledges that she did find it overwhelming in the beginning and that guidance would have been helpful.

What struck me most in the above extracts was how Mia's language moved from using downwards comparison, 'they didn't know what was required of them' to reassure herself that she was doing well. Mia then moved on to identifying with the international students and 'what was expected of us' and 'what should we do' to finally focusing on herself and admitting how difficult it was for her, using the phrase 'less emotionally overwhelming for me'. Comparing herself to students in a similar position may have been an attempt to feel better about her situation. I saw this as a further example of a student making sense of their situation during the interview.

Mia expanded on the frustration she felt due to a lack of direction from tutors:

> When I don't have a structure I find it quite difficult so I like to have some instructions from my course leader or the module leader on how to do it but if there's no structure behind it at all then I wouldn't know where to start and I might get lost. […] Overwhelmed, frustrated because of course you want to do well and you want to spend your time effectively and not just search around and try to get on the right path but you don't know if it's the right one so yes it was quite frustrating I think.

Mia's use of phrases such as 'knowing where to start', 'getting lost', 'search around' and 'on the right path' suggest that engaging with independent learning could be likened to a journey. Instructions or structure provide the 'road map' to ensure students are heading in the right direction, preventing them from losing their way. In essence, students experiencing independent learning need to know they are on the right path, as getting lost is scary and searching around feels unproductive when under pressure.

Mia had experienced some support but acknowledged that had guidance initially been provided, this would have prevented her from being overwhelmed. This suggests that even students who are familiar with the requirement to engage with independent learning would benefit from some guidance about the particular model adopted by the course.

Sara was not the only participant to use the metaphor of spoon-feeding. Neela referred to spoon-feeding as a way of justifying the limited support she received from her tutors:

> They can help us out to a certain extent, not totally, they can't spoon-feed us everything.

Therefore, while participants may initially question the lack of support they appear to receive, some felt that postgraduate study required them to engage with independent learning. Over time, participants appeared to adjust to, accept and even value a different approach to study.

Sara used cultural stereotyping to compare herself to other students. In the quote below, she referred to herself as Asian, strengthening the stereotyped view of Asian students as shy and therefore unlikely to ask questions in class:

> I would say my classmates are very you know, they can ask questions a lot, they are Nigerians [….] I think most Asians they are more shy to ask questions because you know in Asia the lecturer comes to you and in the UK you have to go to the lecturer so that's the difference, we are more spoon-fed in Asia.

Use of the words 'they can' perhaps implied that Sara literally felt like she could not ask questions. Engaging in independent learning appears to result in some students reflecting on their ethnicity, culture and personality, comparing self to others as well as the impact of these elements on their relationship with learning.

Similarly, Lin described her experiences in her home country and reflected on the differences she had witnessed in the UK:

> It's very different because in China we are forced to study. Last time I went to Doncaster on the bus I came back, I don't know what age they are, they look like High School, they finish their school 3 o'clock, it's so early, I was thinking "oh my God this is heaven for us" because in high school when I was in China we studied from in the morning like 7 o'clock until at night 11 o'clock, it's too much, it's very too much and we have to study every day even the weekend we have homework so I feel like they are so happy here.

In this extract Lin compares her negative experience of being forced to study with the 'heaven' of UK students. This may have caused Lin to reflect on her past experience of learning thereby illuminating the differences.

Lin with left with a sense of not knowing how to deal with a different approach to study; she felt as if she was left to 'figure this out' by herself. Like Sara, Lin suggested that her culture influenced this. However, she questioned whether this would be the case for all Chinese students:

> …for me Chinese student but maybe only for me or just a little part of us they don't know how to do the independent study because you know in China the teacher always tell us what we should do.

Comparing herself to other students from China, Lin reflected on how similar or dissimilar she was to her peers but once again I was struck by the language used. Lin moved from saying this is experienced by 'me' and then 'us' and then finally 'they', in essence she is pushing this experience away from herself through her language. However, Lin recognised that whilst this experience was difficult, acquiring the skills of independent learning would be of value, but again appeared to be distancing herself from this experience:

> …but I think this is a very important course for the Chinese student, they have to learn to study by themselves because nobody is going to teach you forever.

Lin also described her experience in the UK as 'free', in contrast to her previous experience of being 'forced to study':

> Here is completely free, the tutor yes they will ask you "next week you have to show me what did you do this week" but if you didn't do anything they won't say anything, they just say "okay next week you have to show me something" but in China if you didn't do anything the teacher will say like "okay do it now".

Therefore, Lin was adjusting to an environment in which the dynamics of the student-tutor relationship are altered. This led to a sense of not knowing what was expected but also newfound freedom. This developing sense of freedom will be expanded on in the superordinate theme 'thriving not surviving'.

Neela also described adjusting to a different education system:

> …actually to be honest the education system is totally different from India in the UK, here we are asked to do more essays, reports and assignments where you need to read the journal article by ourselves, back in India we were given the information on the subject, we used to have particular books to follow so it was very easy to be honest. Here there is no particular book, you have to find your own resources, you have to refer to many books, many different authors, many different articles so you can find those critical arguments.

Neela reflected that her previous experience of learning was carried out without much effort, presenting few difficulties. There was an element of confidence and certainty used to describe her previous approach. However, as she talked about her current experience, there seemed to be a sense of ambiguity, along with an emphasis that the volume of the work has also increased. This can lead to some participants feeling more tested or challenged.

In contrast, Hani focused on how her previous experience of learning was frustrating due to her dependency on the teacher:

> …what you need to provide answer in that particular setting is a structure of answer, something I struggled with back when I was in my undergrad because some tutors want you to answer the same way that they give you the information and if you change one word you didn't pass and you didn't get the right answer and it was very frustrating.

Hani's previous experience of responding to questions using rote or memorised answers created frustration. However, she has been presented with an opportunity to become more autonomous and creative in her learning.

PhD students Jeannet, Hue-Wen and Khalid also recalled how their previous experiences had impacted on their current experiences of independent learning. Transitioning from master's to PhD appeared to have a less profound impact than transitioning from undergraduate to master's.

Jeannet described how her engagement with independent learning was similar at master's and PhD level:

> Yes, I guess I would say there's not a big difference between the last year of my master's and here, maybe there was a little bit more guidance in my master's.

The final year of Jeannet master's undertaken in her home country prepared her to undertake the independent learning required for her PhD. Khalid also felt that his experience back home was similar to what was expected of him now:

> Finish my master's degree back home in Iraq, it looks similar independence with the style of study here.

Hue-Wen recalled her past experience of learning:

> **…**in Taiwan like other Asian countries then performance is really important […] I would say before university it's all teacher-led because there's some basic skill or knowledge you need to learn so it's more like you remember it and the teacher will examine it. By university it's both way.

Hue-Wen suggested that by the time she entered university, she was developing independent learning skills, although there were still times when learning was more tutor-directed. However, like previous students, Hue-Wen also found that cultural differences impacted on her experience:

> …because you are studying in a different country, the way you study, and the way people communicate is quite different.

In many of these accounts, past experiences of independent learning led to participants feeling lesser than their peers. Participants were expected to study in an unfamiliar manner, learning the rules of a new game. A lack of guidance resulted in frustration, self-doubt and annoyance at the tutors. Even if participants were familiar with the requirement to engage with independent learning, early guidance would have alleviated some anxieties or frustrations. However, independent learning can also be viewed as a liberating experience. Acquiring this sense of freedom will be expanded on in the superordinate theme 'thriving not surviving'.

5.3.4 You're not fighting alone physically but you are fighting alone mentally

Hue-Wen and Jeannet recounted the ways in which the pressure of undertaking a PhD impacted their mental wellbeing. In the extract below, Jeannet described how the pressure to succeed resulted in long working hours and a cycle that was difficult to break:

> Sometimes I guess you push yourself too far, if I look in the office especially the third years I know there's an article about mental health and PhDs and that the combination is not so good, I can definitely see it in our office. A lot of people especially not talking anymore, one of them had to take a week off because she couldn't cope anymore, you see that there is too much pressure sometimes but because everyone is like most of the third years in our office they are working seven days a week, 12 hours a day but because everyone is doing that you think that's kind of normal, I guess that's not always good.
>
> *Q: So that's a bit self-perpetuating then?*
>
> Yes it's kind of interesting because in one way you should not do that because I've seen what happens you should definitely stick to your hobbies and stuff like that but in another way you do feel the pressure "I need to finish this" also if you don't finish it then you won't get money anymore at some point so it's very useful to finish anyway so I guess there's a lot of double things there. We also said because everyone is working so many hours the supervisors expect more and more from every person because they don't see how many hours go in and therefore they know that person could do that work in those few weeks so you should be able to do that work in those few weeks and therefore everyone needs to work more and more but I guess that's not about independent learning it's more about

> peer pressure […] I think it's an issue as well but since everyone just keeps doing it it's really hard to break that cycle.

Jeannet described a situation in which the pressure to succeed by engaging in independent learning was influenced by a variety of factors. Her use of 'double things' seemed to suggest a series of contradictions and tensions. Normalising long working hours adds to the pressure, especially in an environment in which all students succumb to this working pattern. Jeannet also felt financial pressure, perceiving that working long hours was driven by the need to complete the thesis within the time allotted by her funders. She felt that students' perceptions of supervisor expectations contributed to these long working hours and therefore increased the pressure; students were working long hours to fulfil their supervisors' demands. Comparisons were made with the time taken by others to complete activities, thus emphasising that other students required less time to meet deadlines. However, Jeannet concluded that this was perpetuated by peer pressure. Throughout this extract, Jeannet repeatedly concluded that students themselves drive the long hours. This appeared to be the culture within this group of students and may well be defined by an image of what a 'good' PhD student should do. Therefore, independent learning appears to be experienced as something that is boundless and goes unchecked, and that students cannot work out for themselves where it should begin and end.

Hue-Wen also described how undertaking a PhD impacted her mental wellbeing. However, she felt that her PhD was, in part, a supportive experience which she shared with other students:

> …it's more mental support, and when you struggle feeling "I can't really finish this paragraph, it's already taken two days, why?" and you will see some people next to you or in the same office they're also experiencing the same stage, you feel like you're not struggling yourself and we just encourage each other kind of supporting even though we have a different topic […] so even though you're working during the weekend they are there, they also work during the weekend so you're not fighting alone physically but you are fighting alone mentally about your PhD.

What I found most striking in Hue-Wen's account was her use of the word 'fighting'. Describing her experience of 'fighting alone' suggests that independent learning can be conceptualised as engaging in a battle or a conflict. Some of this battle is experienced internally while some is fought with others. The physical presence of other students provides a level of support. Peer support will be discussed in more depth in the superordinate theme 'steering the course'.

5.4 Superordinate theme summary

In this superordinate theme, I have highlighted that independent learning is experienced as a struggle, a fight to be overcome, something without boundaries. It is slippery and unknown until it is mastered, and how to go about it is not always effectively expressed to postgraduate international

students. Students must initially try to understand the rules of the game, leading to frustration, self-doubt, feelings of being lesser and annoyance with tutors. Independent learning can result in students spending long hours studying and can impact their work-life balance and mental wellbeing. However, independent learning can also be viewed as liberating; an investment for the future when others are not there to teach you as well as a route to autonomy and creativity in learning.

5.5 Superordinate theme: steering the course

In steering the course, I consider data relating to the themes of:

- **Defining and demonstrating independence:** *I have to find my own way through*
- **Role of feedback:** *I was totally relying on that feedback*
- **Relationship with supervisor/tutor:** *Please, just give me the answer!*
- **Peer support as motivation:** *it's a motivation to know that your colleagues are working with you*

Within the superordinate theme of 'steering the course', I collate the factors that helped or hindered engagement with independent learning. I also discuss how participants experienced independent learning as well as the activities they considered demonstrated independence. Overall, participants tended to describe independent learning as a solitary activity. Several participants discussed the role and importance of feedback – both formal and informal – in supporting them to make sense of how they should develop as independent learners. However, postgraduate international students'

relationships with tutors and peers were also beneficial. There appeared to be a sense of community among the students which positively influenced motivation and self-belief. As the interviews progressed, I felt strongly this notion of students experiencing independent study as a journey in which they encountered obstacles. They were supported in navigating some of these obstacles, whilst others were hidden, waiting to derail the student from their path.

5.5.1 I have to find my own way through

Many participants initially described independent learning as a solitary activity. For instance, Sara's repeated use of 'by yourself' created an image of independent learning as solitary:

> For me independent learning is that you study by yourself and you try and understand everything by yourself…

In this extract, it appeared that Sara was not seeking support or help from others as she emphasised the self in her learning endeavours. She believed that independent learning required her to do 'everything' by herself, this would be a considerable amount of work. There was a sense that independent learning was something to be mastered; all you can do is try.

Neela also highlighted the individual aspect of independent learning as fundamental:

> You basically have to do your own individual learning.

Mia's repeated use of the words 'on my own', below, supported this image of independent learning as only being conceived of as a solitary activity:

> I would associate with it is any learning that's outside of the classroom that I do independently on my own […] it's more like something that I do on my own for myself.

As well as suggesting that independent learning is a solitary activity, there was an assumption that this occurs outside of the classroom, suggesting that students do not engage with independent learning within a classroom setting. Mia's use of the word 'myself' is interesting. Ownership over her learning, Mia perceives independent learning as being in her own interests; something she does by herself but also for herself.

Khalid seemed to go further. As well as its individual nature, he stated that the level of responsibility required for engaging with independent learning added to the pressure for the student. This suggests that for Khalid independent learning is a stressful activity. He experiences independent learning as a weight he has to shoulder alone, a pressure that bears down on him:

> First of all like independent I feel like it's so […] first it put the pressure on the person because it puts all the responsibility on the person.

Hani also highlighted that independent learning requires students to assume responsibility for that learning:

> …it's your responsibility to go through it and identify what you need to cover or not […] able to identify what your learning needs are rather than just being within the boundary of tutors or lecturers…

So, for Hani, independent learning was more than just studying by herself; it was a complex process of activities. It is a considerable requirement for students who have previously experienced a tutor-led approach to learning to have the confidence to identify their learning needs without a tutor. However, breaking away from the 'boundaries' of Hani's tutor seems to provide her with a newfound sense of freedom and empowerment.

Lin embraced and celebrated the autonomy of the individual aspect of learning but, like Hani, suggested that as well as knowing how to learn, students should come to decide for themselves what they need to learn:

> Study by yourself and you have to know what should you do and it's not other people telling you, you have to know by yourself, that's independent.

Jeannet also referred to this notion of knowing what needed to be learnt:

> I guess it would be learning in which the biggest part comes from yourself so you don't have an actual lecturer, an actual person to guide you through, you guide yourself and

> you do that by getting information from other people, from books but you are the one who is collecting the information and you don't have a person who tells you this is what you need to learn […] I have to find my way through.

This extract suggests three critical elements of independent learning. Firstly, as in previous extracts, independent learning was defined as a solitary activity. Secondly, there was a sense that while the student was undertaking this activity, guidance from tutors was not expected; instead, the student should guide themselves, finding their 'own way through' a possibly unfamiliar approach to learning. Jeannet created an image of a student undertaking a journey and finding their way to the final destination. Thirdly, Jeannet described some of the activities she undertook along the way. People and books could be viewed as map or reference points to help students reach their final destination. In comparison to Khalid, Jeannet's journey seems a gentler process, in which she guided herself through the route. Khalid's 'pressure' journey felt more like one he did not want to take.

Other participants also described activities they engaged with as a way of defining and demonstrating independent learning. In the extract below, Aleni alluded to the volume of work required to engage with independent learning:

> I would say you have to go through a lot of reading, put down many different opinions, negatives, positives and analyse basically different people's opinions and then make it your own kind of. You're given a report subject and then you have to gather material and

> then put down what you believe but based on what other people said before, it's a lot of studying.

Aleni's repeated use of the phrases 'a lot' and 'many' created a sense that this volume of work had increased from her previous experience and may be an unexpected event for her. Once again, independent learning was experienced as boundless, a journey without an end, meaning it was not possible to work out how many miles to cover in a day. Aleni described a process of demonstrating independence in her learning and some of the activities required to demonstrate this independence.

Reading as an activity featured in many accounts as a way of demonstrating independent learning. For Mia reading was the major component of independent learning:

> Reading mostly I think, doing research maybe, searching for literature on my own, maybe revising what happened during the class, trying to make sense of it and putting it together so I would make sense of it, things like that.

Mia's use of 'I think' and 'maybe' suggest that she may find it difficult to clearly define activities that constitute independent learning, again reinforcing the image of independent learning as something nebulous and difficult to grasp. The activities Mia described seem to be carried out individually. However, Hue-Wen suggested that networking with others is also an element of independent learning:

> …you always get more information when you talk to people even though you try searching on the internet but it's always easier if you talk to people because you don't know. When I talk to you, you might know someone or someone, someone linked to the topic I'm talking about, you have that information so I think this chance or the link is quite invisible but it's there, you can't be certain every time you have it but as long as you expand your network or you talk to people more you are increasing the possibility to respond to the information or the chance you needed or you are looking for.

For Hue-Wen, independent learning extends beyond the individual act of searching for information to recognising that others are often a wealth of knowledge.

These extracts suggest that early experiences position independent learning as an activity that is carried out in isolation. Participants tended to conceive of independent learning as an activity they carried out by themselves with little or no guidance from others. Taking responsibility for their learning lead some of them to experience the pressure of responsibility (Khalid), although others experienced a newfound sense of freedom (Hani). Activities that demonstrate independence were at times difficult for the participants to define but tended to include solitary pursuits such as reading and searching for information. However, independent learning can also include the support of others, in particular peers. This will be expanded on later in the chapter.

5.5.2 I was totally relying on that feedback

Participants including Mia discussed how feedback supported their independent learning:

> So, I find feedback quite important because it helps me to improve and it helps me to show where I have to do more independent learning again giving me a direction on what I should focus on, things like that.

Feedback helped Mia develop as an independent learner. Referring to feedback as 'quite important' suggests that while influential, it may not have been the most crucial factor. This is in contrast to Neela's view:

> I think it (feedback) plays a major role because especially for the international students, every country has got their own education system, so everybody is coming from a different background. For me when I came here I was very lost at first and then later on when I figured it out "okay we're going to submit the assignments and then we'll get the feedback" […] I was totally relying on that feedback because using that feedback I was planning to improve my assignment for the second semester and for the dissertation and everything but now since I didn't get that feedback properly I want to know how I can improve it which I didn't get in the feedback. So, I think feedback plays a very big role for the international students to improve their learning for the next semester.

Neela perceived feedback as valuable because it helped her to adjust to an unfamiliar education system. Feedback became the critical guide through the journey, helping students know what to look out for and how to avoid hazards

on the next stage of the journey. It also supported Neela's understanding of the 'rules of the game'. However, the latter part of the extract suggests that, for Neela, some feedback did not have the level of detail she required to improve her future work. Therefore, the level of feedback given can be critical. Participants described different experiences. Sara said:

> …it's very detailed and it's on Blackboard and there's a button there and my tutor he just sends a list of details of what I've done good, what I could improve, the way to improve and he also directs me to the links, the books to improve the area where I'm weaker, referencing and things like that.

Sara's experience of receiving feedback was positive. However, this contrasted with Aleni's experience:

> There is a difference in the way every lecturer gives feedback because some of the lecturers explain it properly like what they actually wanted in that paragraph or from that assignment but then there are some lecturers who will be very precise, like only one word, good, bad, reference missing, that kind of thing which actually didn't help me, help us because I was trying to think if it was good still why did I get the lowest mark, why did I get less mark, what additional things do I need to add so this kind of feedback you know.

Aleni described an inconsistent approach to how feedback is given and therefore, a difference in the quality of the journey guides. Some guides helped support her to develop as an independent learner while others did not. Both Sara and Aleni referred to knowing or wanting to know how they could

improve. This created an image of a student who was striving to overcome barriers and progress with their learning. This was evident in Neela's extract below, where she described trying to overcome the challenge of adapting to a different approach to learning:

> I think more elaborate feedback would help the students more, if you know because I have interacted with those module leaders and told them what I'm facing, what were my issues. After getting the feedback I was like I don't know how I will use this feedback, "good, very good, reference" how will I use this kind of feedback because I told them I don't know how to write academically, I don't know how to think critically, maybe my thinking critically is different to how they approach the criticality thing so if they will make it more clear I think I will get a better understanding of how to write and how to attempt my assignments.

Neela seemed to view her performance from a personal perspective, highlighting the deficits in her abilities to write critically or academically. However, while she may feel challenged by these activities, she demonstrated agency by raising her concerns with her tutors.

The need to raise awareness of the importance of feedback was also discussed by Aleni:

> …there are still things that we feel we need more help with like more direction towards assignments, more feedback, better feedback and just for our professors to know that

> nothing is obvious, we have not done this before so some things need to be clear and understood from the beginning like step by step.

Successful engagement in independent learning requires postgraduate international students to understand what is expected of them. It also requires tutors to have an understanding of students' backgrounds and their previous learning experiences, so that they can act most effectively as guides.

5.5.3 Please just give me the answer!

Participants described how their relationships with tutors and supervisors influenced their engagement with independent learning. Availability of supervisors was important for participants who were undertaking a PhD.

> First one which is very important, being available. They have their offices and you can find them, it's very important cos I feel the pain of some friend who can't see their supervisor based on their situation. So, for me they always available during the week. I can call them by phone or by email. So being available one of the main important part.

Supervisor support was important for Khalid. His use of the words 'first one' suggested that availability is paramount, and supervisors are accessible. Feeling the pain of a friend's negative experience suggests that not all students have the same experience and that a negative supervisor relationship can elicit an unpleasant sensation.

Hue-Wen also recounted how fortunate she was to have a supportive team of supervisors:

> I'm quite lucky, I don't know about other people but in my case I think I'm quite lucky because I have a team of four people and they are all in different stages as a researcher.

While Hue-Wen is unable to comment on other students' experiences in this extract, her reference to luck suggests that her experience is by chance and unexpected. The following extract provides further support of this, as she also went on to suggest that other students' experiences may vary:

> I remember I was really surprised about my DOS (director of studies), he always reply to your email within five minutes even though he just replies to you saying "I need to have a think" or "I'm looking for something" so it's really good about calming yourself down because I think for a lot of PhD students one of the difficulty is your supervisor doesn't reply to your email or they take a long time to reply to your email or give you comments. I think in my case I'm quite lucky.

Receiving a prompt response from a supervisor appears to calm anxiety more than receiving an answer to a question. Hue-Wen recognised that independent learning is not about receiving the answers; supervisors are there to guide and direct. However there does appear to be contradictions in Hue-Wen's accounts. There is quite an emotional difference between the quotes we have seen from Hue-Wen so far. In previous narratives she talked about feeling supported and calm, whereas in the below quote, she sounds

panicked and pleading for more support. Words such as 'desire' and 'desperate' add to the notion that independent learning for Hue-Wen is experienced as a highly emotional journey:

> Even though they are really good and always respond to your email it doesn't mean they always give you answers, I can see the point they're trying to lead you to the ways because this is the process you need to go through to learn by yourself but when you're asking questions or sending emails out you are kind of… your desire or desperate to know what is right and what is wrong but there's no certain things called right and wrong, especially when you're doing a PhD so it's quite like you are "please just give me the answer" and they say no, they're using another way to give you the answer.

Khalid shared this experience:

> The supervisor ask you the student to figure it out by reading.

Sara described her tutors as 'very kind'. This felt in contrast to Hue-Wen's 'please just give me the answer':

> …all my tutors they are very kind, if you email them they will answer your question and if they can't they will send you links to direct you to find your own resources.

For Sara, being kind meant answering questions and directing to resources. However, considering Sara's past experience of learning in her home country, being kind may also mean an environment where she does not fear ridicule.

Hani recounted how valuable it was for her for tutors to have an awareness of the needs of international students:

> ...the guidance you will get from the tutor, how he's able to understand that you're an international student and for that reason you are not quite used to this way of learning.

Hani suggested that her needs as an international student differ to those of UK students. Being supported by a tutor who is aware of and appreciates the differences in students' backgrounds, and who can comprehend this as a basis for their current methods of learning may be vital to ensuring that students receive the right advice and direction to aid their progress through the course.

5.5.4 It's a motivation to know that your colleagues are working with you

The value given to peer support by participants revealed a surprising characteristic of independent learning, in that it was often experienced as a collective, shared activity. For Sara, independent learning was sometimes something that required support from others; if so, classmates were viewed as the first point of contact for help:

> I normally try to learn it myself but if I can't I will ask my classmates.

Mia also held this view:

…with other classmates where you do it, so maybe it's not instructed by your lecturer but you do it with your classmates together.

Mia described how independent learning could be understood as a relational practice. Working together provided support from peers and helped to foster a sense of community. Many participants stated that peers provided emotional support and positively influenced their experience of engaging with independent learning. This is evident in Neela's account below:

…if someone else is also sitting and doing the same work just in the other room or something but you don't know that they are doing the same thing so if you know that there are more people apart from you in the same situation who are struggling to finish their assignment or who are panicking or they are stuck in the same kind of situation I think it gives you a bit of relaxation, for me it does.

It appears that Neela's strength to continue her learning was influenced by the physical closeness of other students. Assuming that other students around her were also experiencing fear and anxiety as they studied helped to reduce her tension. The thought of other students struggling with their learning provided Neela with the reassurance and motivation to continue, as evidenced below:

…that's what I meant when I said I feel better when I see my fellow student dealing with the same problem because then I feel like "okay I'm not the only one" and you can praise yourself and motivate yourself more, okay you're not the only one, it's not an exception,

> it's not an extraordinary situation that you're stuck in, you can get through it because if others are also dealing with the same thing it's a normal situation, it's not a very big problem that you can't solve […] I think feeling comfortable and feeling a little bit safe can help you out in this kind of situation.

Like Mia, Neela emphasised the importance of relationships. There was a sense that the students were all in it together, creating their own 'safe' community of learners. However, this implied that there were times when the students did not feel 'safe', suggesting that an element of feeling vulnerable or exposed as a learner remained. In the latter part of the extract Neela uses 'you' rather than I. This may be an attempt to unite herself with other students, so when she says 'you' she means 'us all'.

Thinking that other students may also be experiencing difficulties led Neela to feel less different from her peers. In the previous superordinate theme of feeling the struggle, participants often felt lesser as they struggled to adapt to a different culture and unfamiliar approach to learning. However, Neela described a situation in which drawing on a community of other students helped normalise her experience. Neela then felt able to identify with her peers and move from feeling lesser to feeling equal.

Aleni focused on how physical proximity to other students positively impacted her motivation. Independent learning was experienced as more manageable when in proximity to others:

> It's a motivation to know that your colleagues are working with you at 3am in the morning, you're not alone in the library, it's okay to be there I think it's quite important actually because being on your own, not only living on your own but also studying 24/7 on your own without any help at all it's very difficult. We do study on our own but sometimes we might sit together still on our own study and we ask questions and try to solve things together so it does help.

As with previous extracts, Aleni's repeated use of 'on your own' and 'it's all very difficult' signifies the loneliness and struggles that students experience. Aleni's reference to the specific time of 3am is an extreme time for studying, implying a constant effort being put into her learning. Both 3am and 24/7 indicate the boundless nature of independent learning. However, Aleni was working together with her peers. Her phrase 'it's ok to be there' appeared to validate and normalise an experience that had no limits.

Valuing the support of a community of students is also evident in Jeannet's account:

> …we call it PhD assemble, one person stands up and crosses their arms in a room that means everyone has to be silent to listen to that person so if they have literally overall, overall question that's what we do PhD assemble and everyone looks up what are we doing.

This idea of PhD assemble was developed from the movie The Avengers, in which a group of extraordinary individuals protect the earth from threat. In

essence, the students are creating a group of 'superheroes'. PhD assemble are a group of extraordinary individuals working together as a team and supporting each other from a strong and major threat that is independent learning.

Hue-Wen described how the proximity of other PhD students supported the development of ideas. Like Sara and Jeannet, she viewed other students as the first point of contact, before tutors or supervisors:

> I think during the PhD it was really good that we are all… all the PhD students based we are all in (building) so you are doing different projects but you are in a similar discipline therefore you can talk to people about "that's my question, what do you think or what direction" we can talk maybe further before you talk to the expertise which is your supervisor.

Other PhD students were vital in supporting Hue-Wen's learning:

> …anytime I need help I've got some quite good friends who are also peers, they are PhDs, they are willing to help me if I face any challenge, they want to spend time, we just encourage each other kind of supporting even though we have a different topic. I think in this way they are more like a mentor supporter or a mentor, we go through the same journey.

What struck me most about these extracts is how invested the students were in supporting each other. They came together in a community to overcome

the shared foe of independent learning. Hue-Wen's description of her peers as 'willing to help' and 'want[ing] to spend time' created an image of students giving something of themselves to support each other's learning.

Participants placed a high value on the support of their peers in developing their learning. This support provided a vehicle through which students could move from feeling lesser than their peers to feeling equal. Students become invested in each other's learning as they create a community of learners.

5.6 Superordinate theme summary

In these narratives once again, independent learning can be seen as boundless and hard to define; a solitary activity undertaken by oneself for oneself, a weight that must be shouldered alone. For some, independent learning was experienced as an emotional journey that has no end, and where feedback and support from tutors becomes the critical guide. Others saw independent learning as a foe that had to be fought; however, this became achievable with the support of peers.

5.7 Superordinate theme: thriving not surviving

In thriving not surviving, I consider the data relating to the themes of:

- **Defining success:** *I think the independent study is one of the most important things to be successful for me now*
- **Freedom:** *it gives you the freedom to be creative, to go your own path*

In this theme, I interrogate how participants conceptualise and depict successful independent learning. These successes were often experienced as hard-won. Participants define and share accounts of successes which for them include presenting at conferences, writing papers for publication, developing life skills and improving employability. They give accounts of how independent learning has created a sense of freedom and a chance to be creative in many aspects of learning. Acquiring agency, feeling empowered and setting one's course all become measures of success as a learner and a person.

5.7.1 I think the independent study is one of the most important things to be successful for me now

Students described some of the successes they gained through engaging with independent learning. Lin addressed the value of independent learning and the influence this had on her success:

> I think the independent study is one of the most important things to be successful for me now.

The words 'most important' created an image of Lin's readiness to engage in something of which she previously had no experience.

Some participants expressed their success with independent learning by reflecting on their developing confidence. In this extract, Mia appeared to be trying to make sense of her experience:

> …now that I've gone through it maybe it made me more confident now.

She reflected on her experiences and suggested that the process of engaging with independent learning made her more self-assured. However, her use of 'maybe' suggested that some residual doubt may still remain.

Hani also considered the impact her progress through her course had on her independent learning skills:

> …because I got through it. As long as I was moving up through the course I became more independent and more able to structure everything without going back and ask the tutor for support or for help.

The value of independent learning gave Hani the confidence to be an autonomous student who could trust her judgement and skills when navigating the methods and practices of her course.

Conversely, Hue-Wen referred to the predicament of being a PhD student. She needed to be self-assured to complete the course, as well as being ready to change direction or adapt to different circumstances. However, this journey could be fraught with apprehension about her skills:

> …you need to be flexible about the path you're going to go through and the other would be confident because when you are writing your thesis we all agree it's a self-doubt journey.

A 'self-doubt journey' is a striking turn of phrase. In addition, her use of 'we all agree' suggested that Hue-Wen is assuming that all PhD students lack self confidence in their abilities.

Developing confidence or seeking less help addressed participants' previous image of students who appeared lesser than their peers. This is evident in Aleni's extract below:

> I think we have come a long way until now and if you compare our assignments from international students and maybe English students there might not be a very big difference.

Aleni felt that the journey from where she started independent learning to where she was now was a considerable distance. Aleni's independent learning journey allowed her to reach a point where she felt more equal to her peers.

Hani also compared the starting point of her independent learning journey to where she was now:

> I remember at the beginning reading two articles took the whole day and I didn't

> understand anything about them but now I can read ten articles a day and then go and summarise everything about them and I'm able to just look and carry on my own life.

This extract demonstrates how successful Hani has become in developing her independent learning skills. This is measured in the volume of work Hani now felt able to undertake and master whilst maintaining a study-life balance; for Hani independent learning had become bounded. As with previous extracts, this supports the image of an international student who was thriving within their learning environment.

In these extracts, the journey metaphor continued. Some participants advanced through this journey, arriving successfully at their destination. They gained some new skills and improved other skills along the way. These extracts show that the journey of engaging with independent learning moved some students from a position of feeling lesser than their peers to feeling equal. However, for others, this journey highlighted the continued need to grow confidence in their abilities.

Some students discussed developing life skills and improving employability as positive outcomes of engaging with independent learning. Neela described developing a range of life skills rather than just academic skills:

> Learning life skills is also one kind of independent learning because when you're coming totally out of your country you learn a lot of things, how to talk to people, how to interact

with new people, how to make friends, how to manage your time with your academics and your own lifestyle.

The upheaval of transitioning to an entirely different way of life means these life skills appear to take on the same level of importance as academic skills. They appear to support adjustment into an unfamiliar country as well as social development for international students.

Lin also saw managing time and lifestyle as critical to advancing her prospects:

…so sometimes I went to museum, I went to gallery, I went to take part in some exhibitions even the tickets are expensive I don't care because I study this so I stay here, I want to take those experiences to improve my CV to make myself in the future more competitive.

Q: So, you see all those activities outside of the classroom as being your efforts towards independent learning?

A: Yes

Q: Because you think that they have an impact on you as an individual and your studies?

A: Yes, they teach me lots of things, how to organise your time, how to arrange your time. […] After I came here, after I became busy I learned how to organise my life, how to

> organise my time. I've got lots of things to do, I study, I also have part-time jobs outside, and I also work in the university the ISE (international student experience) club […] I want to have more work experience, I want to try new things.

Lin thought of independent learning as extending beyond her course, seeing her multiple roles and new opportunities as increasing her chances of success in the future world of employment.

Other participants also discussed improving their employability prospects. Aleni initially struggled to adjust to a different education system. However, she perceived increased employment prospects within her chosen fields as a reward for those struggles:

> I think that's the main reason also why most of us study here because it's easier to find a job afterwards especially in our field.

Jeannet also considered the role that independent learning skills would have on her future career:

> …useful if you want to go further into work, academia whatever, you don't need someone at some point to guide you anymore so to make you ready for the work life.

Therefore, independent learning could be conceptualised as extending far beyond the boundaries of students' courses, and so was appreciated as a lifelong skill.

Khalid considered publications and conference presentations as illustrating his success. He described these achievements as positive:

> Becomes positive when you achieve something […] when I finish first year I was asked to publish a paper. So, the first year I went to a conference […] I present a poster and I get 3rd prize which was good achievement. This work I presented in Italy last May and when I came back from Italy there was a symposium and my talk won, was very good achievement for me and my research.

These achievements were viewed as markers of success within Khalid's development as an academic, demonstrating both personal and professional recognition. This sense of achievement makes independent learning a positive experience.

Participants shared specific achievements that engaging in independent learning had yielded. Independent learning may be a provider of success in different forms, from intangible elements such as confidence and empowerment to the more tangible elements of jobs and prizes.

5.7.2 It gives you the freedom to be creative, to go your own path

Some participants saw the positive essence of independent learning as a route to 'freedom' and 'creativity' and discussed the impact that these factors had on their experience.

Sara acquired a sense of freedom in her learning, in contrast to where she started. She came from a learning background that was predominately teacher-led, where creativity was most likely not encouraged. She now said:

> Freedom, I can do my own research.

The word 'freedom' created an image of Sara breaking free of the barriers or restraints of a previous experience. 'I can' depicts a learner who was taking back control, becoming empowered and demonstrating agency. There was a sense that perhaps for the first time, Sara was directing a course of studies that was not dictated by others. Khalid described a similar experience of self-determination, which he related to his past situation:

> The freedom I get, the freedom with my research I think is more open than back home.

Like Sara, Khalid described a sense of breaking free of previous restrictions. This was evident in his use of the word 'open', suggesting his previous experience was closed, not accepting of new ideas. I interpreted this to mean that, for Khalid, independent learning resulted in the unrestricted power to think, act or argue without constraint and, therefore, being able to set the direction of his studies.

Independent learning also allowed Mia to explore other ways of learning:

> …it gives you the freedom to be creative, to go your own path.

Mia's use of the word 'creative' is suggestive of a student who is prepared to take risks, forge original ideas, try out new approaches and extend beyond what is expected of them. Hani supported this image of a student who was becoming more adventurous with their learning in her quote, below:

> Freedom and creativity because you will have your own way to discuss something or to present something rather than sticking on one particular format.

For Hani, independent learning became a tool of liberation and empowerment.

Neela also talked about the freedom she was developing within her learning:

> Here in the assignments we can choose our own topic and then we can create our own arguments, we can question others' arguments and it's just how we think, we can put our thoughts in it. Back in India we couldn't do that, I think that's one good thing because here we can speak our mind.

What struck me most about Neela's and Hani's extracts was that those students were not previously encouraged to express their views. Therefore, independent learning became a tool of critical thinking, development of the self and liberation. Hani's extract suggests that as well as developing freedom of thought, participants might also develop freedom of style and presentation with regards to their learning. They could now enjoy the freedom to argue and debate, becoming empowered to be independent in their actions or opinions.

These extracts show that independent learning, with its characteristics of freedom of thought and control over learning, is experienced as a maker of agentic, empowered and creative producer of knowledge. By engaging with independent learning, the participants challenged the boundaries of their past expectations, taking risks and exploring new ways of learning.

5.8 Superordinate theme summary

In this theme, I have presented a picture of students who are becoming empowered and taking control of their learning. Participants were explicit in how they described their successes, although how they experienced success varied. The journey metaphor continued, with most participants sharing new skills they had picked up along the way. For some, independent learning was now experienced as bounded.

5.9 My story with independent learning

The double hermeneutic approach within IPA has led me to reflect on my process of interpretation, in that my experience of engaging in independent learning will in turn influence my interpretations of the participants' experiences of independent learning. This therefore led me to consider my own experiences of independent learning, thereby adding a tenth story. As a part-time EdD student I have reflected on why I have been drawn to certain aspects of the participants accounts and wish to make these clear.

I grew up the youngest of six children to working class parents in a mining village. Father worked at the coal mine and mother worked evenings as a

barmaid. Education was valued but not wholly important for a girl who after leaving school was expected to find work in a sewing factory, marry and then have children. I had three older brothers, one joined the army and two found work at the local coal mine. My two sisters both found work in a sewing factory, married and had children. I achieved many firsts within my family, the first degree, the first masters and now the first doctorate. However, academic achievement has not been an easy journey. No one in my family had ever considered the option of undertaking 'A' levels and then moving onto university. So, when I decided that this was my path it was met with resistance from my parents, resulting in many heated arguments. At school I was a capable, hard-working student, and in the highest achieving groups for most subjects but I vividly recall the event when my aspirations of becoming a veterinarian were dashed. During a careers advice session prior to selecting subjects for my final two years a teacher announced I would never be a veterinarian as I was not the top of the class in all my subjects. So, the last few years at school I lost my motivation to succeed, but despite this still achieved nine O' levels. Without much enthusiasm I did progress to college to study 'A' levels, but this was more motivated by my attempt to keep out of the sewing factory rather than aspirations of academic or career success.

After leaving college I changed my mind regarding university and moved to London with friends to find work, securing my first position with the Ministry of Defence. I eventually found my way back to learning five years later when I decided to embark on a career in nursing. Listening to the participants

accounts, there were many aspects that would resonate with my own personal learning journey.

All of my HE experiences have been as a part-time student while undertaking full-time work. I was excited, but apprehensive to be accepted onto the EdD. I recall receiving a paper to read before the first group session, and so began the first of many episodes of anxiety and self-doubt. In her account Hani spoke about feeling completely overwhelmed by not knowing what to do with all the materials she was presented with, this brought back similar feelings for me. The paper by Francis Bacon was not an easy read. We were told that we would have a discussion about the paper but without any specific guidance on what we would be required to focus on. In an attempt to be a 'good student' I tried to read the entire paper and make notes, so I had a good understanding of the main aspects. I recall feeling totally out of my depth reading one paper. This experience was brought back to me when Lin described how she felt unprepared for what was required, when Neela conceptualised her experience as a personal failing and Hani questioned why everything was so hard to read.

I always looked forward to the scheduled study weekends as this provided an opportunity to meet with other cohort members, but there was also an undercurrent of anxiety. Coming to terms with new concepts, feeling baffled at group activities and similar to Neela feeling like I was the 'only person not understanding anything in class'. Like Sara this resulted in a fear of 'asking stupid questions'. Mia talked about her need to know where to start, the fear

of getting lost and the unproductive act of 'searching around' for information. These were all memories and experiences that I vividly recalled as being part of my EdD journey.

Several of the participants within this study talked about feeling like an outsider. As previously mentioned all my HE experiences have been as a part-time student and very much grounded in my work of nursing and education. Never viewing myself as a 'proper' student left me feeling somewhat lesser (and if I'm totally honest slightly envious) to students who may have taken a more 'traditional' full-time approach. Therefore, I feel this has led me to highlight the experiences of individuals that may not fit the perception of a 'traditional' HE student.

Many of the participants described independent learning as a solitary activity. During my undergraduate and master's degree if I had been asked the same question I would also have defined it in this way. This may have been a symptom of being a part-time student and therefore contact with other students was limited. Studying alongside the demands of full-time work did not facilitate the formation of a community of learners.

Throughout my studies I have experienced varied relationships with tutors. The participants within this study described the times when tutors have either helped or hindered their learning. Neela recounted how unhelpful feedback had been for her in terms of progressing her learning. This brought forth a memory of when I was undertaking my dissertation for my undergraduate

degree. The stress and anxiety felt due to numerous unanswered telephone calls and emails seeking support and feedback still remains with me. A similar situation was experienced during my master's degree. However, like Khalid and Hue-Wen I have been 'lucky' with my EdD supervision team and received the support that I have needed to keep me progressing with my studies.

The support and motivation gained through working alongside other students was evident in most of the participants' accounts. For me, during the EdD there was a strong need to have the support of peers, therefore most likely informed my interest in how the participants' in this study talked about their peers. Working alongside others provided a strength to continue for both the participants and for me.

5.10 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have reported and considered the data in relation to the superordinate themes, 'feeling the struggle', 'steering the course' and 'thriving not surviving'. Accounts were individual, reflecting the idiographic nature of IPA.

The key findings from this chapter are that engaging with independent learning demands adjustment and can feel emotional and overwhelming if not introduced with care and guidance. However, a small amount of change in practice between previous and current study forms appear to lead to fewer emotional issues. Independent learning can be experienced as unbounded and hard to grasp and has been likened to a journey. Feedback and guidance

from tutors support students in arriving at their destination quicker, avoiding hazards along the way. Independent learning is also more manageable when working in proximity to student peers. Finally, there was an appreciation of liberation through independent learning, with participants recounting successes and achieving agency.

In the next chapter, I will consider the implications of these findings in greater depth.

6. Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1. Introduction

Within this study I sought to explore how postgraduate international students experienced independent learning. A range of narratives emerged, reflecting the diversity of experiences and backgrounds of the participants. However, there were also many shared experiences.

In their accounts, participants spoke at length about their struggles. They described difficulties in adjusting to a new country and unfamiliar approaches to learning. Researchers have highlighted that everyday tasks that were undemanding for international students to do at home are no longer easy in their new setting. Sources of strain include the weather, different food, language, accommodation, separation from home, diminished social integration and an unfamiliar educational system (Busher et al., 2016; Gu & Maley, 2008). These same concerns are reflected within the accounts of the participants in the current study who discussed a range of responses as they adjusted to new experiences, which included feeling shocked, frustrated, overwhelmed or lost. Such difficulties left these students feeling isolated, disempowered and, in some cases, lesser than their peers.

However, the picture for these students was not as stark as it seemed. Participants went on to describe coming to terms with independent learning as a journey from feeling isolated to finding a community. This in itself was not without its challenges as students spent long, unsociable hours studying

in an effort to keep up with the academic demands placed upon them. Finally, some participants experienced independent learning as a welcome agent of change that empowered them to be creative and feel free.

Within this chapter, I consider in more detail the implications of my interpretations. I utilise Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of Process, Person, Context and Time (PPCT) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005) to examine independent learning as demanding adjustment. The PPCT model provides a holistic perspective of how a person's interactions in context either fosters or disrupts their growth and development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and makes visible that systems outside the control of the student will have the potential to impact on their engagement with independent learning. However, this model also recognises that individuals are active agents in and on their own environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), thereby affording the opportunity to explore not just the similarities of experiences but also the differences.

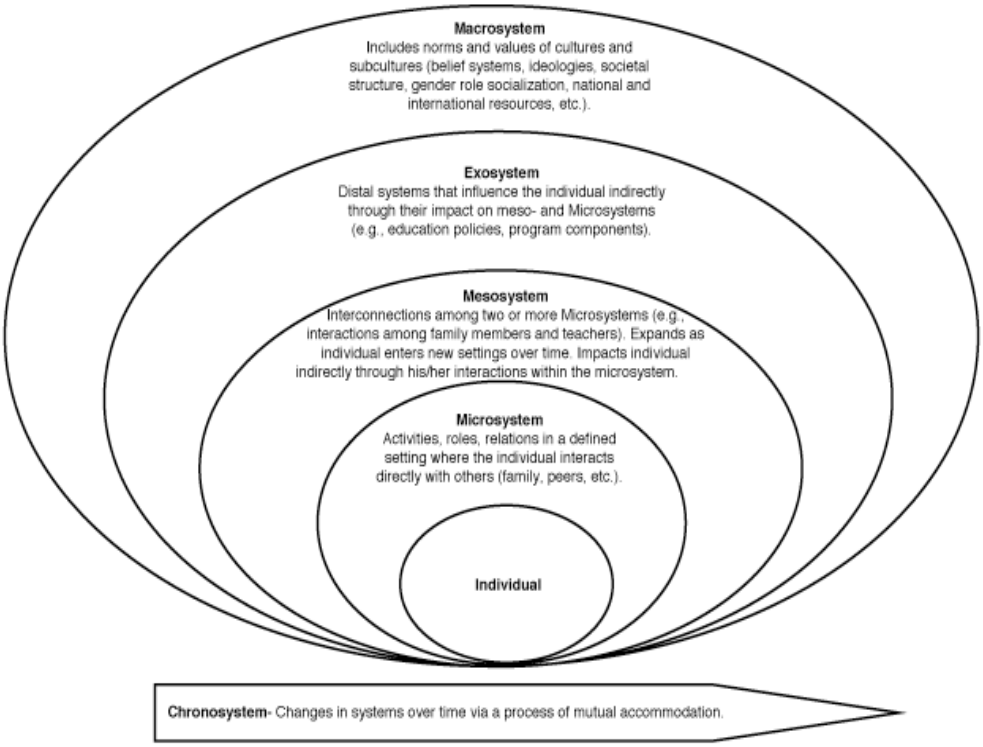
International students can often find themselves with no established reference points for negotiating their new environment, which is compounded by the loss of previous community support in their home country (Dai & Garcia, 2019; Hunter-Johnson, 2019; Johnson, Seifen-Adkins, Sandhu, Arbles, & Makino, 2018). This model is particularly useful for explaining the sense of isolation, strangeness and loneliness experienced by participants, since transitioning from one bioecological system to another can impact and challenge one's wellbeing, knowledge, self-assurance and confidence.

I also explore here the participants' need for a connection with academic staff and their peers. Here, I will utilise the concept of belongingness, (Thomas, 2012) which is about feeling accepted or fitting into the academic and social environment. Participants implied that they create belongingness or community as a result of finding others who are experiencing the same challenges while negotiating the bioecological system of higher education. Within the research literature it is argued that students should experience a sense of community and belongingness within learning environments as this enhances learning opportunities and success (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1993). The sense of togetherness can combat feelings of isolation, alienation or being othered by academic staff and domestic students.

6.2 Bioecological Model

In his bioecological model (1979, 1994), Bronfenbrenner suggested that individuals are exposed to four ecological systems which influence their development. Standing in the centre of four contextual systems, individuals are exposed to a microsystem, a mesosystem, an exosystem and a macrosystem. The chronosystem adds a time dimension to the model, highlighting that historical circumstances will influence a person's development (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The interrelated aspects of the environment influencing individual development across and within levels. Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979).



6.2.1 Contextual systems

Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original model, contextual systems consist of all the processes, relationships and external influences that impact learning and human development (Spencer, 2006). Each system acknowledges one another, and development is the result of an interaction between them. The influence of some of the systems was more apparent within participants' accounts than others and will be highlighted later in this chapter (Table 3).

The microsystem comprises direct individual interpersonal relationships and interactions, occurring within the person's immediate surroundings, such as

those with family, school and peers. Bronfenbrenner (2005) argued that how these groups react to each other will influence an individual's development.

The mesosystem refers to the cross-relationships and lateral connections between two or more microsystems. It involves interactions between home and school, peers and family, family and community. The more microsystems that the student engages with then the more mesosystems they will have, however in some cases these linkages may be less apparent. Challenges within the mesosystem can become apparent when there are conflicts between one microsystem and another (Jaeger, 2016).

The exosystem contains elements of the microsystem that do not influence the individual directly but may do so indirectly. It contains the external factors outside of the individual's scope of control. This can include the wider community or significant other's social network or workplace. Centres of power such as unions, local government and university boards can make decisions that impact on the context in which students live and learn. Radical changes within an exosystem may indirectly result in fundamental changes impacting a person's growth and development.

Being embedded in all the other systems, the macrosystem greatly influences an individual's growth and development. The macrosystem level showcases the differing and at times conflicting cultural differences and societal customs from participants' old and new ecological systems. These may include differing values, beliefs, laws, language and patterns of

communication. It can also include other influences such as discrimination based on personal characteristics. Macrosystem level factors that can either promote or restrict individual development can also include national, social and educational policies, the economic and political situation and the mass media (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Table 3: A summary of the interaction of environments in the postgraduate international students' experience using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model.

Context	Description of each level	Situated examples for postgraduate international students' engagement with independent learning in higher education
Microsystem	Contains all personal relationships and direct interactions within the immediate surroundings. Includes parents, teachers, school, peers.	Includes peers, academic staff, admin staff (including international student experience team), friends, family. Language Advisory Service
Mesosystem	Interactions between various aspects of the microsystem, for example between parents and teacher; peers and family	Interactions between international experience team/language advisory service, course teams and student support officers.
Exosystem	Includes other people and places that the individual may not actively interact with, but which have an effect on them, for examples local	Includes local educational policies on feedback, contact hours, tutor roles and responsibilities, teaching, learning and assessment methods. Course/module

	government, local policies, community	evaluations-student feedback. Centres of power including Unions- (with reference to recent strike actions), university boards.
Macrosystem	Contains the individual's cultural context and legal policies that may influence their life.	Learning in a 2nd language; culture; values and beliefs influencing educational policy. NSS, PTES. Immigration Advisory Service, Home Office, Visa Policy. Brexit. Media representation of immigration. Covid pandemic (recent-not at the time of data collection)

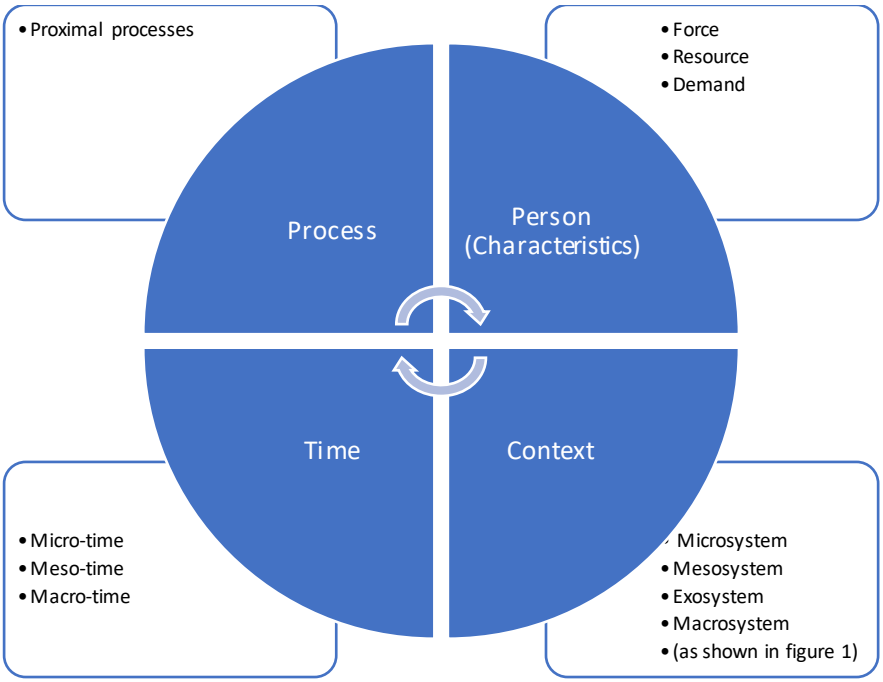
However, Bronfenbrenner criticised his earlier forms of the theory, claiming an over-emphasis on the contextual systems and undermining the characteristics of the individual as an active agent influencing their own development (Jaeger, 2016). So, while still including the person-context interrelatedness, the bioecological model evolved into four interdependent components that constitute the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner and colleagues designated these four components as the developmental ***processes*** shaped by the characteristics of the ***person***, and the ***context*** over ***time*** (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

6.3 Process – Person – Context – Time (PPCT)

Figure two provides my diagrammatic representation of the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). As a brief

introduction, process takes account of the interactions required for an individual's development. Person incorporates the role that personal characteristics of individuals play in interactions. Context refers to the four interconnected systems, based on Bronfenbrenner's original model and shown in figure one (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Time (previously chronosystem) takes account of the passing of time over the course of an individual's development.

Figure 2: Representation of the Process-Person-Context-Time model. Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (2005).



Tudge et al. (2009) argue that researchers drawing on the PPCT version of Bronfenbrenner's theory should include each of the elements of process, person, context and time but may not necessarily be able to include all four

systems within the context. Jaeger (2016, p. 11) argues that "the mature version of Bronfenbrenner's theory promotes a careful consideration of inter-related factors rather than an ill-fated attempt to include every one". Each of these elements will now be discussed in more depth, with reference to the findings of this study.

6.3.1. Proximal processes in context

Process is the fundamental element of the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), and can be defined as:

> …progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996).

Therefore, process describes the dynamic, bidirectional interactions between an individual, other people and the environment. It is by engaging in interactions and activities that the individual comes to make sense of their world, although the essence of proximal processes differs according to the characteristics of the individual and the environments in which they find themselves (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield & Karnik, 2009).

Proximal processes can be considered to be either positive or negative, protective or detrimental to an individual's development. A positive outcome

can be defined as “the demonstrated acquisition and further development of knowledge, skill, or ability to conduct and direct one’s own behaviour across situations and developmental domains” (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 118). In contrast a negative outcome refers to “the recurrent manifestation of difficulties in maintaining control and integration of behaviour across situations and different domains of development” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 1002).

In education, proximal processes can refer to interactions between student and teacher, or student and student. These can be solitary or group activities which it is hoped will lead to the development of new skills and knowledge. We can see these acts of proximal processes taking place in the accounts of these participants where they described how they engaged with independent learning. Some of these activities were undertaken as solitary tasks and others were group activities. Some were interactions with peers and others were with academic staff.

Markey, O’Brien, Graham and O’Donnell (2019) described how international students who are struggling to come to terms with a different way of learning may initially rely on old and familiar ways of dealing with change. Some participants in the current study described having to adapt learning processes upon which they relied in their previous bioecological system. Hani’s attempts to engage using the past process of memorising no longer worked. Transitioning to a new bioecological system meant that Hani had to adapt her processes to influence her development. Similarly, Lin reported not knowing

how to engage with independent learning as 'in China the teacher always tells us what we should do'. Sara was also accustomed to being 'spoon-fed'. Conversely, Mia was familiar with the demands of independent study and so required less adjustment.

These experiences are aligned with findings from other studies. Dai and Garcia (2019) described mixed responses when participants adapted familiar learning approaches to a new context. While many could negotiate different teaching and learning approaches to become motivated and independent learners, other students struggled to adapt to a new academic model that was less didactical and more exploratory and facilitative. These students were left feeling disempowered as they could not find a suitable approach to meet their learning needs. Blasco (2018) found that students experienced disruption to their learning as they struggled to understand what was occurring.

Therefore, what Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model makes visible regarding participants' independent learning experiences is that engaging with proximal processes in an unfamiliar setting demands adjustment. The extent of these adjustments and the struggles endured will be very much influenced by past experiences. Past cultural norms and behaviours situated within the macrosystem, past local education policies situated within the exosystem and the familiarity of a previous student-teacher relationship situated within the microsystem may impact how successful a student is able to accommodate new practices.

International students may recognise the need to employ different academic skills; however, it is not always made clear what those skills are (Quan et al., 2013; Spiro et al., 2012). Therefore, academic teams must be aware of the past experiences and learning preferences of their students and recognise that a postgraduate international students' understanding of independent learning will be influenced by their previous contexts of learning. Chickering and Gamson (1987, p. 4) argued that "students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them. Then they can be pushed to learning in new ways that do not come so easily". While I prefer the term guided to pushed, talking to students about their experiences of and expectations for independent learning can help to develop a shared understanding of their needs. Building in phased learning opportunities that take account of the varied demography of students to explore new ways of learning can assist in demystifying unfamiliar approaches and empower students to become independent learners.

6.3.1.1 Proximal processes in isolation

Many participants referred to independent learning as something they carried out in isolation. Participants described various learning processes that were undertaken without a teacher. These included 'find your own resources' (Neela); 'try and understand everything by yourself' (Sara); 'reading mostly I think, doing research maybe' (Mia); 'identify what your learning needs' (Hani); 'getting information from books' (Jeannet); 'go through a lot of reading' (Aleni). These findings are consistent with those from other studies. Examples cited in the literature include reviewing

materials from taught sessions; writing up lecture notes; searching for and selecting information; setting and prioritising learning objectives; rehearsing and practising; assessing progress and achievement (Gieve & Clark, 2005; Hockings et al., 2018). These examples reinforce the solitary expectation of independent study, with little acknowledgement given to the collaborative nature of learning. This focus on the solitary nature of learning opposes learning theories that stress the community or social nature of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

6.3.1.2 Proximal processes in groups

Processes also took place within group and peer-supported activities. These included supporting each other (Hue-Wen, Aleni, Neela, Jeannet) conversing and sharing ideas and problems (Hue-Wen, Jeannet, Aleni) and the physical act of being in proximity to other students (Neela, Aleni). The process of working through struggles can be influenced by the value of conversation with fellow students in a similar situation (Markey et al., 2019). While recognising the expected autonomous nature of independent learning, Zutshi et al. (2011) makes a case to incorporate the social aspect of learning and therefore move away from it being seen as a solitary activity. Spiro et al. (2012) argue that the most valued learning aspect to emerge from their research was the relationship students developed with fellow learners. They concluded that the development of these relationships went above and beyond just supporting each other with content and subject knowledge; there was also an awareness of a developing sense of self, increasing confidence and a capacity to initiate learning. Therefore, academic teams can engage

postgraduate international students in conversations about the value of establishing a community of learners and providing opportunities to learn with, from and about one another.

6.3.1.3 Proximal processes and academics

Participants described how they engaged in processes and interactions relating to academic staff. It was found that practices demonstrating effective relationships with tutors and supervisors were crucial to the student experience. However, mixed views were expressed. Aleni questioned the role of the tutor, feeling that engagement was lacking. Khalid, Hue-Wen and Jeannet found that engaging with supportive supervisors rendered them 'lucky'.

Hagenauer and Volet (2016) reviewed the extant literature relating to teacher-student relationships at university, claiming this to be an under-researched field. They posited that the better the quality of this relationship, the more connected the student would feel to the university. However, they argued that research exploring the quality of student and teacher engagement tended to focus on the number of interactions, rather than their quality. Two particularly striking aspects of their paper were the notion of the caring nature of a teacher-student relationship and the behaviours that are expected to be displayed by students in an adult-adult relationship, such as independent study. Hagenauer and Volet (2016) questioned whether academics in HE had a responsibility to display caring behaviours and, if so, what these would look like.

Some researchers have suggested that university lecturers saw the importance of demonstrating care by developing open, honest, respectful, fair, encouraging and supportive relationships with students (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002; Fitzmaurice, 2008). Situated within the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), Hunter-Johnson (2019) proposed that relationships with academic staff were important, especially for international students who are lacking family presence. Lähteenoja and Pirttilä-Backman (2005) suggested that attempts to promote student integration, thus creating a safe environment and promoting positive learning opportunities, can be regarded as a specific form of caring which was beneficial for students, although they recognised that not all academics hold this view. Some academics believed that students should study independently without extra care from staff (Lähteenoja & Pirttilä-Backman, 2005).

Khalid and Hue-Wen in particular, described the availability and responsiveness of their supervisors as an important aspect of their experience. Being approachable and available is considered helpful for supporting students' success and adjustment at university (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012) as well as for helping students feel connected and preventing feelings of alienation (Stephen, O'Connell, & Hall, 2008). Positive relationships can also facilitate other factors such as commitment, effort, motivation, and achievement (Halawah, 2006; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). In the UK, a good teacher is considered to be a facilitator, helping students to become creative, independent learners (Goode, 2007;

Lähteenoja & Pirttilä-Backman, 2005). Changes within the microsystem, including staff perceptions of students' needs influence the degree to which interventions are empowering or limiting (Jaeger, 2016). There is a need to balance the role of teacher and the desire for knowledge to emerge with the occasional students' preference for knowledge to be made explicit (Spiro et al., 2012). We can see this from Hue-Wen's plea to 'just give me the answer'.

Local university policy, situated within the exosystem often sets out expectations regarding academic roles, student face-to-face contact time and additional academic work planning related to supporting students. Indeed, my own experiences of supporting both UK and international students frequently leaves me with the sense that there is a disparity in what students want and need, in comparison to how many hours I can commit. This is not a failing of the student when one considers that their previous exosystem and microsystem most likely afforded them more academic (teacher) contact. Conversely, academics are managing multiple competing demands of teaching and scholarly activity alongside an ever-increasing administration responsibility. Therefore, what Bronfenbrenner's (2005) model brings forth is that systems often outside of the control of the student will have the potential to impact their engagement with independent learning. Their success is not just an outcome of their own efforts but also a product of the environment in which they are situated.

6.3.1.4 Proximal processes and academic feedback

The process of engaging with tutor feedback either contributed to or hindered Mia, Neela, Sara and Aleni's independent learning. Wette and Furneaux (2018) considered the usefulness of feedback in their exploration of the academic discourse socialisation challenges and coping strategies of international graduate students entering English universities. The participants in their study described some helpful and unhelpful aspects of feedback, some of which resonate with the findings of the current study. Wette and Furneaux (2018) described feedback which was vague, included insufficient examples or lacked suggestions for improvements as unhelpful. The absence of detail was viewed as particularly challenging for international students who were unfamiliar with what was expected of their academic writing. Aspects of feedback that were considered helpful included comments on language, grammar and spelling, noting errors or weaknesses, comments supported by an explanation, feedback that included examples and suggested areas for improvements (Wette & Furneaux, 2018).

Aleni, Mia and Neela all recounted ways in which feedback was either unhelpful or how it could be improved. Like the participants in Wette and Furneaux's (2018) study, they wanted personalised, detailed feedback that would support them to improve future work and become more critical in their writing. Neela commented that demonstrating criticality in her writing was a concern and expressed that she did not know how to write critically. Therefore, key requirements, such as criticality, must be made transparent so that students can understand what they mean in practice. However, it should

be acknowledged that this was not the case for Sara, who found that the feedback she received met her learning needs.

Within the department where I work, creating feedback that meets the needs of students is a perennial issue. Situated within the macrosystem, the National Student Survey and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey scores often highlight the need for students to receive better quality feedback. Strategies are in place to address this, including co-producing assessment guidance with students, on-going staff development sessions and the use of annotation software to provide detailed, personalised feedback. Transparency regarding learning objectives and course expectations, specific feedback on assignments and availability of academic support are good practice for all students but are particularly helpful for international students who may be adjusting to new pedagogical practices (Skyrme, 2010).

Within the context of this study, proximal processes can be used to understand how postgraduate international students are required to make changes to learning practices. As they move from the old to the new bioecological system, many will have to change and adopt new learning practices. For academics, particularly those responsible for course design, it is useful to know that these processes need to be developed over time. Educators can structure a learning environment to facilitate proximal processes that provide both sufficient challenge and sufficient support (Jaeger, 2016). This can lead students to take more responsibility and

ultimately function more independently. Additionally, academics should appreciate that many of these processes are reliant on others, for example, peer supportive and academic supportive structures.

6.3.2 Person in context

The 'person' aspect of the PPCT model encompasses the individual characteristics necessary for learning, acknowledging the role that the individual plays in their own development. Considered to be influential in affecting the direction and power of proximal processes, these characteristics can be considered under three main categories: force, resource and demand (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

6.3.2.1 Force characteristics

Force characteristics, according to Bronfenbrenner (2005) relate to differences in motivation, temperament and persistence of the individual, and can initiate or prevent proximal processes from occurring. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998, p. 1009), force characteristics can "actively interfere with, retard, or even prevent" the occurrence of proximal processes. For example, potentially disruptive attributes conducive to learning could include distractibility, apathy, lack of interest, feelings of insecurity, shyness and avoidance. An individual exhibiting these characteristics would find it onerous to engage in proximal processes. However, motivation, persistence and a drive to succeed are positive characteristics required to engage with proximal processes (Tudge et al., 2009).

Within my study, there are examples of times where shyness and feelings of insecurity could have hindered learning. Feelings of loneliness were a recurring theme among many participants (Lin, Hani, Neela, Aleni). Loneliness can lead to anxiety about the ability to survive and succeed (Markey et al., 2019). Hue-Wen also talked about how shyness and a lack of courage could prevent an individual seeking help with their studies. Similarly, Sara was left feeling 'quite afraid that if you ask some question in class they'd all laugh at you'. This fear suppressed Sara's engagement in classroom activities.

Conversely, some students described how their motivation and desire to succeed were instrumental in supporting their adjustment to a new culture and different way of learning. Hani and Khalid asserted that learning was their responsibility. However, Jeannet pointed out that this could lead some students to 'push[ing] yourself too far'. Thus, participants described a resilience that enabled agency. There is a need for academic teams to recognise and take account of characteristics that drive this motivation and persistence, while also identifying students who may be excluded from learning activities or pushing themselves too hard. This may require a review or changes within the microsystem that promotes engagement with proximal processes and thereby influence motivation and persistence.

6.3.2.2 Resource characteristics

The concept of resource characteristics, according to Bronfenbrenner (2005), are the qualities that influence an individual's capacity to engage

effectively in proximal processes and, therefore, successfully influence their development. These qualities include ability, knowledge, skill and experience. Bronfenbrenner advises that the knowledge and skills required in one setting may differ from those required in another. Individuals may not achieve success if they are constrained by their circumstances. This is even more noteworthy when the individual cannot access resources such as supportive relationships.

Participants in the current study questioned their ability to utilise their previous approaches to learning. Sara's experience of being 'spoon-fed' left her feeling lesser to her peers, as she was now expected to study in an unfamiliar fashion. Compared to her UK peers, Aleni felt as though she was starting from 'zero'. Neela questioned her abilities as she felt she was the 'only person struggling', while Hani's attempts to apply her usual approaches 'doesn't work'. Thus, the rules of the game had changed (Gebhard, 2012) and skills that had previously led to success were now no longer applicable. Williams and Daborn (2008) used the analogy of game playing; international students have learnt how to play cricket, but once they were in the UK, were expected to play football. To have a good chance of 'winning' (that is, successfully completing their course), they must master the rules of the new game. PhD students are given more time to do this, but master's students must perfect the rules quicker. However, with persistence and tenacity, these participants drew on personal resources, holding onto the view that they had once been successful learners.

Elliot, Reid and Baumfield (2016) used a metaphor of transplanting a mature tree to discuss how international students transition from one bioecological system to another. The tree needs special attention and care during its growing time to allow it to gradually become accustomed to the new soil conditions. This helps the tree adjust to the new environment, cope and thrive. Likewise, the participants in this study had been shaken but not uprooted. If they had received special care and attention during the early 'growing' phase, then perhaps their adjustment to the new environment would have been less traumatic. For example, if Mia had received structure and guidance earlier in her course, if Hani had understood what was expected of her and what to do with the overwhelming volume of materials or if Aleni had not felt like she was left alone to work out what was required, they might have been able to adjust, cope and thrive sooner.

Within the PPCT model, experience relates to feelings of anticipation, apprehension, aspirations, doubts or personal beliefs (Tudge et al., 2009). The impact of past learning experiences was a theme for all participants in the current study, encompassed within the superordinate theme of feeling the struggle. Many participants used emotionally loaded terms to describe their lived experiences. Challenging emotions included shock (Sara, Hani), depression (Aleni), frustration (Aleni, Mia) and feeling overwhelmed (Mia). However, participants also experienced more positive feelings such as feeling freer (Lin, Sara, Hani, Khalid, Mia) and more creative (Mia). To lessen the impact of the overwhelming feelings experienced by postgraduate international students as they transition into a new bioecological system,

academics should consider students' past experiences of learning when designing and delivering courses. Postgraduate international students will have learning skills that have enabled them to be successful in their previous bioecological system but may need support and guidance to translate these skills into a new setting and thereby avoid students feeling lesser.

6.3.2.3 Demand characteristics

Demand characteristics, according to Bronfenbrenner (2005) refer to the capacity of the individual to seek or avoid interactions within the social environment which can discourage or promote proximal processes. This could include how approachable an individual appears to others and whether they are active or passive in initiating interactions. There were only a few accounts where participants spoke about avoiding interacting with others. As previously mentioned, Sara avoided asking questions in class due to fear of ridicule. Thus, we can see that fear of being judged by other students influences engagement (Markey et al., 2019). Lin had experienced a breakdown of a personal relationship that resulted in her avoiding talking to friends. By her own admission, she did not have many friends; 'just some Chinese people'. This difficult time along with a lack of emotional support caused her to miss out on learning opportunities. Interacting with the exosystem may leave some students with the constant impression of being somewhere else that is not home. This could lead to feelings of otherness, lack of authenticity and attachment (Pifer & Baker, 2014). This was evident in Neela's account as she described her struggles of adapting to a new environment.

Therefore, we can see that there will be times during a student's journey where they may be more likely to avoid interactions with others. Expanding the individual's microsystem by providing situations that invite engagement with others and thereby foster emotional support, may assist the international student to engage more successfully in processes related to learning.

6.3.2.4 Person, context and meaningful relationships

All participants in the current study have moved away from close family and friends and are faced with establishing new microsystems. It is within this system that postgraduate international students can find and nurture new relationships. I found the participants' reports of moving from loneliness to a community powerful. Initially, some participants presented quite stark images of loneliness. Aleni found being on her own in a foreign country 'a challenge', while Lin said, 'I'm alone here'. However, as time progressed, participants developed new forms of support. Students created opportunities, often during unsociable hours, to sit and work together, or to provide a motivation for persisting with their learning. Jeannet presented a compelling case for creating space for groups of students to support each other. A PhD can be a long, lonely journey. However, by creating the microsystem of 'PhD Assemble', students fought together to battle the foe of independent learning. Working together provided support from peers and helped to foster a sense of community, which positively influenced experiences of engaging with independent learning. Therefore, universities

need to ensure that students are aware of the benefits of accessing a shared space in which to work together and support each other.

A lack of meaningful relationships is linked with an increasing sense of isolation (Koehne, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007). Feeling that you do not belong can result in students experiencing increased stress, anxiety and depression (Li & Peng, 2019; Quan et al., 2013; Zhang & Goodson, 2011) as well as a decrease in wellbeing and happiness (As-Saber, 2006; Li & Peng, 2019). Postgraduate international students may also find themselves positioned as 'other' due to issues of racism or intolerance. This may lead to them being treated as inferior or unequal (Heng, 2018; Marginson, 2013) due to English language ability or norms for demonstrating knowledge or engaging in learning activities (Arthur, 2017). Those who do not feel they belong to an established group may be viewed as strangers (Marotta, 2012). Strangers could be the racial or cultural 'other' who feel excluded or marginalised from a host society because they do not share the same values, beliefs or assumptions (Marotta, 2012; Schutz, 1944). A consequence of being a stranger is that the natural attitude (taken for granted assumptions) must be consciously acquired to understand the "meaning of intercultural processes" (Madison, 2006, p. 256).

Horgan (2012) built on the work of Simmel (1971), who categorised the stranger by their physical proximity and social distance; we recognise strangers because we encounter them in space. Horgan (2012) proposed that the concept of 'strangership' focuses attention away from the characteristics

of individuals to the characteristics of relationships between those individuals considered strangers. Horgan (2012, p. 611) argued that:

> Just as friendship refers to the form of relation between friends, strangership refers to the form of relation between strangers. While the terms friend and friendship are clearly related, a friend is certainly not the same thing as friendship. Likewise, a stranger is not the same thing as strangership. A friend or a stranger is a specific person or a social type, while strangership and friendship are relationships or forms of associations.

This, therefore, provides a starting point for exploring differences (Starr-Glass, 2016). Starr-Glass (2016) proposed that it is natural for international students to feel like strangers due to differences in language and unfamiliarity with learning approaches. However, this provides an opportunity to engage with these differences and explore different perspectives. Academics can provide opportunities for students "to meet as fellow travellers, recognising that their journeys – spatial, cultural, and educational – are uniquely different, valuable, and empowering" (Starr-Glass, 2016, p. 317).

6.3.2.5 Person, context and creating a sense of belongingness

Belonging in educational environments has been defined by Goodenow (1993, p. 25) as:

> Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of

> feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual.

Belongingness can be used to explain how the potential mismatch between a student's background and that of an institution may result in individuals feeling like they are not accepted (Thomas, 2012). Researchers have discussed how fostering meaningful relationships with peers and academic staff can create a sense of 'belonging' (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008; Thomas, 2012) that leads to students feeling accepted, supported and valued (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). Environments that foster a sense of belonging have been found to influence students' persistence and academic success (Hausmann, Schofield, & Wood, 2007; Osterman, 2000).

Furthermore, postgraduate international students may feel pressured to excel academically. Therefore, studying for long periods may seem to be the most effective use of their time (Abel, 2002). Unfortunately, a lack of leisure and relaxation can inadvertently increase an international student's loneliness and depression (Chen, 1999; Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, & Cong, 2015), increase stress (Yan & Berliner, 2011) and hinder the formation of supportive networks (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timimi, 2004). Therefore, those who find it harder to make friends may have a more negative student experience. Thus, belongingness appears to be a fundamentally critical concept influencing a

student's academic success, social engagement and overall wellbeing. If postgraduate international students are to be enabled to succeed within HE, then we must attend to the nature of their experience of belonging.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) suggested that effective practices promoting belongingness should encompass seven key areas. These are: encouraging contact between student and academic staff; developing reciprocity and co-operation among students; use of active learning techniques; providing prompt feedback; time dedicated to engaging with learning tasks; communicating high expectations; respect for diverse talents and different ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Of the seven suggested effective practices, four resonate with the findings of my study, given the participants' narratives. These are: encouraging contact between student and academic staff; developing reciprocity and co-operation among students; providing prompt feedback; and respect for diverse talents and different ways of learning.

Authors of the 'What Works' project (Thomas, 2012) evaluated the impact of a range of interventions to nurture belonging. Whilst this project was focused specifically on improving retention and student success, some of the interventions resonate with the findings of the current study, including developing supportive peer relationships; encouraging meaningful interactions between staff and students; developing knowledge, confidence and identity.

Supportive peer groups can have a positive influence on students' sense of belonging and engagement with the curriculum (Slaten, Elison, Lee, Yough, & Scalise, 2016; Thomas, 2012). The development of friendships with co-nationals, other international students and home students plays a critical role in preventing depression, improving academic performance and increasing student satisfaction (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gould, 2005). The physical closeness of studying alongside other students helped Neela and Aleni feel motivated, comfortable and safe. This, in turn, helped normalise their experience in the sense that being around other students who were also experiencing difficulties created a sense of being less different or 'other'. Social engagement can create a sense of belonging and provide informal emotional and practical support, thus improving motivation, knowledge sharing and developing confidence (Thomas, 2012).

Creating an educational environment to increase interpersonal interactions and influence bonding can provide postgraduate international students with opportunities to share and dispel their doubts by encouraging each other (Slaten et al., 2016). Hue-Wen and Jeannet spoke a great deal about how their sense of community helped them overcome challenges. This strength of community was evident among the PhD students, most likely due to the time spent working alongside each other and having a shared space in which to work. This supports the idea of a community of learners, or a community of practice, whereby a social environment provides the support that community members need (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning opportunities are therefore created by social processes, communication and the exchange of ideas

within a supportive community, offering a source of academic help and enabling students to cope with their academic study. This can lead to complex environments feeling more socially and academically supportive (Mwangi, 2016), where "learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 3).

Universities can promote social integration and belongingness through induction activities, collaborative learning and teaching approaches. However, there may not be a 'one size fits all' strategy for promoting belongingness. Inductions can be used to facilitate not just the sharing of information but as a means of focusing on developing an individual's capacity to engage and belong. Course teams and academic advisors can utilise extended inductions to develop individuals' microsystems and to make explicit the value of active participation and interactions with peers and staff. The classroom offers the opportunity for students to engage in intergroup dialogue so they can develop friendships and recognise the value of group study as a critical element of independent learning.

6.3.2.6 Person, context and language

Hani, Hue-Wen and Sara spoke about how studying in a second language could impact on learning opportunities, particularly within the first few years. Whilst participants recognised this as a barrier, persistently inviting interactions in the academic and social environment could enable students to overcome challenges with their English.

Language proficiency has been discussed in chapter two as a predictor of students' acculturative stress as well as a facilitator for academic adaptation and efficacy in forming relationships with other students (Busher et al., 2016; McMahon, 2011; Yu & Moskal, 2019; Wu & Hammond, 2011). A student's perception of their language proficiency may limit their desire to seek out social interactions (Chen, 1999) and is fundamental to the learning process (Palmer, Zuraikat, West, Calderone, & Shanty, 2019). Consequently, a perceived language barrier can create negative feelings about an individual's ability to be successful in their new environment. Therefore, international students' social interactions and academic performance are likely to be influenced by their perceived linguistic proficiency (Abel, 2002).

Participants in this study described language as incorporating both negative and positive experiences. A language barrier can add to a student's feeling of loneliness and isolation (Palmer et al., 2019), as can be seen in some accounts. Hue-Wen, Aleni and Sara all reported that language made it harder to adjust to learning and living in the UK, which led some students to question their ability and self-esteem as learners. This impacted on Hue-Wen's 'courage' in seeking support. However, while not every participant shared the language barrier issue, all noted its importance. Both Mia and Hani could see how language might be a barrier for some students, but their experience was more positive, as they felt confident about their English language abilities.

Most universities provide support for students whose first language is not English. Indeed, at the university where I work, one-to-one and group

English language sessions are available for students. Conversation clubs are another opportunity for students to improve their English language, socialise and therefore extend their microsystem. However, I observed that some students from China who accessed a course in my department would not take up opportunities to improve their English unless those opportunities were scheduled and appeared on their timetable. Therefore, as a result of undertaking this study, with the support of the course team and language advisory service, we built-in additional weekly timetabled English support sessions for the first semester. The sessions were framed around the students completing their first written assignment and supported the students in developing their skills in interpreting what was required for their assessment, structuring an essay and improving their academic writing. So far this has proven successful, with fewer students failing their first attempt and an increase in the overall grades received by students. I would argue that as well as directing students to central university support, course teams need to work with their language advisory service teams to incorporate strategies that are embedded in the curriculum and designed to meet the specific needs of student groups. This is an example of how the expansion of an individual's microsystem and mesosystem can benefit their development.

6.3.3 Time

The element of 'context' has been embedded in the preceding discussion therefore the final element of the PPCT model to be explored is 'time' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and refers to the passing of time over an individual's

development stages. Time occurs within three successive levels, micro-time, meso-time and macro-time. Micro-time encompasses on-going episodes of proximal processes that an individual engages in. Continuity of these episodes are reliant on the degree to which the environment offers stability and consistency in order for proximal processes to function effectively (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Meso-time describes events over longer time periods such as days or weeks (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Macro-time refers to the changing expectations and events in the larger society that shape the individual's experience (Adamson, O'Brien, & Pasley, 2007), which in turn can be affected by the characteristics of the developing person (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Participants described how time influenced their experiences. Hani, Aleni and Jeannet gave accounts of how, at the beginning of their courses, they tried to make sense of everything. However, over time they came to terms with what was required. Jeannet and Mia used the metaphor of a journey occurring over time; a series of stages that provided a roadmap to independence. Mia talked about having 'gone through it', while Hani felt like she was 'moving up'. However, Hue-Wen felt like she was undertaking 'a self-doubt journey' and needed to be flexible in how she reached her destination.

Participants talked about gathering skills and knowledge throughout their journeys. Mia described how she had gained confidence. At the start of Hani's journey, she described how 'reading two articles took the whole day'.

However, by the time of the interview, she had reached a point where ‘now I can read ten articles a day’. Aleni referred to gaining ground so that she now felt no different from her UK peers in terms of academic performance. Sara and Hani were faced with the opportunity to break free of a didactic approach to learning and could navigate their course of learning as a driver rather than a compliant passenger.

Central to our understanding of postgraduate international students’ experience is the way in which studying overseas impacts on the development of their personal, social, and cultural identities and how participation in HE contributes to the formation of their present and future selves. Studies have challenged the Eurocentric and neo-colonial paradigms of ‘adjustment’ and ‘acculturation’ by stressing agency driven forms of identity formation (Ploner & Nada, 2020). Marginson (2014) argued that international students are not just passively adjusting to unfamiliar social and educational environments but actively choosing to negotiate a sense of self that sustains identity while engaging with cultural plurality. Fincher and Iveson, (2008) emphasise the importance of understanding identity formation and presentation of self as situated within a particular context thereby rejecting presentations of identity in which groups are portrayed as internally homogenous or fixed. Instead, they argue that understanding of identity and agency should be perceived as contextually contingent.

6.3.3.1 Time and agency in context

The bioecological model refers to individuals influencing their own life course through enacting human agency. Bronfenbrenner and Morris, (1998, p. 1021) argue that "individuals construct their own life course through choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances". Marginson (2007) argued that the international students' identities are multifaceted in that they revolve around balancing of the selves they are in their home country with the selves they develop in their new environment. The students are selectively using their personal attributes and histories in association with past and evolving selves and influencing their apparent compliance with powerful institutional demands and expectations.

The concept of agency offers a means to examine how postgraduate international students respond to their new environment over time. Hopwood (2010, p. 115) described the international participants in his study as "intentional agentic beings with the capacity to shape their own experience". Agency in relation to time is believed to have three crucial dimensions. The intentional aspect entails responses based on previous experiences. The projective aspect refers to the ideation of a preferred future self, the evaluative dimension entails the ability to respond appropriately to a new context (Nguyen & Robertson, 2020). Therefore, achievement of agency results from individual efforts, available resources (economic, cultural, structural) and contextual factors (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Nguyen and Robertson (2020) describe four different forms of agency that are relevant to this study's participants. These are needs response agency, agency as struggle and resistance, collective agency for contestation and agency for becoming.

Needs response agency refers to the essential requirements for students to engage effectively with their studies or meet their wellbeing needs. The participants in this study were faced with overcoming obstacles of the environment, unfamiliar approaches to learning and language. They demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness as they responded to their study needs and life issues, they embraced a different approach to learning and valued the end result.

Agency as struggle and resistance describes how students use their power and transform themselves when challenged by undesirable situations (Nguyen & Robertson, 2020). We can see participants demonstrating agency as struggle and resistance in the accounts where they talked about the undesirable situation of a lack of feedback. Neela demonstrated agency by raising the quality of her feedback with her tutor. All participants in this study demonstrated agency by openly telling their stories of their struggles.

Collective agency for contestation refers to how individuals deal with difficulties by mobilising the relationships within their own communities (Hopwood, 2010). This was clearly apparent within most of the participants' accounts. Participants sought assistance and support from their peers and

developed their own community of learners (Sweitzer, 2009). One striking example of this was the PhD assemble described by Jeannet. In their new bioecological context, away from their familiar forms of support, participants assembled new forms of support, identifying who could be a resource to help them in their learning endeavours.

Agency for becoming is a new type of agency characterised by the way in which individuals self-transform and generate future aspirations (Tran & Vu, 2018). This was evident within participants' accounts when they described their successes and influenced their futures. Gaining new skills and developing others along the way was described in some of the participants' accounts (Hani, Neela). Developing life skills acquired equal importance to academic skills (Neela). Becoming known to others by networking (Hue-Wen), seeking out volunteering opportunities (Lin) and presenting at conferences (Khalid) revealed other ways in which participants demonstrated their agency. Participants talked about enhanced employment opportunities, advancing their prospects in the world of work (Lin, Aleni, Jeannet). Success towards autonomy came with persistence. For most this journey was fraught with challenges, but their efforts were rewarded with empowerment, creativity and freedom. They displayed resilience and achieved independence "through a process of conflicts, struggles and reconciliations (Xu & Grant, 2017, p. 570).

Therefore, there a many different forms in which postgraduate international students can demonstrate their agency as they respond to a new context.

Illuminating how postgraduate international students enact their agency can provide examples to course teams so that they can build in opportunities and create an environment for this to occur. This can encompass creating opportunities for postgraduate international students to effectively express their needs in relation to study and life, to provide an environment that does not subject postgraduate international students to struggles and resistance, to create communities that provide support and assistance, and to explore other ways in which they can be supported to self-transform.

6.4 Chapter summary

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model includes a holistic perspective of how a person's interactions with each of the layers impacts on their growth and development. Elliot, Reid and Baumfield (2016) argued that an international student's temporary move to a new setting with unfamiliar cultural norms, academic processes, language and even weather necessitates a transition at numerous levels. This can lead to a disruption at all levels as students become part of a different bioecological system, the result of which can severely affect their principal sources of support and their fundamental sense of self. Additionally, a person's sense of identity can be disrupted as they move from being successful students in their old bioecological system to now feeling lesser than their peers. Tensions can arise when there is a disparity between old and new systems, potentially requiring students to learn, unlearn or re-learn new beliefs and practices so they can first survive and then thrive in the new environment. Therefore, there is a need to recognise that access to usual forms of support were no longer available.

Academic teams must take account of past experiences, engaging in conversations with postgraduate international students, defining expectations and recognising the rules have changed for them with regards to their learning.

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model has much to offer when considering the nature of postgraduate international students' experiences as they encounter independent learning. The participants in the current study are experiencing a process of complex change that requires them to negotiate two different bioecological systems. They experience changes at all levels, thus extending beyond adapting to a new pedagogical style. Their microsystem will have previously consisted of parents, siblings, friends and a familiar school environment. However, their new microsystem is depleted as they move away from all things well known and are faced with having to develop relationships with other students and become familiar with a different educational environment. To foster development of the student's microsystem academic teams can incorporate extended induction activities to build social relationships with other students and staff. Provide and signpost students to dedicated spaces where they can work together in order to create their own community of learners and thereby make learning feel more of a "team effort rather than a solo race" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 3). Academic teams should take account of how their high-quality student-centred learning and teaching strategies help to support staff and student interactions.

The use of this model has drawn attention to the act of engaging in independent learning and how students must adapt processes they had previously relied on. It cannot be assumed that if a student already possesses an undergraduate degree, they will be able to cope with the demands of postgraduate study in a new setting without experiencing some troublesome emotional responses. The extent of the challenges that postgraduate international students experience will vary, based on their past experiences. Therefore, academic teams must be aware that some individualised adjustment will be required for most students, but that international students should be led gently through this process, ensuring they are guided to adapt and develop their learning skills.

However, it has been shown that over time postgraduate international students become to value the benefits that independent learning affords them. Describing their successes and achievements illuminates their drive, motivation and persistence to succeed in an unfamiliar environment. Recognising and valuing the different ways in which postgraduate international students can demonstrate their agency academic teams can therefore provide opportunities to facilitate this to occur.

7. Chapter 7: Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have presented the findings and discussion examining postgraduate international students' experiences of independent learning. The extant literature has been used to provide context to the study. This chapter will then reflect on how the research has informed each of the four main research aims, before addressing what this study adds to our understanding of postgraduate international students' experiences of independent learning. An evaluation of the study is presented considering the evaluative criteria discussed by Yardley (2000), before finally considering the implications for future research and practice.

7.2 Revisiting the study aims

Within this thesis, there were 4 central aims:

1. To explore what 'independent learning' means for postgraduate international students studying in a UK HEI.
2. To explore the experiences of independent learning for postgraduate international students studying in a UK HEI.
3. To identify the impacts of engagement with independent learning on postgraduate international students as they progress through a course of study.
4. To identify how these experiences could influence future course developments.

Chapter five has described the phenomenon of independent learning as experienced by the participants. These experiences have been conceptualised as 'feeling the struggle', 'steering the course and 'thriving not surviving'. Within 'feeling the struggle' the participants described the difficulties they experienced in adjusting to a new country, unfamiliar teaching and learning practices and a language barrier. These left participants feeling lost, isolated, frustrated and overwhelmed. In some cases, participants felt lesser than their peers as they attempted to understand the rules to an unfamiliar game. 'Steering the course' initially presented independent learning as a solitary activity but concluded with most participants finding community. There was a strong sense of participants experiencing independent learning as a journey. 'Thriving not surviving' depicts success with independent learning. In most cases this success was hard won but led to a sense of freedom, creativity and empowerment.

Chapter six discussed the findings within the application of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This model presented a holistic perspective on how a person's interactions within contexts impacts their growth and developments. This discussion gave rise to a number of recommendations that are presented in 7.6. The aims of this study have therefore been achieved.

7.3 Contribution to knowledge

Through the review of the extant literature, it was evident that there was a mismatch between educators understandings of independent learning and international students' experiences of engaging with it. This study has addressed the gap by presenting individual stories of lived experiences.

Engaging with independent learning demands adjustment and can feel emotional and overwhelming if not introduced with care and guidance. For some independent learning can be experienced as a struggle or a fight to be overcome. Students must initially try to understand the rules of the game, leading to frustration, self-doubt, feelings of being lesser and annoyance with tutors. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model has shown that a person's sense of identity can be disrupted as they move from being successful students in their old bioecological system to now feeling lesser than their peers. Tensions arise when there is a disparity between old and new systems, potentially requiring students to learn, unlearn or re-learn new beliefs and practices so they can first survive and then thrive in the new environment. However, it has been shown that a small amount of change in practice between previous and current study forms appear to lead to fewer emotional issues.

Independent learning has been conceptualised as a journey. Feedback and guidance from tutors support students in arriving at their destination quicker, avoiding hazards along the way.

Independent learning can be experienced as unbounded, hard to grasp and define. It is slippery and unknown until it is mastered, and how to go about it is not always effectively expressed to postgraduate international students. Often viewed as a solitary activity, a weight that must be shouldered alone, independent learning can result in students spending long hours studying and can impact their work-life balance and mental wellbeing. However, independent learning is more manageable when working in proximity to other students; independent learning became achievable with the support of peers.

There is an appreciation of freedom through independent learning, with participants recounting successes and achieving agency. Independent learning can be viewed as liberating, an investment for the future and a route to autonomy, empowerment and creativity in learning.

7.4 Evaluating the study

Yardley (2000) presents four broad principles for evaluating the quality of qualitative research. These principles can be applied to judging the credibility of IPA research. These include sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. Each of these will be discussed in order to demonstrate how these have been considered in relation to my own research, highlighting any strengths and limitations in my approach.

7.4.1 Sensitivity to context

The first principle of sensitivity to context can be demonstrated from the very early onset of the research study. This can include the researcher demonstrating an awareness of the cultural setting in which the study is conducted, the existing literature on the topic, or sensitivity to the data obtained from the participants (Smith et al., 2009). As discussed in chapter one, my position as an insider researcher means I have an awareness of the cultural setting in which this study has taken place. I believe my insider status provided many benefits, however, my position as an academic may also have placed me within a position of power with regards to the participants. I aimed to address this power imbalance by raising my profile as a fellow student rather than an academic. Nevertheless, I have to acknowledge that my position may have influenced the ways in which the participants responded to my questions.

In chapter two I have presented the pertinent literature that situates this study and where further knowledge can be added. My approach was to present a broad overview of the existing evidence rather than a comprehensive review. Taking this approach could have caused me to over-look a crucial piece of evidence, however by considering the extant literature relevant to the findings I do not believe that to be the case. The review of the literature supported the identification of where more knowledge was required and provided a focus for the study. The review identified that the extant literature was dominated by students from Far East Asia. Therefore, this study ensured that a wider range of cultures have been represented.

On reflection and through engaging with further literature I could have used the term ‘student migrants’ within this study instead of ‘international students’. The latter has been increasingly critiqued for its emphasis on nationality as the sole determinant of internationally mobile students. As such it fails to take account of the complex configurations of student identities beyond nationality (i.e., age, ethnicity, gender, place) and equally tends to overlook the ways in which student migration is tied into other concurrent forms of global migration (Findlay, Prazeres, McCollum, & Packwood, 2017; Ploner, 2017)

Sensitivity to context can also be demonstrated by a clear presentation and understanding of the interactional nature of data collection (Yardley, 2000). The main purpose of a semi-structured interview is to discover the participants’ perspectives concerning their experience relating to the study topic. Use of in-depth interviews led to a deeper understanding of postgraduate international students’ experiences of independent learning, however, conducting a good interview requires skill, dedication and awareness (Smith, et al., 2009). Prior to the interviews I had developed a flexible interview schedule. The initial questions were aimed to put the participant at ease and begin to develop a rapport. Throughout the interview I aimed to be led by the participant telling their story, only adding in questions or prompts to check my understanding of what the participant was saying. Following the interviews, I reflected on my interview approach, reflecting on the words or phrases I had used that may have caused

confusion. In one of the first interviews, I noted that on occasion I asked two questions at the same time, what the participant's past experience of independent learning was and what independent learning meant for them. Reflecting that this was a poor approach to interviewing I ensured that this did not occur again during any future interviews.

Sensitivity to context continues throughout the analysis stages of the study. Analysis of the interview data was a lengthy and immersive process. Verbatim quotes have been used to support my interpretations and to give participants a voice (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). I have consciously attempted to provide a range of responses across all the participants; however, I do feel that Khalid's voice is less well represented than other participants. One of the reasons for this was the difficulty experienced in understanding much of what Khalid recounted. At that point I could have made the decision to remove Khalid's account but since he had given up his time to take part in the study I wanted to recognise his contribution. Khalid made a substantial contribution to my findings with respect to participant successes and achievements. A further reason for incorporating a substantial number of verbatim quotes is to allow the reader to check my interpretations of the participants' accounts and therefore only make claims that are appropriate to the sample analysed (Smith, et al., 2009). However, the double hermeneutic approach of IPA acknowledges the active role that the researcher plays in the interpretation of the data. Given the wealth of date presented here it must be acknowledged that another researcher may

have focused on different aspects of the participants' accounts and therefore presented alternative interpretations.

7.4.2 Commitment and rigour

Commitment and rigour can be demonstrated in a number of ways. Within IPA studies this can be demonstrated through the degree of attentiveness given to the participants through the data collection phase and to the care taken with the analysis for each case. A demonstration of commitment can overlap with the need to show sensitivity to context and also the requirement to be an ethical researcher. As previously discussed, ensuring that the participant is comfortable and attending to what the participant is saying is a demonstration of commitment (Yardley, 2000).

Along with presenting a thorough and idiographic analysis of each participant and the representation of themes generated, attention must also be paid to the appropriateness of the sample to meet the research criteria. The sample size is in keeping with the IPA approach that focuses on "close engagement with the idiographic and the particular" (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 189). The findings from this study cannot claim to be representative for all postgraduate international students studying in a UK HEI. However, the participants in this study have afforded the opportunity to provide new appreciations of their lived experiences of independent learning and thereby reveal valuable insights.

7.4.3 Transparency and coherence

According to Yardley (2000) transparency and coherence relate to the clear description and presentation of the research process. In chapter four I have presented the study methods and outlined each stage of the research process taken in order to meet the critical requirements of IPA. I have endeavoured to carefully describe how the participants were selected, how the interview schedules were constructed, and conducted, and what steps were used in the analysis. In chapter three I have attempted to make clear the degree of fit between the research questions and the underpinning philosophical assumptions of the approach being implemented. I have also made clear my own philosophical standpoint with regards to the production of knowledge. Therefore, the approach presented has been consistent with the underlying principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

7.4.4 Impact and importance

Yardley's (2000) final principle is impact and importance, arguing that regardless of how well a piece of research is conducted its real test of quality is whether the research presents something important, interesting or useful. The credibility of this study has been achieved by tackling the key area of postgraduate international students' experiences of independent learning and being able to get as close to the participants' experiences as possible. The extent to which my interpretations and claims are viable and defensible rests with my ability to articulate and present my findings in a meaningful way to a wider audience (Thorne, 2011). The impact and importance of this study relates to how it can be used in everyday practice. The findings and

recommendations that have emerged from this study are especially useful for those involved with teaching and supporting postgraduate international students. The findings of this study offer further insights for those involved in developing and implementing learning, teaching and assessment policies that impact on the international students' experiences.

7.5 Recommendations for practice and future research

The study has generated a series of recommendations. These include:

- Recognition of the need for academics to be aware of past learning and teaching experiences of postgraduate international students;
- Academic teams to engage in conversations with postgraduate international students about their experiences of and expectations for independent learning. This can lead to developing a shared understanding and demystifying unfamiliar approaches;
- For HEI's and course teams to establish a community of learners and provide an opportunity to meet as fellow travellers. This provides postgraduate international students (and UK students) to support each other in their learning approaches and ensure learning is experienced as a team effort;
- Provide and signpost students to spaces that support their development of a community of learners;
- Incorporate induction activities that promote social integration and belongingness and therefore extend microsystems;

- Course teams to work with central university support, for example the language advisory service to extend the international student's meso and exosystems.

There is a wealth of research incorporating student participants from Far East Asia. In order to further extend our understanding of postgraduate international students' experiences of independent learning other studies could be undertaken that provides a broader representation of other cultures. Consideration of other methodological approaches to capture data across a larger sample, and multiple sites could help us better understand postgraduate international students' experiences of independent learning.

This study has captured some of the ways in which postgraduate international students describe their successes in HE. It would be pertinent to explore further how international students conceptualise their successes in an unfamiliar environment and what factors facilitates that success. Finally, this study has only briefly explored how postgraduate international students enact their agency. Additional studies in this area may move us further from the deficit discourse surrounding the international student.

7.6 Thesis conclusion

The key themes that emerged during the examination of postgraduate international students' experiences of independent learning have been categorised as 'feeling the struggle', 'steering the course' and 'thriving not surviving'.

Postgraduate international students are not a homogenous group and, the application of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) has attempted a refocusing of the critical gaze and a redress of the deficit discourse surrounding international students.

Within this study, we have witnessed students negotiating two bioecological systems and feeling isolated. Participants had to adjust to and navigate a new environment without their usual forms of social support. The use of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory highlights the importance of relationships and how these influence an individual's learning experience. The 'problem' is not with the individual but in the relationships between the individual and the systems that operate on them and around them. HEI's cannot begin to understand how postgraduate international students experience independent learning without first coming to know how relationships and interactions within contexts affects that experience.

This study has made six key contributions; engaging with independent learning demands adjustment and can feel emotional and overwhelming if not introduced with care and guidance; a small amount of change in practice between previous and current study forms appear to lead to fewer emotional issues; independent learning can be experienced as unbounded and hard to grasp; independent learning has been conceptualised as a journey, feedback and guidance from tutors support students in arriving at their destination quicker, avoiding hazards along the way; independent learning is also more manageable when working in proximity to student peers; there

was an appreciation of liberation through independent learning, with participants recounting successes and achieving agency.

The recommendations of this study provide an indication of how academics in HE can influence and impact the independent learning experiences of postgraduate international students.

Finally, I would like to conclude this thesis with the voice of one of the participants, Aleni:

> There are still things that we feel we need more help with […] and just for our professors to know that nothing is obvious, we have not done this before so some things need to be clear and understood from the beginning.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Search strategy as applied to the ERIC database

Search number and key words	Truncation/ Boolean	Filters/Limiters	Result
S1. International student		Full text	6470
S2. “International student”		Full text	4853
S3. S1 OR S2	OR		4853
S4. Foreign student			11471
S5. “Foreign student”			7577
S6 Overseas student			601
S7 “Overseas student”			64
S8. S4 OR S5 OR S6 OR S7	OR		7577
S9. S3 AND S8	AND		3533
S10. Independent learn*	Truncation*		3104
S11. “Independent learning”			7717
S12. Autonomous learn*	Truncation*		895
S13. “Autonomous learning”			403
S14. Self-directed learn*	Truncation*		2409
S15. “Self-directed learning”			22008
S16. Independent study			10211

S17. “Independent study”			8331
S18. S10-S17	OR		8331
S19. S17 AND S9	AND		29
S20. S17 AND S9	AND	Full text	29
S21. S17 AND S9	AND	Full text English Language	28
S22. S17 AND S9	AND	Full text English Language 2005-2020	24

Appendix II

Our Ref AM/RKT/D&S-308

25 October 2016

Jacqueline Parkin
Sheffield Hallam University Room RWB F430
Robert Winston Building Collegiate Crescent Campus Sheffield, S10

INTERNAL

Dear Jacqueline,

Request for Ethical Approval of Research Project

Your research project entitled "International students' experiences of independent learning within a UK Higher Education Institution" has been submitted for ethical review to the Faculty's rapporteurs and I am pleased to confirm that they have approved your project.

I wish you every success with your research project. Yours sincerely

Professor A Macaskill
Chair
Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Office address :

Business Support Team Faculty of Development & Society Sheffield Hallam University Unit 4, Sheffield Science Park Howard Street, Sheffield, S1 1WB Tel: 0114-225 3308 E-mail: DS-ResearchEthics@shu.ac.uk

Appendix III

Request to participate in a research project

Dear international student,
I am inviting you to participate in a research project that I am undertaking as part of a doctorate in education entitled:
'International students' experiences of independent learning within a UK Higher Education Institution'

The purpose of the research is to understand how international students experience independent learning during a course of study.

If you consider yourself to be an international student and you commenced a postgraduate course in September 2016 then you may be able to provide me with some information about your experiences. This may include you talking about your past experiences of independent learning or what independent learning means to you. You might wish to discuss what helps you to engage with independent learning and what prevents you from doing so. Engaging with independent learning might cause you to have certain feelings and so this study may give you the opportunity to share those feelings.

Your participation in this study will require you to take part in a face-to-face interview with me. This should last no more than 1 hour. Your involvement in this study may benefit your own studies as this will provide you with the opportunity to explore your own approaches to independent learning and how this impacts on your activities as a student.

If you are interested in taking part then please let me know and I will send you some further information. I can be contacted at j.parkin@shu.ac.uk
Many thanks for taking the time to read this announcement and I hope to hear from you soon.
Kindest regards
Jackie

Appendix IV

Participant Information Sheet

Project Title: International students' experiences of independent learning within a UK HEI

You are being invited to take part in a research study that will inform my Doctorate in Education. The research will explore how international students experience independent learning whilst studying at Sheffield Hallam University. Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important for you to understand why the study is being undertaken and what it will involve. Please take the time to read this information sheet so you understand what the study involves, what your role will be and how it will inform the thesis. Contact details are provided at the end of this letter. Please feel free to contact me if you need further clarification on any of the points mentioned below.

What is the purpose of the study?

The focus of the study is to look at what factors support international students to engage successfully with independent learning. This may include you talking about your past experiences of independent learning or what independent learning means to you. You might wish to discuss what helps you to engage with independent learning and what prevents you from doing so. Engaging with independent learning might cause you to have certain feelings and so this study may give you the opportunity to share those feelings.

Why have you asked me to take part?

All postgraduate international students within Sheffield Hallam University have been invited to take part in this study. As an international student you will be invited to attend one interview nine months into your post-graduate course.

What if I choose not to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to not take part in the study will have no negative impact on your progression as a student.

If I choose to participate what will it involve?

If you agree to participate you will be invited to take part in one semi-structured interview.

The interviews will be held at a Sheffield Hallam University campus at a mutually convenient time and place. With your permission the interviews will be audio recorded.

Findings from this study will inform the thesis and therefore individual interpretations of your experience may be included in the thesis report,

discussed within supervision meetings, presented at conferences and in publications such as academic journals. If requested you will be provided with a summary of the research study findings.

What are the risks involved with participating in the study?

There are no particular risks associated with participation in this study however if reflecting on your experience causes you to become upset then you will be directed to appropriate support.

What are the benefits of participating in the study?

You may find it beneficial to your role as a student to have the opportunity to discuss what independent learning means for you. This may help you to reflect on approaches that you currently use to manage independent learning and gain further insights into how this impacts on your activities as a student.

What if I change my mind during the study?

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving any explanation and without any effect on your progression as a student. After participating in the interview you may withdraw your data up to two weeks from the date of the interview session taking place. After this time it may be difficult to remove your individual data from overall analysis summary.

Will my participation be kept confidential?

All data will be stored securely and confidentially. Pseudonyms will be used in all written material from the start of the study unless otherwise agreed. Any personal details (such as name and email address) will be stored separately from the interview data and be password protected. On completion of the project, in accordance with university guidelines data will be securely held for ten years before being destroyed.

Contact details

If you have any concerns or questions about the study please contact:

Researcher: Jackie Parkin; 0114 225 5605; j.parkin@shu.ac.uk

If there is any issue that you do not feel you can raise with me then you may also contact my supervisor.

Supervisor: Professor Nick Hodge; 0114 225 4554; n.s.hodge@shu.ac.uk

Appendix V

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

PROJECT TITLE: International students' experiences of independent learning within a UK HEI

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies

	YES	NO
1. I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.	☐	☐
2. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.	☐	☐
3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.	☐	☐
4. I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
5. I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
6. I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes.	☐	☐

Participant's Signature: Date:

Participant's Name (Printed)

Researcher's contact details:

Jackie Parkin; Sheffield Hallam University, Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, Robert Winston Building, 11-15 Broomhall Road, Sheffield, S10 2BP; telephone: 0114 225 5605; Email: j.parkin@shu.ac.uk

Supervisor: Professor Nick Hodge; 0114 225 4554; n.s.hodge@shu.ac.uk

Appendix VI

Participant Information Sheet

Project Title (Main Thesis) An exploration of independent learning experiences of international students within a UK HEI

You are being invited to take part in a pilot study that will inform my Doctorate in Education. Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important for you to understand why the pilot study is being undertaken and what it will involve. Please take the time to read this information sheet so you understand what the pilot study involves, what your role will be and how it will inform the final thesis. Contact details are provided at the end of this letter, please feel free to contact me if you need further clarification on any of the points mentioned below.

What is the purpose of the pilot study?

This pilot study aims to help determine the most appropriate methods of collecting and interpreting information about international students' experiences of independent learning. Participants will be invited to share their own ideas as to how international students might be best enabled to share their experiences.

Why have you asked me to take part?

All international students within the Allied Health Professions Department have been invited to take part in this study.

What if I choose not to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to not take part in the study will have no negative impact on your progression as a student.

If I choose to participate what will it involve?

If you agree to participate you will be invited to take part in a focus group session lasting approximately 90 minutes. This will be held at Sheffield Hallam University, Collegiate Crescent Campus. During the focus group you will be asked to share your ideas on the ways in which international students may be supported to share their experience of independent learning. In order for me to keep an account of our conversations I would like to audio record the focus group session and so seek your consent to do this. You will be provided with a report summarising the research results. This provides an opportunity for you to agree the results as a representative account of the focus group session. Findings from this pilot study will inform the main thesis and therefore may be included in the main thesis report, discussed within SHU supervision meetings, presented at conferences and in publications such as academic journals.

Are there any risks/benefits involved?

There are no particular risks associated with participation in this study. You may find it beneficial to your role as a student to have the opportunity to discuss what independent learning means to you and also participate in research design. If reflecting on your experience causes you to become upset then you will be directed to appropriate support.

What if I change my mind during the study?

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving any explanation and without any effect on your progression as a student. After participating in the focus group you may withdraw your data up to two weeks from the date of the focus group session. If requested within the stated time-frame data that can be identified to you within the transcript will be withdrawn.

Will my participation be kept confidential?

All data will be stored securely and confidentially. Pseudonyms will be used in all written material from the start of the project unless otherwise agreed. Any personal details (such as names and telephone numbers) will be stored separately from this data and password protected. On completion of the project, in accordance with university guidelines data will be securely held for ten years before being destroyed.

Contact details

If you have any concerns or questions about the study please contact:

Researcher: Jackie Parkin; 0114 225 5605; j.parkin@shu.ac.uk

If there is any issue that you do not feel you can raise with me then you may also contact my supervisor.

Supervisor: Professor Nick Hodge; 0114 225 4554; n.s.hodge@shu.ac.uk

Appendix VII

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
PROJECT TITLE: An exploration of independent learning experiences of international students within a UK HEI
Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies

	YES	NO
I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.	☐	☐
My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.	☐	☐
I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.	☐	☐
I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes.	☐	☐

Participant's Signature: Date:

Participant's Name (Printed)

Researcher's contact details:
Jackie Parkin; Sheffield Hallam University, Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, Robert Winston Building, 11-15 Broomhall Road, Sheffield, S10 2BP; telephone: 0114 225 5605; Email: j.parkin@shu.ac.uk

Supervisor: Nick Hodge; 0114 225 4554; n.s.hodge@shu.ac.uk

Appendix VIII

Sample interview schedule, including prompts.

The running order of questions changed depending on the flow of the interview.

1. Settling in questions

- Can I ask you first of all what course are you doing at the moment?
- When did you start your course?
- Is this your first time in the UK?
- Where's home for you?

2. Exploring the concept of independent learning

- I just want to ask you about your previous experiences of independent learning and what independent learning means for you.
    - In your previous education did you feel you had to demonstrate independent learning?
    - Do you feel you have to engage with independent learning now in your current course?
    - When you think about some of activities that you might do with regards to independent learning can you think of the types of things that you might do?
    - How would you define independent learning?
    - Where does independent learning happen for you?

- Is independent learning something you feel you have to do yourself or do you do it with other students, for example do you have a study group?
- How much time during the week do you allocate to independent learning?

3. Exploring the barriers to independent learning

- Have you had any situations where you may have found independent learning quite difficult or a challenge?
  - How does language influence your experience of independent learning?
  - How do you find receiving feedback?

4. Exploring the enablers to independent learning

- Can you tell me about the things that may have supported you with your independent learning?
  - If so what helped to make independent learning more enjoyable?
  - How does feedback enhance your experience?
  - What makes you feel ok with independent learning?